

Greg Hollingshead / SEABRIGHT

Old Henshaw, widower to Old Hetty, thinks this is a story about a boy and his hawk. I won't disabuse him. The boy is me, Edgar Dunlop. The hawk is a beauty named Seabright. For his sake and for the sake of the game, I have made a study of hairballs. If Seabright is given ground meat, there must be feathers pushed into it. To me, who have understood the hairball mechanism, this is clear, and Old Henshaw acts upon an intuitive sense of my understanding. Also I have grasped that my duty lies not in teaching Seabright to hunt — he knows all about hunting, is a hunting machine — but in teaching him to return the prey to me, which is something entirely different, and necessary to bear in mind.

Old Henshaw believes that Seabright, who is a gift from The Benefactor, will make me well. The Benefactor is my father, though I have never seen him. When I instructed Old Henshaw to fire off thanks, I noticed him adding his own at the bottom, as if The Benefactor could care. The three of us — Old Henshaw, bird, myself — climb to the upper heath in late morning, dizzy and ravenous, the sun already warm, the heavy invariable clouds of mid-day not yet arrived from the west. His and my breakfast Old Henshaw carries in his pockets; Seabright's is still in the earth, in the trees, in the sky. When I cough, old Henshaw sets down Seabright's cage to re-wrap my scarf. My eyes I keep closed until normal breathing resumes. Old Henshaw kisses my cheek, and we proceed to the spot that seems perfect. He spreads the blanket and sets out breakfast while I engage with Seabright, who is no ordinary bird. I look at him and do not see a dinosaur who has climbed diminished into the sky. His hood he wears without demurral — just one sharp look at me — but today I

leave it off, tired of the pretense that this is a bird who is being trained. At first nothing changes. Seabright returns with a sparrow, a fieldmouse, a wren, a hare (aborted). He waits after each catch only long enough to see it tossed into the sack. Three times more he returns, with a lark, with a white rat, with a luminous green brooch pinned to a swatch of purple material like raw silk, but softer than down. The brooch is warm and smooth like a baby's nose against my cheek. Where has it come from? We pack up everything, gazing about us. High against a sky the colour now of scorched aubergine, Seabright hovers to guide us. When, after what seems like hours, he is directly over our heads, we are stumbling into a narrow ravine with white dripping walls and a deep moss floor that slopes to a lime pond crowded with rushes and unindigenous mauve ferns. Old Henshaw reminds me how damp this is, the very worst kind of place for me. In raspy whispers he pleads with me to come away. His terror has the effect, however, of diminishing mine. My eyes I feel exploring the place with the discipline of fascination.

"Why do you suppose those ferns are such a strange colour?" I ask Old Henshaw, who can only gape. Seabright joins us. He lands at our feet before alighting on my arm. With him there, I feel even more assured. "Let's go closer," I say, and already am several paces ahead of Old Henshaw, who has come stumbling down the slope with his arms outspread as if to stop me. Nearer the pond, where the ground is level, it becomes very wet, and I have two soakers before stepping back into the arms of Old Henshaw, who would restrain me, but easily I break away, and with Seabright still on my arm, circle around until I realize that a stream feeds this pond, and that its source must be somewhere farther along. These two white walls I now see do not, as I had thought at first, come together here to form a cul-de-sac, but continue some distance to converge only very gradually toward a point somewhere deeper into the mists. And so we follow that stream. There is no path, but the going is easy. The ground becomes more solid, the moss giving way to a peculiar variety of rangy, tubular grass. I find myself imagining what The Benefactor would say about this place. I find myself imagining The Benefactor. In the distance, then, mists, with Old Henshaw behind me muttering. I expect the mists to

enclose us while keeping their distance, the way mists do, but these refuse, are wet and sliceable as the whites of apples. They also roar, and there's a pungence in the air, not apple but celery. Perhaps it's the vegetation, which snaps like tiny stalks of it under our feet. When the mists clear we are at the base of a waterfall twenty or thirty metres high. I stop to take it in, and Old Henshaw stops behind me. First one eye and then the other Seabright with his usual intensity turns to fix on it.

So. The three of us. The water roaring. Does Seabright shoot me a glance? He glides to the ground. He flicks his wing feathers once, and steps onto the pinkish, drenched rocks that ring the falls' base. For a moment I think there must be osprey in him — he sees a trout — but instead he steps in a cautious way from rock to rock until he has disappeared behind the falls. I can see a cavern back there. Deep and dark it looks, mossy I should think, though its walls must be white underneath, since what could have created this canyon but this very water slicing home through limestone? Seabright emerges with gold in his beak, a lock of gold hair. I touch it to the fuzz of my upper lip, and I think of the brooch, which smelled like this, fragrant, alive, though "smelled" hadn't occurred to me back on the heath. I glance behind at Old Henshaw, and he is more composed, though not completely unapprehensive, has assumed the miner's squat, and looks about him relieved that only this should be our goal. But he hasn't seen the lock, has cataracts of his own, and I don't pass it back for examination. Instead I sneak it into my pocket. Seabright has no objections — and with him once more on my arm I walk toward the falls, aware that behind me Old Henshaw is on his feet. I turn back and make a sign intended simultaneously to pacify and to order to stay put, something like a traffic warden. And as I do that, the possibility occurs of thumbs (mine) pressing the old trachea — *don't push me, Old Henshaw*, says a voice inside me — and I know at this point I would have the same answer for The Benefactor. Resolution must be a terrible thing.

