

**Exile, homecoming, and the remembered journey:
towards a new writing of perspective, place and event**

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A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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January 2019

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Abstract

Exile, Homecoming, and the Remembered Journey: Towards a new writing of perspective, place, and event.

The final thesis is in two sections: Section I is a work of Creative Writing comprising a novel entitled *Sunnyland*; Section II is a self-reflective commentary on the writing of the novel which explores some of its formal decisions and attempts to place *Sunnyland* within a contemporary context.

Section I

***Sunnyland* – a novel**

The basic conceit of the novel is that of a son constructing his estranged father's biography from the latter's journal fragments, letters, unfinished stories, etc. The novel's apparent protagonist, Jons, initially bewildered by the multiple accounts of places and events described in his father's papers, becomes seduced by the potential for spatial limitlessness that they seem to provide. His sense of delimited space becomes increasingly "oceanic", exemplified by the obsessive reconstruction of a "driftwood ship". As the novel progresses the oceanic gives way to a psychosis of gyrating voices, in which the question becomes: who is narrating who?

A quasi-autobiographical prologue appears to link the "real" author with the story that follows. Like the main body of the novel, the prologue

takes actual memories of places and events and slews them into an invented narrative in a process that involves a kind of cut-up technique of past notes and diaries, which in fact echoes Jons' own attempted reconstruction of his father's life.

Section II

Critical Commentary

A reflective self-commentary is offered on the main formal and experimental decisions made in the writing of my novel *Sunnyland*. These will be set within the context of a range of innovative contemporary fiction, considering in particular the authors W. G. Sebald, Tom McCarthy, Ali Smith, David Shields, Deborah Levy and Gabriel Josipovici.

In this study I have considered a range of authors who I believe are particularly illuminating in their exploration of new emerging representations of subjectivity within the novel over the last two decades. The inclusion of their writing here is to acknowledge a view of self and subjectivity that sits within the humanist/post-humanist debate regarding the status of the individual, and the challenge to conventional notions of realism and selfhood which their work enacts.

The preface, placed at the beginning of Section I, properly begins the critical commentary, providing an insight to my initial critical motivations for embarking on the novel. This is followed in Section II by an introduction

which will delimit a contemporary context. Observations and comparisons between the above texts and my own will be given in the main body of the work.

Finally, I offer a conclusion in which I evaluate the success of the novel and reflect upon possible revisions.

Acknowledgements

I have been very fortunate to be supported by a wonderful team throughout this project. A special thank you to my supervisor Peter Hulme. His special brand of understated wisdom, always insightful, combined with his expertise and kindness, has provided me with the best guidance I could have wished for.

I would also like to extend my gratitude to Phil Terry. His encouragement has proved invaluable, always helping me to maintain a level of self-belief in pushing the boundaries, as well as providing inspiration through his own work. In the same vein, my heartfelt thanks to Roger Moss, whose astute and generous advice saw me through the last stages.

I must also mention James Canton and Marina Warner, who set me on the right track early on with their inspired teaching, and enthusiasm. Additional gratitude to Adrian May for his early advice, and for setting the tone.

My thanks to the LiFTS office for their help throughout, in particular the kind support of Jane Thorp and Ildiko Olah in the early stages.

And of course, a special mention for Atsuko and Luka, for their love and support, their patience, and all the ways they are themselves.

Wivenhoe, June 2019

Preface

Sunnyland, as a creative project, may be described as an investigation of homecoming, both as fictional trope and as lived autobiographical experience. In the latter it seeks a generative function and an analogue – but it is far from “autofiction” in this sense: the novel does not contain the shape of a life that might plausibly have been lived, and does not attempt to deliver a representation of an individual autobiographical self. Its concerns remain with the art of fiction and story-making, although its foraging for raw materials is motivated, to use David Shields’ term, by a certain “reality hunger”.

As a critical project, *Sunnyland* relates to my encounter with W. G. Sebald’s *The Rings of Saturn* (1998), an account of a meandering walking tour of my native Suffolk putatively undertaken by the author himself, which is part fiction, part memoir, part travelogue, and my reading of that work as an expression of a translational poetics.¹ For George Steiner, this latter quality may be referred to as “extraterritoriality”, a term he uses with particular reference to High Modernism and a generation of writers who used exile as a strategy of erasure and a means of contesting cultural, national and social norms – one thinks of the literary innovations of Pound, Eliot, Joyce, and of the Lost Generation.² In Sebald, we are presented with the exilic traveller,

¹ W. G. Sebald, *Rings of Saturn* (London: Vintage, 2002).

² George Steiner, *Extraterritorial: Papers on Literature and the Language Revolution* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972).

and the sense of a writing in absentia – which in Sebald’s case, serves to recalibrate place back into the frame of its own historicity through a strategy of connectivity and unexpected association. But for me, at a time I found myself returning to live in a region where I grew up, Sebald’s text also called into question the nature of the home-comer’s experiential association with place. Why did the strange spectral poetry of *Rings of Saturn*’s “outward bound” itinerancy chime so much with my own experience of *return*? If place is always somewhere else, somewhere other, what then of homecoming? It is this latter question that is explored in *Sunnyland* through formal aesthetic encounters with place using the forms of memoir, and travelogue, combined with narrative techniques which owe more to the overtly “fictional”.

Formally then, my aim was to explore how this two-way “translation” of states might be represented – between departure and return, between the familiar and the foreign. In this respect, I was interested in describing my own experience, not as a standard autobiographical narrative encounter with place, but place encountered as an exploration of *ipseity*: for me the real interest in Sebald’s text lay in its evocation of self as a kind of dispersal rather than as a centred narrative entity – one might say a non-narrative self. A creative investigation along these lines implies a poetic approach, a lyrical register, perhaps. But returning to the translational condition, this immediately suggests a more dialogic state of affairs, one contained in a novel, for instance, with its Bakhtinian potential for multiple voicings. Bakhtin also speaks of the

novel's "linguistic homelessness". Rather than employing the "inner" potential for dialogism than might be present in a realist novel's narrative voice, I wanted to create a deterritorialising situation of different registers – a kind of exterior dialogism to express an itinerancy in language itself, so that memoir might cross into travelogue, into historical tract, into psychological realism.

