

# source

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## THINKING THROUGH PHOTOGRAPHY

#106 / £8

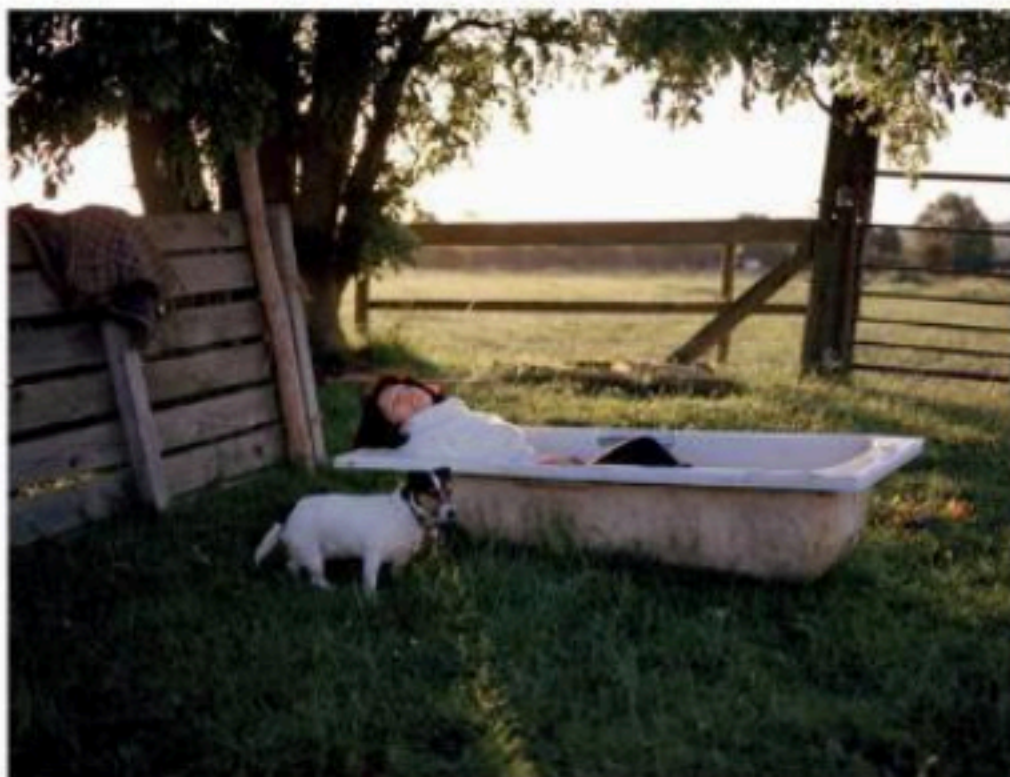
### FEATURES

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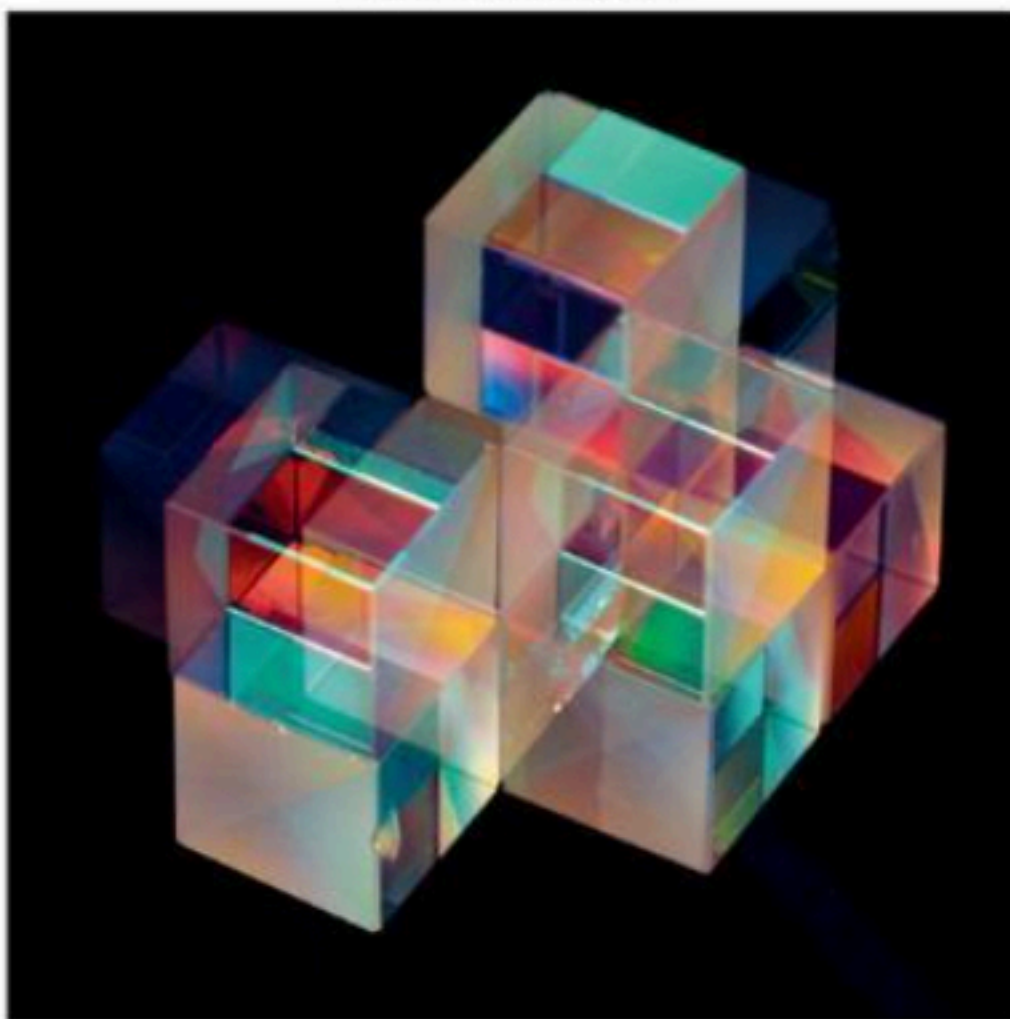
## SLOW



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### EXHIBITIONS

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AUTUMN – 2021



Those who were birds, (i) 2018



Those who were birds, (iii) 2018



Those who were birds, (vii) 2020



Those who were birds, (viii) 2019

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# MARTIN HEALY

## Field Notes

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These photographs by Martin Healy were taken during walks in Ireland, France and Mallorca. The work includes images of trees and other natural features but most are of birds. A museum collection has been utilised for some close-ups but the most powerful, to me, are those taken outside, skyward shots with the living birds cruising high above. There are red kites, buzzards, kestrels and crows, among others. The distance between you and the birds in these photographs might at first feel unsatisfying, they are small in the sky, and you must sometimes search to find the anchor shape of a hunter through the foliage encroaching from the edges. The photographs certainly do not offer the thrill of close action, even an ornithologist might have difficulty identifying some of the outlines. Healy's work helps us understand this experience, that dissatisfaction or disappointment are in fact truer understandings of where you are when you enter the kingdom of birds. You soon see that although the photographs are of birds, the birds aren't really the subject.

