

Return to the whole

Peter Reason pauses, briefly, a cycle in time



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Beside the stream that tumbles over the rocks down from High Moor the path is covered with oak leaves. The thick layer silences my footfall as it presses into the soft depth; there is just the occasional sharp click of my hiking stick against a rock. Lying several inches thick, the leaves envelop the hillside in a rich golden brown.

I pick up a leaf. It is early March; my guess is that this, like the others on the surface layer, was among the last to fall the previous autumn, maybe even held on until the late winter storms, and so has preserved its wholeness.

Its edge is still sharply delineated, a sinuous curve moving elegantly between convex and concave, five lobes to each side. Just one of the lobes has been torn off, leaving a jagged edge that interrupts the pattern. The leaves under the surface layer are soggy, fragmented: those at the deepest level have completely disintegrated, transformed into humus. I hold a handful up to my nose and draw in the sweet smell of rotting vegetation.

As I look about me, resting in the moment, I find myself seeing how all beings in the world emerge into presence and retreat into absence. The leaf now resting on the blank page of my notebook took its form as part of a living oak and is now beginning its return to the formless whole. In picking it up I have given it a separate identity as 'my' leaf, at least in my mind. As soon as I let it go it will again become nameless.

If I put the leaf between the pages of my notebook, so it

dries and is pressed, I can retain its form for longer. Should I do so? I have done so. A few days later it tumbles from the pages quite dry and completely flattened: no longer a chance encounter in the woods, but an artefact of human choice.

Towards the end of November I came across the leaf once more, dusty and neglected on the shelf in my study, jumbled up with the rocks and feathers and whatnot I collect on my travels. I felt some remorse at neglecting it after my earlier intense engagement; it seemed a shame to let it crumble away or just dump it in the trash.

So, late that afternoon, just as the light was fading, I took my leaf up the lane by our house. Low grey cloud covered the sky, leaving all colours muted save the oak tree by our orchard gate, which still held a head of foliage glowing against the soft background. Maybe half its leaves had fallen, blown into heaps by the stone wall, scrapped around by badgers digging for worms.

I dropped 'my' leaf amongst its fellows so it could rot back into the Earth. For a moment I could see where it lay. Then a gust of wind murmured through the trees, scattering the leaves on the ground, and shaking more from the branches, so they floated down around me.

The gust died away, leaving my leaf hidden amongst the others, anonymous once again: the cycle of emergence and return I had interrupted by picking up the leaf could now be completed.

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