Edward Casey has claimed that "[t]o come to terms with the inner life, it is not enough to constitute a biography or autobiography in narrative terms; one must also, and more crucially, do a topoanalysis of the places one has inhabited or experienced."³ Questions that such an analysis imply, regarding the spatial aspects of identity and of sense of self, fundamentally in relation to place, and associated memory of place, form an important role in the conception of *Sunnyland*, which sets out to explore formal representations of self as constituting the kind of situated subjectivity implied by Casey's statement – what Seán Burke, in relation to the author role, calls "the principle of specificity in the world of texts".⁴ Indeed, the question becomes whether the emplacement of the self through an "inner life" is still a productive descriptor in recent contemporary fiction which, as I shall touch on below, is prefigured by the humanist/post-humanist debate and the role of an individualist subjectivity. But such specificity as outlined by Burke does

³ Edward S. Casey, *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 289.

⁴ Sean Burke, *The Death and Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida*, 3rd ed (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 194.

suggest autobiographical events at some level (including reading events) as anchoring points, either as some kind of Nabokovian “subliminal coordinate”, or as a more generalised principle of relatability.

My interest in Sebald therefore began with his work’s status as a text that bore a translational dynamic, and then proceeded to the broader intertextual transposition of what was to me a familiar landscape (Suffolk, East Anglia) of heimlich, which I had regarded as home, into something else. In this translated form, East Anglia became another place to the one that I knew, and this produced an effect that resonated with my own vague sense of estrangement on returning “home”, having spent several years living elsewhere. I discovered, that in my own case, I was translating my experience of returning not only into other terms, but into *another’s* terms, into words that somehow no longer felt like my own. It seemed that suddenly everything I experienced had become an *interpretation* made against something known elsewhere, by an outsider. Or perhaps, as in André Breton’s opening lines to his novel, *Nadja*, the question had become not, “Who am I?” but that “everything would amount to knowing whom I ‘haunt.’”⁵ Or, put in another way, I found myself too easily slipping into the tendency of imagining how another might see what I now saw. But, in Sebald’s case, it was the very ghostliness of his peripatetic protagonist that felt strangely familiar. Except that I was not an outsider – my memory seemed to want to insist on a

⁵ André Breton, *Nadja* (London: Penguin, 1999), 11.

different, “original” version, at odds with this new “phenomenology”: the clash between an enculturated, remembered, narrated version and what John Wylie describes as “a constantly emergent perceptual and material milieu”.⁶ Meanwhile, another memory, the memory of being an outsider during my recent experience of living elsewhere was also present. If there was a border between self and other, it was being crossed in both directions simultaneously. In this respect, *Sunnyland* shares a certain affinity with Emily Hicks’ ambitions in her *Border Writing* project: “The border crosser is both “self” and “other” ... the “subject” emerges from double strings of signifiers of two sets of referential codes, from both sides of the border.”⁷ This particularly “translational” dynamic is often associated with the much-contested term of magical realism, occasional shades of which form part of the referential schema in *Sunnyland*, and this will be elaborated upon below as part of the novel’s broader representational framework. But if the procedure of magical realism is to be seen in terms of the dynamic of border crossing and in the potential synchronicity of here with there, now with then, *Sunnyland* prefers to envisage the trope of layers, strata – a topology of surface and depth, but one which privileges neither one over the other – a landscape governed by porosity and palimpsest:

⁶ Daniel Weston, ‘The Spatial Supplement: Landscape and Perspective in W.G. Sebald’s The Rings of Saturn’. *Cultural Geographies* 18, no. 2 (2011): 172, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474474010397596>.

⁷ D. Emily Hicks, *Border Writing: The Multidimensional Text*, Theory and History of Literature, v. 80 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), xxvi.

Hardly a landscape at all, more a flat transporting osmotic platform, a living zone of transfer and exchange ... a process ... indifferent ... into which we somehow stumbled ... We are bound and drawn by its mutable surface that reflects our own condition. Where that which is washed away is always later washed up again.⁸

The many references to the peculiarly dynamic and shifting physical geography of East Anglia and its coastline enact this condition in the novel.

⁸ *Sunnyland*, 28.

I

Creative writing

SUNNYLAND

A NOVEL

Prologue

When I was five, we moved into a sprawling old house that had been derelict for some twenty years. My father had won it at auction against lacklustre competition. It was in an exquisite state of ruin: buckled and sagging inwards beyond the confines of any surveyor's logic, leaning in upon itself. When inside, one sometimes had the impression of being in a vast wigwam stuffed with timber and rubble, if that makes any sense. I mean to say that you felt somehow unprotected from the outside by solid walls. That's how I remember it, at least.

Its dusty nooks and mouldering crannies were negotiated by means of cramped, twisting stairwells, or along narrow passages whose wormy floors creaked and gave; damp plaster hung in great sheets from the walls as if the hide was being peeled from the carcass of a huge beast to reveal a pasty greyish flesh beneath; drunken doorways lurched forward into darkness or nothingness or into the wan extenuating light of the 1970s, a light that nonetheless became brighter as you ascended, so that on finally clambering out onto the floor of the attic you felt you had reached a precariously suspended aerial platform dedicated to worship of the sun, which now shone

with all its might, gleefully it seemed between the rafters; a place where you could lounge and read the days away, far from earthly life, forgotten in the sky.

It shouldn't have been like that. The house I mean. And then should never have been changed. It was built during the early Georgian period in red Bedford brick, probably by a moderately prosperous squire (some Austenesque farmer made good perhaps) who would have felt at home amidst the rigid simplicity of the box-like proportions that the building offered a proud new owner such as himself. How it went from that to the musty labyrinth I first encountered centuries later became apparent to me only recently, when I was handed a creased sepia photo that had been taken towards the end of the nineteenth century. In front of the house stand no less than four separate tenants and their families, amongst them the village blacksmith and the local postmaster, both of whom had their businesses on the premises. The house had been divided up accordingly therefore, from attic to cellar, each portion now with its own entrances and stairs and storerooms and closets and kitchens: a cell-like hive of partitions and half landings, replacing the large square interior spaces of the original.