Healy says the work emerged from a long-term interest in J.A. Baker's *The Peregrine*, a book that instilled in Healy 'a need to look up and obsessively look for signs of presence'. Baker was a Chelmsford office worker who spent a decade, 1954 to 1964, watching for

birds, especially peregrines, in the landscapes near him. He wanted to understand every aspect of their lives and watching them became an obsession. Each evening he would cycle home and write up notes on the day's sightings, notes that eventually became the book, published in 1967. Its intense, rich, prose often feels like it might have been composed during reveries, and it certainly captures the author's awe when witnessing the animals at hunt. However, Baker acknowledges the compromise that comes with attempting to meet birds in their territory and on their terms, when compared with looking at photos taken in controlled conditions, the sort in books: 'Compared with the close and static image, the reality will seem dull and disappointing. The living bird will never be so large, so shiny-bright. It will be deep in the landscape and always sinking farther back, always at the point of being lost'.

It is this zone of almost-vanishing, the point of being lost, that Healy's work manages to frame. Even in the close-ups the birds are at a remove as most have their backs to us. They are impervious to any attempt we might make to connect or create for ourselves an imagined understanding of their worlds. The photographs also include images of silent trees, but they are infused with



Those who were birds, (ix) 2019



Those who were birds, (xi) 2020



Those who were birds, (xiv) 2020



Those who were birds, (xviii) 2020

the wider atmosphere of the collection – we still remember the birds wheeling high above. Looking at Healy's trees you feel there is something behind, or more likely above, looking at you. The silence is loaded.