And so I go balancing from rock to rock, and think how horribly slippery, it's a wonder my neck isn't broken, but Seabright remains calm, so why shouldn't I? Above our heads the spray drifts like powder. Nearer to the falls now I see the gap plainly, black, and narrow for snugness. I remember my childhood places for hiding, think how surely this must be the very best, and I wonder whether one ever finds his way out of the very best, and then I am through, and can't see a thing. Correction: I can see a whole world. It has a sky of its own, in patches, high above the sun-pooled forest where a girl in shorts with white legs, who stands in a shaft of sunlight, who is known to me by the colour and the fall of her hair (which is not symmetrical), and the tear my hawk has left in her cardigan, holds out her hand in a gesture not of solicitation or even of intrepidity, but of something else. And me a boy of thirteen-and-a-half who takes his cough and his brain along with him everywhere he goes. But don't I breathe freely just now? Aren't I strong? Don't I take firm hold of her hand, which is also white, and don't our words unspoken shoot skywards to hover and hum there until Seabright has warmed with claws to his dreadful task, and their tiny bodies rain down like a blanket for ours? Her name is R. Abbetheswaithe. She comes here rarely. I've decided to put my life in her hands, and she takes it.

And takes it.

I revive, stretch. She takes it again.

"Open your mouth." There's a segment of orange in it, more wild and more strange than the wildest, strangest grocer ever stocked. With eyes closed, with jaw glands that continue spraying twin jets, I await another. We'll each have half, I'm thinking, and half a second, making a whole each. But nothing except a fit of nasty shivering happens, and disappointed mouth closes as eyes open on black ceiling of dim cave, one wall of which is water roaring. Seabright steps briskly out of the shadows. He flies up onto my arm, and both of us a bit sad, but also restless, leave, blinking into mist illumined with sunshine, and stumble across those slippery pink rocks with just enough balance to dodge the embrace of Old Henshaw who means well but irritates by not being of the same world as R. Abbetheswaithe.

We set out home, retracing the stream. The mist clears. The sky over the high heath is blue again, steeping to black. Old Henshaw crabs at me. I think of an old dog who worries a bone. Several times I almost tell him about R. Abbetheswaithe, but always some nameless misgiving restrains me. I wish I understood more of all this. Perhaps there's a book on it in the library at home, under Natural History, or Health. And then something clicks. And I ask Old Henshaw the first question that comes to mind concerning Old Hetty, whether she used to like taking walks on the heath, and although in moods ranging from torpor to lassitude I have listened all my life to his Hettiana, as I call it, I now await his answer with eagerness.

"Yes, she did," he says finally, and then he looks at me in a funny way, and for the first time I glimpse inside the old dog a trapped pup, which baffles me, until with a further funny look — a leer, I deduce — he adds, "She liked it better outside." And I understand, *I understand*, which means that whole inner amorphous tracts in my head come snapping into crack, precision outline like intricate cities crystallized from fog. I feel dizzy. The door has flung open and the world has no floor. I look at the back of Seabright's head (he is turned away, watching the gorse) and I see him in old age, bleary-eyed, coat unsheeny, a riot of hunger traces, and I know that the arm the old bird stands on is old then too, old as Old Henshaw's; liver-spotted, freckled, foxed like a page from an antique book; sinewy, brittle with desiccation, creaky at elbow and wrist, and swollen there, the fingers gnarled a little, the back of the hand a knot of blue worms, and I am afraid, though not completely, not for example to the point of diarrhea, but enough certainly not to stop feeling dizzy, to be startled, to stagger, even, when Seabright, still very much the young hunting machine, takes leave of my arm to pursue some poor creature that rustles in the gorse. I stagger, and understand as I do, that I must find R. Abbetheswaithe. I must grow strong, and if that is not a natural consequence of having met her, then I must find her anyway, coughing into my handkerchief as I search if need be, to find and never leave her. Oh, why am I leaving her now?

It's a stoat Seabright has, a small one, quite dead. He stands over it like a mother until Old Henshaw has dropped it into the sack, then flies to my arm and closes his eyes. When we draw near the estate, he is off to circle high over the house, portending. For someone is there, waiting. A strange, whiskered man in black who sits on the front steps with his knees at his chest and his long hands folded.

"The Benefactor?" I whisper. We are close enough for Old Henshaw, who is walking ahead of me, to perceive the general outline. He shakes his head, No.

"Who then?"

Old Henshaw shrugs, cautiously.

"Mr. Dunlop?" says the strange man when Henshaw and I halt in front of him like truant schoolboys. "Mr. Edgar Dunlop?" Yes, I nod; I even step forward and hold out my hand like a proper gentleman. He doesn't take it, though he looks at it, and then he unfolds a large sheet of paper informing us The Benefactor has died, and that is about as much as I am able to grasp. When Seabright lands at his feet, the man stops reading, startled, and takes a step backwards, up a step. Later Old Henshaw explains that I have been left principally the house, plus a small annuity, and there are also apparently certain provisions for my formal education, if any. Things may become a bit tight, he suggests with the hesitance of tact, though probably not so noticeably, I gather, in his time as during the middle and declining years of mine.

I suppose I should be concerned, and in a way I am. From here on in I shall have to keep my wits about me, certainly. But why should Life spare Edgar Dunlop her gauntlet? If he intends to become strong for R. Abbetheswaithe, he might as well become strong for Life too. And if logic like that is spurious, then I am tired of logic. Courage will have to do. I have just come back from telling Old Henshaw my intention from now on is to hawk alone. He wept and made an awful scene. I don't like to say this, but there is less and less co-operation from that quarter every day. Tomorrow at dawn the bird and I set off without him. The ground hamburger with the feathers pushed into it will be withheld again tonight. He has to find her. R. Abbetheswaithe is the answer now, the only one that makes any difference, and if I am going to face this out alone, then I am going to need it.