And it was in the wreckage of the hive that I now delighted, thrived. And outside also: an extensive back garden had thoughtfully been allowed to revert to temperate jungle by some benefactor of childish imagination, rent here and there by cold pyroclastic flows of rubble and rotting furniture which

had spewed from doorways of the house or even overflowed out of windows. Over these I would clamber as I penetrated deeper into the jungle's interior, dense with blackthorn and yew, tunnelling through thickets of greasy elder bushes that sprawled in their own damp fug and smelled of old linen and over-used slippers.

We led a nomadic existence in those early years: our first encampment an old caravan in the garden, mottled with lichen and totally enclosed by trees and overgrown bushes. How it had ever been stationed there in the first place remained something of a mystery. From this "gypsy dell" we removed ourselves by degrees to the house itself, inhabiting one room at a time, constantly on the move as other spaces became habitable.

Work began. Enthusiastically at first, but then with intermissions that lasted months or even years. The garden's magic forest was cleared with chains and thrillingly at one stage a small bull-headed tractor, to become a no less fecund morass of sand piles and breeze blocks and trenches and banks of earth, amongst which I quickly re-established my old feral pathways.

But slowly, the house's interior was becoming increasingly barn-like as joists were exposed and torn out, staircases sent crashing to the ground, partition walls kicked in and smashed. The house's numerous spirits now floated back pedalling in open space – as I suspected they always had done – but a space now undefined, to the human eye at least, by walls and ceilings.

It is a wonder I survived at all, did not join the ghostly ranks of the house's slowly accrued catalogue of the deceased there and then. I still remember the moment when I had to leap into the outstretched arms of an uncle from a second floor fireplace, now a clammy slate ledge suspended high above the ground and into which I had somehow managed to climb and become trapped; or when a poorly placed cinder-block fell from beneath the eaves onto my head, knocking me face first into the old tin bath next to which I stood, filled with green oily water and bare rooted rose bushes left to soak, subjecting me to both concussion as well as near drowning.

Most vivid of all perhaps is the time I fell from the ancient apple tree, as gnarled and decaying as any centennial oak, riddled with fungi and pests of every type, within whose broad but withered canopy my father had carelessly provided a treehouse, and from which I one day found myself plummeting. At that age, it takes a long time to fall 25 feet, and when my body finally reached the ground it seemed to resonate with it as one. In the throb of impact I became aware of the massy stubbornness of the Earth, its dull muscular deeps extending to my very core through the loamy turf and hidden bands of tactile clay. Of course, at the time I would have been unaware of these last geological details, which could only be added later, but the impressions associated with that brief and endless moment as I fell have never left me, something I will

never forget: amidst this tumble of events and visual images, at the silent eye of all that chaos, lies one single sensation: an act of falling.

They say, don't they, that one should always awaken from the falling dream before reaching the ground.

Yes...

Yes, they do say that.

PART I
SOUTH FROM HERE

I turn and you are sitting there, as if you were just dropped into the stillness. Something somewhere tells me I should feel surprise, but instead what fills me is a kind of torpor of inevitability, that I somehow always knew you were always there, upright on your slender chair that holds you like a fluted cup, body skewed slightly to one side, hands clutching your knees, long fingers bedecked with plain angular silver. Your face, bone pale, wears an expectant, quizzical expression that provides a suitable heightened tone to your features, those remembering eyes two dark glittering pools. Should I move to greet you, or hold back? But the atmosphere of this shaded room is thick and massy with dim refracted light and I am unable to move forward. A thought occurs: "Which one of us is present?" I know I do not wish to find the answer.

And you possess the air of the sitter not yet bored by the static pose demanded from the painter, that other figure who you now sense occupies the black centre of this space, the stranger you have just met. The spring is still only half wound as the shadows around you extend like ink soaking into cotton, drenching the outer contours of the room in near darkness, and the painter, standing between us, his back towards me, umbral and cloaked in

some heavy garment, is almost invisible save for the occasional faint blur of his head turned to one side as he studies you.

I notice your foot almost imperceptibly start to arch, heel rising as your toes press into the floor. But then in a moment, at a quick glance from the painter, which I sense rather than see, you pause. The movement of your foot is suspended, your posture frozen. The spring tightens and in this stillness now I am for the first time conscious of the fact that you are somehow aware of my presence, perhaps as a dimly unconstructed thought woven amidst the slight sensation of discomfort you now feel from your tightening tendons, that beyond the gaze of this new figure who fixes you to the chair there is a penumbra that reaches out into the tempered light. And I too am held – a noise or a movement from me now, if that were possible, would be an unspeakable violation of these rules of light and shadow.

A soundless door opens in my hand. And the light that opens in my hand is the light of a distant room. I emerge into a hallway. From behind another door I see a muted phone that buzzes toneless on the table with all the fury of a giant wounded bee as it inscribes figures of eight across the polished surface. *They will be wondering – asking.* I realise I do not remember when last I spoke, when last I uttered a single sound – do not know what to think to say or know what I mean to think. What voice then will answer theirs? Is this a matter of choice? The giant bee is gone from the table yet its buzzing

still fills the room, modulated at the pitch of synthesized human speech.

Somewhere it has flipped onto its back, its barbed legs slowly churning.

An eye blinks in the dark, the head turning, turning...

I make as if to speak.

It was in the spring of that year that I found myself returning to the old house, my father's last known refuge after his return, to undertake the project that they had insisted would represent a final process of closure, one that I was told would ensure his enduring legacy, and perhaps even my own. The mystery of his whereabouts, of the long disappearance that had ended abruptly with his sudden arrival at my mother's door eight years previously, had hardly been mentioned, and indeed, my own estrangement and long subsequent exile a matter, it seemed, of relative inconsequence.

I had noted – considered – my own apparent disinterest regarding the question of my father's existence. I felt a certain curiosity, it was true, but nothing more than that urge felt to turn the next page of a mildly engaging story. I assumed this to be a healthy sign – given that I had not seen the man for some twenty-five years. If I was troubled in any way it was by the image the news of the sudden brief manner of his reappearance created in my mind: the slightest vibration on an otherwise calm reflecting surface momentarily distended, that at once sprang back as before, creating a subtle jarring sensation that rippled through my core. But of the man himself nothing, neither a face nor a voice to disturb my conscious imaginings – at least if one

discounts the myriad composite fathers, the various generic elders who jostled hatted and besuited for attention in my mind's eye. The photographs I had seen were of no use – merely adding to the catalogue of guises that he seemed to have inhabited – [the flesh and blood human being no more real to me than the picture of an author on the back of a familiar book, never otherwise imagined as more than a poorly defined presence at a desk or in the corner of a darkened room. And while the occasional publicity photo I had seen over the years generally revealed a rather theatrical twinkle to the eye behind the air of studied melancholy, any private photos tended to show only that peculiar fuzzy blankness that comes from discomfort with one's surroundings, and I had no means by which to reconcile these two opposing portraits into a figure that I knew or could remember.