This is only natural. Baker's description of a peregrine's eyes makes you realise that ours are terribly weak and under-accessorised. He explains that if our eyes were in the same proportion to our bodies as the peregrine's then our eyes would be three inches across. The distance in Healy's images is our reality alone, the birds simply aren't living it. The bird knows immediately when you walk into their domain and they can zoom in when conducting their assessment of you. Baker writes that 'Deeply pitted foveal areas' give the bird a telephoto ability, it can immediately make the image of an interloper flare up into a larger, clearer view. The bird 'may live in a world of endless pulsations, of objects forever contracting or dilating in size.'

Healy could accessorise his camera with a lens to do something similar but prefers to keep the view close to how we naturally perceive. Staying within natural limitations is what makes Healy's skyward photographs so unlike the close-up work found in the genre of nature photography. In those images there is a sense that the photographer has triumphed: patience and good equipment has led to a win over the evasive, difficult, natural world. Sometimes it seems the photographer has succeeded when they've finally caught animals posed in a way that pleases our sense of character, narrative and

drama – giving animals an accessibility that is surely misleading. The photographer and their camera is rather like a hunter and their gun – they both seek the perfect shot and when they finally get one it is chalked up as a kind of victory. In Healy's photographs there are no such victories.

Baker says birds are wise to hunters, wiser than we might think: 'When man is hunting, the peregrine goes elsewhere. It is remarkably quick to distinguish between an unarmed man and a man with a gun'. One wonders what understanding birds might have of our cameras. In any case Healy's images remind us that when we step into the woods we aren't apex, the birds are actually watching us. Generally we catch only what the bird is willing to give. The subject is not in the distance in Healy's photographs, distance is the subject.