*

I had made my way back, first to the small unfamiliar English town nearby, to where my mother had been moved: a composite of yellow utilitarian variegated brick and galvanised railing, *all held together at numerous points by broad strips of striped tape, stuck down in each case by two great beating Belisha pins*, one of which had clearly been hit at some stage by a car, so that it did indeed appear as a giant pin stuck haphazardly in a giant map, and I noticed I had also written: *their quasar-like pulse seemed at odds with any possible rhythm of earthly life.*

The long polished inner corridor enclosed on either side entirely by windows, windows that looked out on onto other windows, leads not to my mother's bedside as I had expected but to a modestly furnished waiting area. Here I am greeted by two small not quite identical men who introduce themselves as the Larch brothers, administrators, they tell me, of my father's estate. While they are reluctantly unable to go into details they feel they should at least be disposed to reassure me that they are presently only in the preliminary stages of dealing with my father's affairs as *in absentia*, the statutory seven years of unexplained absence having passed, and that a certificate of Presumed Death has not currently been applied for...

—If you follow, Mr Fla...

—Jons, you can call me Jons.

—although... it is often the case, that in such cases, legal death is preferred as a neater alternative to permanent unexplained, unaccountable absence, a *living* death – if you will – pertaining as long as there comes to light no evidence, no trace, of continuing life. And given the somewhat delicate situation of the other involved party (the spouse), my mother herself, any *in absentia* claim made in her name might be deemed rather inappropriate. That responsibility would have to fall to somebody else...

As I had entered they were chatting easily at the half open window, through which, in a small enclosed doorless patio, great tangled clumps of what I take to be nasturtiums can be made out in the poor light. *One does not*

so much see as sense their succulent yet brittle stems, snapping easily to release that peppery scent, a scent that subtly now invades the room.

—It is doubtful that she had known who he was, they were saying. People coming at her like that from out of the present tended to confuse. It was only afterwards, after my father had left the building, by going way back, had they managed to engage her in any meaningful dialogue concerning the situation, and even then, said Timothy, the more expressive of the two, glancing at his brother, her wishes had been rather difficult to establish.

—More a matter of interpretation really, which with our experience of the family's history, we felt that...

—You see... he never really left her...

The other, whose name had escaped me, interrupts now, with sudden candour:

—And in her eyes, he did return, and is always returning. The fact that he was absent for so many years, and is absent again now, is lost to her.

Parts of that conversation you remember with clarity, as if certain lines had been highlighted in a script. Yet there are many areas which you feel quite vague about: the very fact that he had reappeared suddenly for that moment, that he had been spotted briefly, on – what should we call it *the surface of the past* – before resubmerging, back into the world of supposition and hearsay – for instance. This was something you could not square in your

imagination. Or perhaps you felt that your fixed vision of the past had been altered, violated – as if some rule had been broken: that somehow his existence, in your mind at least, had depended on his very absence. Are ghosts not supposed to haunt our present moments from a position the past? But do you not now have the sense that the past itself is being haunted? The past – the only thing you thought you could be sure about.

That's at least the way I'd like to see it – that's what it feels like to *me*.

And I know that these emotions, strong but perhaps as yet barely defined, which this unexpected reported sighting of your father has stirred in you, have come as something of a surprise – considering that for a long time he has been a figure dead to your thoughts – at least this is what I believe *he* senses, or maybe what he strangely wishes for – as a kind of absolution – because the alternative would surely be too much for him to bear. Better, far better, that you thought of him as at best a presence that moved vaguely with the currents like a corpse upon the seabed. This would be something he could live with perhaps...

Please forgive your father then, if in this preoccupied state, in your mind (as it is represented here, *as he wrote it*) this meeting becomes confused with that other meeting, which took place in London a few days later with the publishers *Pinkman & Foales*, to whom they (the Thompson twins, as we now imagine them) had surely directed you.

Yet, looking back, did it not strike you as odd, that these two brothers, and the conversation you had with them, so closely resembled your subsequent encounter at the publishers, with those two characters who glory

under the title of Pinkman and Foales? Were you satisfied in your mind that one encounter could blend into another so seamlessly, or that these two sets of people were not in fact the same pair? What are the boundaries here, Jons – on what basis, in fact, do you distinguish one person from another – one situation from the next? And it would be tedious also to ask of your movements between the “unfamiliar English town” and the place where you met later with Pinkman and Foales – presumably London. I am sorry, I know I am probably overstepping my own boundaries by questioning you in this way, but I wonder what you did with yourself in those intervening days – knowing that there is nobody in England left for you to turn, because you too have been away too long, and left behind you no bridge unburnt. I don’t somehow imagine you at a hotel – I prefer to pursue the vagrant theme – a field then...?

Or do you simply come and go from this story as you please, with no further explanation required?

Like father like son?

And answer me this: where is it that people really go when they are not there before our eyes – I mean, really *go*?

But I doubt you hear any of this. Anyway, why should you listen? Your thoughts are turning to that meeting with your mother, which after all was

the reason you came here in the first place. Before these foreign interventions came between you. But now you are moving fast – I don't know – walking, taking a bus, driving – but moving away from this place; or as it appears to us, the images behind you are moving, at least – in a soft focus, the reflecting windows, the trees, the cars, the blurred stick-like figures (who do not move), their silhouettes eaten away by background light. Other images enter the frame, as you find yourself scrolling through the various expressions that your mother's face displayed – more animated than the blankness you had been given to expect – each look signifying a passing wordless thought like the ever-changing patterns left by clouds racing across a landscape.

*

But it is not until his mind alights upon the small portrait of her upon the wall above her chair that he really sees her. The painting he had guessed was an early Flannery – all the characteristics of what was to become his later celebrated style were already in place: the intensified expression, the exaggerated gauntness which nonetheless shone with an inner light, the impossibly intricate swirling designs of the clothes; all of this glowed and triumphed against the great dark slabs of colour, emerging from the background as if at unbelievable speed, so that they might overwhelm at any moment – were it not for the eyes, which the artist had perfectly captured, stolen from the present. The same eyes, which as he glanced at his mother's face, now sang through the intervening years.

It had been a year, perhaps more, since they had last spoken, and as he sits down beside her she turns to him, smiling gently – can he even detect a fondness there? He takes her hand, something he does not remember voluntarily ever having done before, is startled by its softness, its impossible warmth. He grips it gently closing his eyes, unable to meet the twinkling gaze with its slight caste of absence, as he tries to expel the portrait from his mind – its dreadful frozen stillness – lest it should replace the person at his side forever.

And as she turns to him, the warmth of her hand reflected in her smile:

*—Now what was it you were saying, she says,
what was it you were trying to say?*

Here you are then, carrying on the conversation as before. Except that things have changed. To my mind if not to yours. A passage of time has passed between us. To you perhaps it was merely a pregnant extended pause, a taking stock, a moment of silence, of reflection stolen between other voices. But to me, whole days have flown by. I pictured you standing at the mean little door of that office of theirs on the fourth floor, having spent a week or more out in the open. You would be picking the grass out of your hair – but otherwise passable, as you usually manage. It wouldn't have been the first time though, would it. I was concerned. You would be breathing hard, perspiring I expect after all those narrow twisting stairs. You'd be nervous too, wondering what to say – I'd like to think so – wondering how you were going to come across, how they'd see you, how they'd image you were. You hold their card in your hand, spin it between your fingers, the gold letters turned one way and then the other, because it is printed on both sides: PINKMAN, FOALES, PINKMAN, FOALES. The bold and elegant typeface of the card is not echoed by the letters stamped on the narrow door which seem to have been placed there almost as an afterthought. You are a little nervous, yet curious to see how the scene was going to pan out – almost as if you had no agency of your own that might determine in any way the course of events.

But these are just thoughts. It's getting late.

*

They had liked my earlier forays into journalism, they said, had enjoyed certainly that crime story that had appeared in one of the Sundays – *Agape's Jape*, was it – in particular, and although this present proposal represented something of a departure, they felt that my style lent itself to my father's own rather unorthodox and somewhat mysterious existence.

—A perplexing conglomeration of unsubstantiated rumour and equally unreliable first-person accounts. Straight from the horse's mouth, so to speak. Yet we feel you are well placed to get to the bottom of things.

—But I hardly knew him.

—That is precisely the point. But you have him in your DNA. Somehow, he lives inside you, a mutated gene that twists uncomfortably in the fabric of your unconscious mind, feral and mischievous, potentially malign, damaging – while it remains suppressed in this way.

—Well, putting it like *that* you...

—And there might be a novel in it.

—Oh, is there? But not one I'd be very likely to want to write.

—No, no, you misunderstand me. You would be engaged to write a *factual* biography – or rather, an *autobiography*. What I mean is, there is literally a novel, or parts of one at least, mixed up in the notes and journal entries, also written alas in the first person, so the matter becomes a little entangled. You would have to sort out – forgive the cliché – the fact from the fiction, put the latter to one side, I doubt you'd

have the rights to use it, anyway. Maybe at some later date that material could be dealt with – maybe your father could even be persuaded...

—That’s assuming he’s still alive. If he could be found. The thought of him being alive... I sort of assumed...

—Quite.

At this point the sunlight is glancing off the walls, as it tends to at such moments, its pinks and lilacs and fawns bleached and wasted against the lamplight. The desks are swimming, the floor floating up amongst them. There are pictures on walls, which we shall return to. Oddly arresting even then in that they seem to possess their own source of dark light.

—And you would of course have to give consideration to voice.

—Voice...

—Yes, you could adopt the voice of your father – you’d be writing in character, so to speak. To make it sound authentic you’d have to establish the voice.

The other chimes in:

—A believable speaking mouth... one that could be plausibly attached to the body of text – those extracts we are privy to, as well as your own contribution – to give the story legs...

At this, his colleague glances at him disapprovingly.

—Don’t the diaries already have a voice? And you would want me to try and bridge the gaps using that same voice...? That to me sounds... tricky.

—Actually, my colleague here is of the opinion that a voice is defined by its narrative context – that voice is merely an expression of agency

and will – something the diary fragments stubbornly fail to deliver. I, on the other hand, take a different view. I believe that voice is always conserved, is the one reality that always emerges from amidst the rubble, is the one stable timeless element. It is speaking ghost that is sustained, survives all that it finds dissolving around it.

—So, that said, is my task not an impossible one?

—Yes, as you cleverly suggest, there is an inherent contradiction. To recreate a voice would be to copy over what remains of the original, to obliterate its traces. It would be like simultaneously recording the words onto the same tape that you are trying to transcribe *from*.

—Then why not a straightforward biography, give an impression of the man rather than try to *be* him? More honest perhaps, if not even more authentic.

There is a pause. He seems to be observing me for a moment, weighing something up in his mind. When he continues, his tone is has changed, as if recounting something he has been over many times. The other man beside him remains silent.

—Two reasons: firstly, putting previous objections to one side for the moment, there is the question of your father's better-known brother, the artist Paul Flannery – in any life of your father his brother would of course necessarily crop up. But we feel any account involving brother Paul is bound to come across simply as salacious gossip – given his history – unless, that is, it were tempered by the insight that might be provided by a first person account – that certain sad acceptance, you might say – that kind of fatalism which only the protagonist or the

victim can deliver, while the onlooker that stands there outraged, aghast...

Secondly – well, this is, after all, as much your story as your father’s, do you.

—So, I could write an autobiographical account of my attempt to get to the bottom of my father’s life...

Pinkman, or was it Foales, I forget, already I am forgetting, hesitates for a second time.

—Again, two points: to begin with – how should I put this – the interest, the main focus, would be the father – in terms of the actual text, that is. In terms of sales alone, you understand. And it would be difficult to write an autobiography in which the *autographer* remained, so to speak, largely in the shadows...