— Garrett Carr



Those who were birds, (xvii) 2020



Those who were birds, (xxiv) 2020



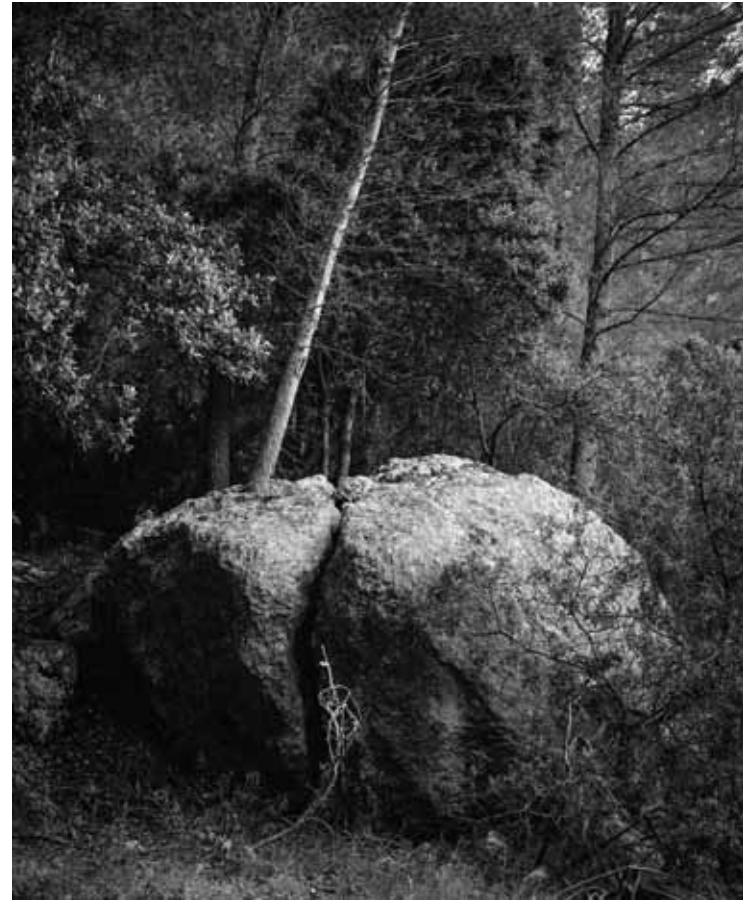
Field Notes (iii) 2017



Field Notes (i) 2017



Field Notes (vi) 2020



Field Notes (iv) 2017



The Augurs (ii) 2018



Field Notes (viii) 2020



Field Notes (x) 2020



Field Notes (xii) 2020



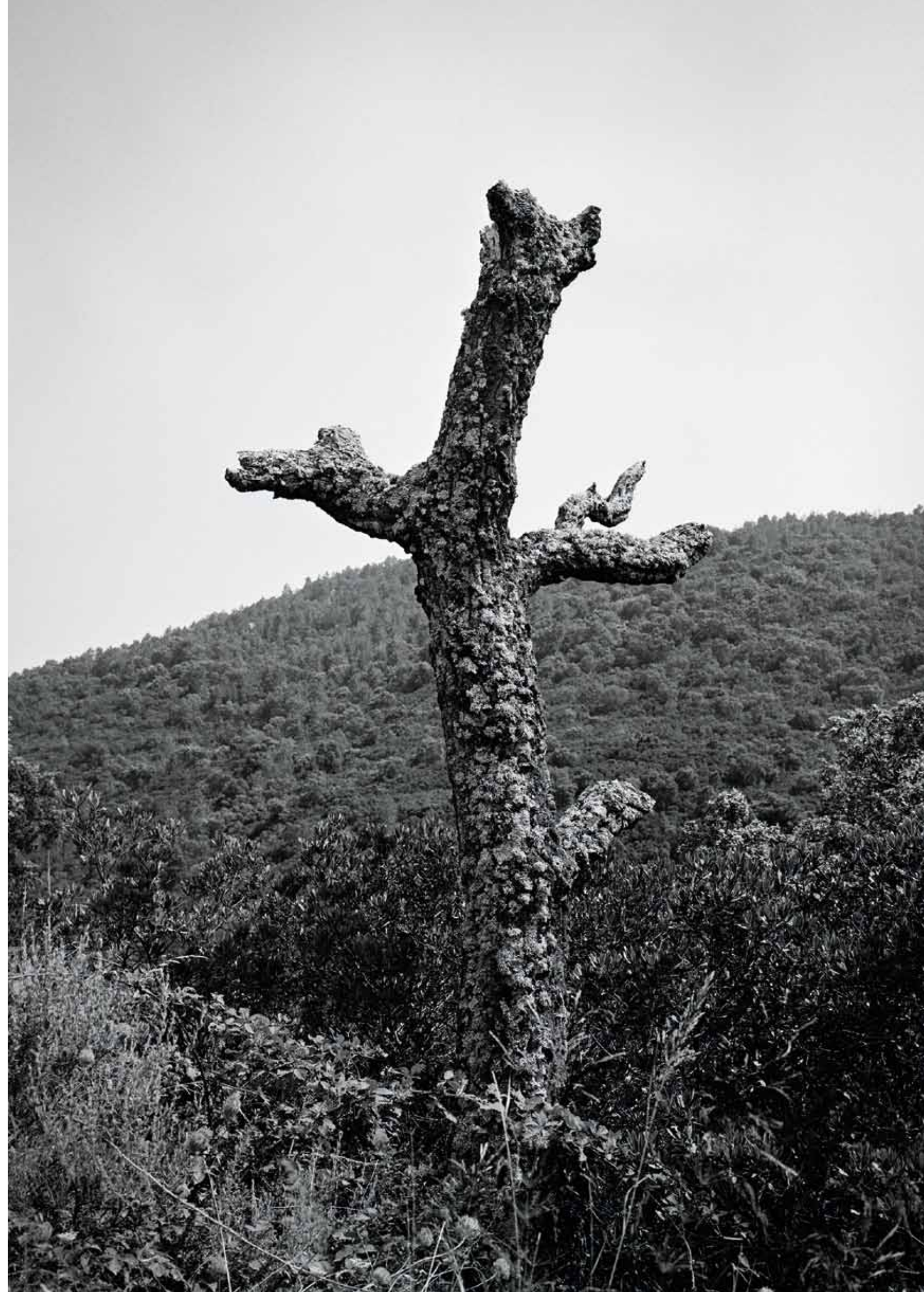
Field Notes (ix) 2020

opposite: Field Notes (xiii) 2020



Field Notes (xvi) 2020

opposite: Field Notes (xv) 2018



Martin Healy's new book *Assume the stillness of a tree* is available at [www.martinhealy.net](http://www.martinhealy.net)