Then – and I feel I am verging on truism here – show me a biography that isn’t actually about the biographer, or isn’t written to reinforce the biographer’s worldview – the stable voice that delights in finding a resonance – with itself. Are you that voice, Jons? And if you were, would we wish to hear it?

No, what better way to render your father’s voice than to steal it for yourself! By whatever means available to you. You have, as we have said, some share of his DNA, you have access to his most intimate journals, you have, although you deny access to them, some distant memories of him, which will at least be vague and imprecise enough to deliver a stamp of real and ordinarily inaccessible truth, truths that

haunt us only in our dreams! But not only how your father would speak – how would he write? How, indeed, would he write about *you*?

*

Departing the scene, I am not altogether clear as to the nature of this commission. Am I being asked to produce my father's biography using the "significant body of material", which they claim has been carefully preserved at the house, as a disinterested third party – which in practical terms I am, since my knowledge of the man could hardly extend beyond those preserved papers? Or am I being asked to "ghost write" his life, *in absentia*, to use that phrase (whose was that?), from the same sources? They seemed vague on this point. I suspect that my involvement in the project is due largely to the will of my mother – a means of bringing me back into the fold perhaps, a form of reconciliation. Or if I were to be more sceptical – and given the apparent insolvency of the estate – had she been persuaded by the publishers for simpler motives? No advance had been suggested. I supposed time would tell. And the matter of my father remained, the young prodigy who had returned briefly from the perfect death after so many years. Where was he now?

As I step out of the office I overhear Foales (I think it is Foales), who has moved into another room, dictating something to a small elderly man,

impeccably dressed, yet looking somewhat uncomfortable in surroundings he does not quite fit into. I notice a deck of cards on the table beside him, which his fingers drum upon nervously, as if he is being kept from his game. He appears to have taken on the role of secretary, shorthand pad in his other hand, concentrating with some effort:

This strange, difficult, beautiful yet beguiling – no scrub that – this strange, beautiful, difficult yet beguiling book will leave you thinking... No...

Perhaps, this wouldn't be such an onerous task, after all. And despite the certain reservations the publishers had expressed regarding the methods by which I should proceed, I felt I had a certain leeway. Or perhaps that would prove just enough rope to hang myself.

The other man, who during our interview had been the more domineering of the two, and who I now associated with the name Pinkman, had shaken me firmly by the hand. There was by now something distinctively avuncular in his manner as he speaks:

—You know, Jons, it is customary at this point to hesitate. The challenge has been laid down for the hero who, inexplicably it seems to us, declines to accept that challenge. Inexplicable, because without that acceptance the story has stalled, is stopped in its tracks. What will become of the hero, we wonder, in this chosen existence that must now only continue as humdrum as before? Is he simply to mingle back into the crowd, become one of us again? And we too – our own place in the

crowd is reconfirmed, our fate sealed, as we can no longer identify with that figure who does not behave as we do. The dramatic tension builds as we wait, suspended from ourselves, anonymous, until that incident, that moment of revelation, that tells the hero he must indeed act.

For all sorts of reasons, I think we can skip that part.

(I find myself muttering now, half to myself.)

Having taken my leave, I find myself on a brightly lit landing, furnished only by a few plastic chairs ranged along the wall, the door closing with a satisfied click behind me. A newish looking elevator, doors agape, waits obediently for me to make the decision to step into it. I do so, descending, surprised at the speed at which it seems to plummet, the blood rushing to my head as I try to recall the whereabouts of the long glass corridor through which I had earlier entered.

How is it that so often I find myself imagining *his* return – in the minutest detail how it would have been? I have little to go on. How can I reconstruct the facts out of thin air? And anyway, facts I am told were never my forte. I might just as well be indulging in augury from patterns of birds in the sky – if there were any birds – at let me tell you, here there are none.

But am I not speaking in circles like the birds? Augury relates to the future, surely. And what am I trying to do – foretell the past? If I continue to engage in this, this imagined fiction, am I not, in a way, word by word, moving forward into the future. The past is for memory, and I do not remember what I have not witnessed, or have never been told. Are the stories we tell made of memories, memories that do not belong to the things of which they speak: shuffled, borrowed images hastily snapped back into the frame as if nobody noticed the switch – or are stories always moving away from memory, in the direction of what does not yet exist?

So – possibly it was late March. Yes, the birds do tell us that. The way they are flying against the low brightening sky – rooks I think, on their purposeful morning commute to wherever it is they go to. The combination of those slow beating wings, the hue of their dark bodies against that light. It

could only be March – although, heavens, I am no expert. And I do not recall ever seeing rooks going *out*, only their evening return. Whenever I have seen them in the morning, they are always already *there*, wheeling about in that bickering manner they have. But this suggests also, does it not, that I am *already there*. Always there, always waiting.

Would he have been aware of them, arguing in the sky above his head, or been aware, as I am aware now as I write in this concrete room, of that season's brittle, lingering inertia, of all that energy waiting, still locked down, as he made his approach? As if those encircling impatient birds were themselves waiting, for all that life to begin.

Perhaps he would have imagined *himself*, tripping across open fields, pushing backwards through the dense unyielding hedgerows, plunging heedless into bramble filled waterlogged ditches, cleaving a straight path of broken young shoots through the unwatched fields as he never before would have dared, his feet becoming heavier with the clutching sodden clay. Indeed, he may have fancied various versions of himself making their way back across an unremitting flatness from multiple centripetal points both near and far, journeys fraught with minor incident and pointless delay, to converge at this one point, each version representing a different shade of life and thought, so that the long-empty house would soon become alive with the murmur of

interlocking voices that echoed in the hallways or spread outwards from the cold un-lived-in rooms like sudden irradiating heat.

—But why that? Why not the voice of, for instance, the sitcom mum:

—*Ooh!, squeals the voice.*

Our Tel, knew e'd make it back. Told you, didn' I!

—*Yes, responds the countering voice, engulfed within the low armchair woven with its meshing floral motifs, from which it cannot rise, has never risen, that voice. He is returned from the sandy beer-churned sea, a man yet. What news?*

If that should come into my head, why not into his? What would be closer to the truth in this game of ghosts? Is he to be so guileless, so easily led by the events laid in his path, so much their product? Let him occasionally slip from this script into another, allow him to entertain a few disparate thoughts, thoughts that do not immediately accord with the situation in which he is placed. Or let him, like his imagined steps, move at will through the layers of time in which we attempt to entrap him.

But for now, I am going to indulge myself further, pursue my earlier course, its manner of telling at least: to reveal that *in the event, he made his arrival from down the dipping winding lane that ducks beneath the maternal hill that always* (it

seemed to him, not just to him) *could itself see, itself breathe. A rolling down through the taut velvet splines of rusted beech, a gentle, physical descent, a coming down through a longed-for topography, pre-mapped, waiting.*

A longed-for topography – yes, that’s it.

As I sit in this concrete room.

The first approach that he makes suggests a to-be-realised potential, the second, a becoming. Either of those things I would be satisfied with, would centre him somewhere within that very map. Stop him falling off its edge.

The extent to which he is aware of these things is difficult to gauge. He has, after all, other things on his mind: for he is, almost unconsciously, composing a voice, and remembers a fragment somewhere that spoke of the sea, which he knows is close by, but one that he never remembers seeing except in his dreams: an unknown stretch of shore, of low ruddy cliffs watching over shingle strands.

As he stands there now, mouthing words – testing their strength against the wind, their fit, their purpose – something within him is already

starting to give. And for the first time in many years, he is aware of the true extent of his own solitude. He looks up. For a moment, a brief moment, there is a sharpness, *a definition*. The voices have fallen away, and in this new raw silence a vast nameless danger.

He sees the grass quiver. Each blade quiver. He sees the rigid immobility of the trees beyond. He sees the tiny black van miles off beetling down the ridge on forever's summer afternoon.

Surge of quickening panic. Let it grow. Let it fountain up through you. He lets it rise, rise to breaking. And then, and then – because he knows he has the solution to this crisis – then gently he lets the voices, gently, start to flow back like slow returning blood.

And gently he has changed.

*

You are standing on the low cliff, facing the sea. A lone gull points at you, almost level with your gaze, stuck and held almost immobile by the wind a few yards out, it tilts and shucks one current from its back only to seized by another as it drives its black eye against the force of your thoughts, rooted there before you. The shining blackness again piercing the blankness of mind,

the grey invading mirrored sea; you have let go, for a moment suspended also by the streaming air, your feet are peeling from the ground.

He thinks: this is how it's done! And he surveys the landscape as it descends around him and becomes his. As if for the first time, the land tumbling to the tilting sea.

He is yelling into the wind by now. So, he thinks, he screams:

This is how it is fucking DONE!

Preoccupied thus, he had forgotten the landscape at his back. Or not so much forgotten as allowed it to become something else. But it is surely worth a mention here, this landscape, moulded also by recent almost remembered seas.

It has drifts of shingle bound by heather, and ribbons of friable clay bombed with nodules of chert. There is pithy yielding humus scooped into banks and hollows, and briny quivering marsh; with little sheltered manardes of grit, washed and graded, cleansed of the fine suspended silts that cloud the shore and its inlets with a silky diaphanous accumulating slurry.

Hardly a landscape at all, more a flat transporting osmotic platform, a living zone of transfer and exchange ... a process ...indifferent... into which we somehow stumbled, briefly got caught up. It is a landscape that corresponds to *human* time, was formed as we already dwelt within it, changed beneath our feet with the seasons. We are bound and drawn by its mutable surface that reflects our own condition. Where that which is washed away is always later washed up again.

But let's forgive him for not noticing much of this – he is lost in his own moment, his own event, and does not need such words as these to probe the surface of his own reality, to pick away at it in this way. His task is not to bring the world into being, after all, but to cope with it as he finds it. Leave him to it. Let him ask his own questions.

There, look there, over there on the wooded crumbling bluff, the ruined monastery, the crumbled run of the clifftop edging towards it. See its carefully cracked fist-shaped flints, mottled with copper, sparkling silica. But they: the flints, the copper, the silica, are all soon to be undone from their bed of lime, gently unlocked by the rocking returning waves. Have a go yourself, kick at the caking stone, pick away at it, it will soon crumble and give, weigh it in your hand, hurl it, hear its foamy thwump as it collides with the curling sea.

There – you are starting to remember!

*

A lull in the wind rocks you forward onto the balls of your feet, forward, and then back, into consciousness again. Turning, you make your way back to the car, realising you left both the driver and rear passenger doors open. The car is like a giant beetle about to take flight. You clamber inside only closing the doors with an effort, forced as they are back against their hinges, stiff with wind.

The drive downhill takes you back through the old moraines, *the base of the ice cliff, margin of a white noise, a polar silence. You look south, across a gurgling rock-strewn expanse alive with twittering birds and the song of freshwater that you could – if you left the car behind and walked, kept on walking – could follow trickling down to the cool clear forest-fringed lakes of Africa.*

Now the moraines are hidden, mere creases in the land through which you drive, cloaked in loamy earth and a benign vegetation, fulfilling the season's need, softened and blurred by decay, furring the edges that lead down to the grey green salt sea that has the land tumbling eagerly towards it.

Beyond that, beyond the bend in the lane, or maybe the next after that, the house awaits. It is bordered, you imagine, by brakes of unkempt splintered pine and bent greyish bracken in matted heaps.

Yet on the sharp bend at the bottom of the hill before the house comes into full view you stop. Somehow you cannot bring yourself to come upon the place so openly. This, after all, is not such a normal homecoming, and lends itself perhaps to a certain degree of caution – a *circumspection* you could call it – the result, strangely, of what you feel as a kind of guilt: that you are engaged in an act of duplicity within this web of manufactured chance.

Before the car pulls up to the front door therefore, there exists the possibility that you might first approach by stealth, through the trees that fringe the side of the house, stepping perhaps through the derelict perimeter walls upon which the years have heaped great gouts of ivy. Imagine that this ivy has spread into the woods themselves, choking everything within the radius of the curving lane, so that you might find yourself plunging into a cold and lifeless tropic; its deep implausible greens are masking dusty withered stems that clutch at the red crumbling bricks of forgotten ruins, ruins that were once, not so long ago, dwellings: the punctured television set, the recently rediscovered and sat upon chair (discovered by who, set on its feet again by who?), the single mummified brogue – the disassembled and dissembling story.

Beyond all this, in an area that now feels out of reach, the woodland broadens out into what seems like uncluttered equilibrium, and its floor is covered not with dense suffocating thicket but with fallen leaves, of myriad shapes and hues that if you were to walk there instead, would whisper softly at your feet.

*

Once before you had paused at the edge of this wood, listened as now to the persistent *tock tock tock – tock tock tock* of the woodpecker from somewhere within, and found yourself facetiously thinking if it had any ticks, and you had turned to – was it Po? – to make your joke. Your old friend, Po.

The pun worms in your thoughts, undermines them as the image of Po's returning grimace now supersedes everything – the tired clown's face through the trees. And you are now wandering not through the deepening paths of a forest like a fox as you had hoped, attentive to the fern cool breeze that swirls and stiffens in the canopies, bearing the hushed modulated pulse of memory, of distant places, your senses as brittle as a slender graphite rod attuned to these humid sulking shadows, but rather find yourself dwelling on that grimace, weighed down by it, those returning words whose language is angular, alien, that find you stumbling across a changed place, *across the uneven metallic surface of some science fiction world of robotic debris strewn across the drifts of glittering unyielding silica in which symbols flash and stutter like faulty neon signs.*

And amongst the great gloomy time-bound oaks, skeletal in the encroaching sand, ephemeral forgetting jays flash between the flickering years disseminating the encrypted seed.

Almost like a swoon, this reverie, this thicket of words that tug and catch. You come to. Your senses sharpen into focus again. You pause now at the edge of this wood, one foot half raised in hesitation, indeed like a fox, the tip of what we shall now call your snout cold and moist. This artificial darkness neither excludes nor invites – you will step into a place of your own making, and this is what you most fear. You feel the clamour of shapeshifting change is upon you, the cold void, the heady distention of self. Will the narrative confront you there at last? A voice lurks in every shadow. And again, we will ask: *Who shall speak?*

*

I hardly recognise the figure that finally enters through the front door, struggling anxiously for a few tense moments with the stiff lock before stepping over the low sandstone sill so worn on one side.

Frantically I search my notes for first impressions. It seems vital that I recover those sensations upon first entering, beyond the spectral blur of chequered tiles and the dull pain left in cold fingers from pressing too hard on

the stubborn key. But I find nothing recorded – can only return exasperated to the figure hesitating at the bend in the lane.

I see him staring into the wood, at the old familiar oaks that you will recall are so twisted by time, that are made freakish by some will to preserve them beyond their natural life, each storm damaged or diseased limb assiduously lopped off and trimmed back, century after century – a slow surgery that has wrought them like a spell. Look how they bulge and burst from the template of their natural selves, how they seem to gurn back at him from the past, loveable, monstrous, witless. Euthanasia was never their option – is that what he is thinking? The quick kill, the jawing slice felt at the base. I try to imagine him thinking. I cannot see him thinking – how he might describe this moment to another who is not present: *that these silent forms gave the impression that they were delivered pre-formed from above, exiled from some ghoulish planet, their roots tentacles that cling to the whirling earth...*

Yes, that's what he'd say if he were asked. He thinks that. And thinking aloud almost, he might wonder (but only in the hope of being overheard), that if he could lengthen his own life, distend it, like theirs across the centuries, would his own biochemical functions also become like theirs; the blood, surging, glossy, the quick ineluctable drama of it, the embodiment and source and the drama of it, reverting back to the barely perceptible: the humours of bile and the blood and the liquid seed of it all reduced to the

merest suggestion of moisture migrating between core and living pith that no wound or incision could trace the inner eye the weeping wound roving bubble of silver knocking against the glass the longing fear the fear the surface membrane a thin distended membrane all things contained upon the thin distending surface membrane

Shout.

Could he say that, believe that? Imagine that he might.

If only you were there to listen.

*

And all the while, there is the figure, who remembers and cannot stop remembering, left alone now in the car, hands stuffed deep into pockets, face obscured by shadowy folds, angles, the many glinting surface planes that move about us as we speak; or now standing a little further back barely visible beneath the vaporous hush of the straight and slender, the geometric and well-placed television trees that face the gnarled oaks on the opposite side of the road, bathed in their own fuzz of static.

And now, after many months, I can finally report that the unfinished work has been painstakingly reassembled. That which lay scattered about the floor, dismantled, in pieces, is now whole again: a fully functioning unit, throbbing with life, possessing truly a sense of itself.

These were the phrases that you toyed with in the days that followed, flipped around in your mind like a coin. You had always imagined “unfinished” to mean never reaching The End, as if the manuscript consisted of a perfect and complete final draft up to the moment that it just suddenly stopped – that the repost to the question flung down by the massing brass on bar 34, scratchily penned just moments before the final breakdown, was total, unbending silence (a silence that now emanates from the empty still rocking chair).

But that not of course. Rather holes and omissions, yawning unbridgeable flaws, pointless later scrapped embellishments wrought for the pleasure of being wrought. Thoughts that forked off, snaked out, left off and went. Fancies tucked in behind and never tricked back to the main thing. Pages in rooms, cupboards, left on floors, in bags. Scribble that edged margins, ran

onto bills, envelopes, hopped, from this pad to that, emerging in another room, grinning, gapped, sorted. Endings there were – everywhere endings – lost within piles of other endings.

Forgive me, I am rambling. I am trying to take it all in. Too quickly perhaps. Trying to assimilate all this too quickly. Wandering through the empty house, up and down its various levels, along its corridors and half landings, I peep around doorways to find differing tableaux of abandonment and neglect. In some rooms, the floor is littered with objects and papers that seem to have attained their random position as if by some geological shift across time rather than by human placement, or resemble the detritus left from a receding flood.

Other rooms might contain a single feature, placed like an exhibit in a museum with a descriptive tag that would have read, *On This Day: This*. A neatly centred table with a single cup, a lamp placed upon a box. In one large airy room a single sagging bookcase against a wall holding nothing but mail order thrillers of dubious provenance. Nearby the cap of a silver fountain pen lays discarded like a spent round that had clattered to the floor.

In this room, in the light that falls from the window, you could clearly see the thick rime of dust that covered the wooden floorboards. The dust is broken by a single track of repeated footprints, overlaid one atop the other.

Curiously, the footprints do not follow a straight line but describe a slight arc, as if deflected by an invisible force within the room, or else drawn by a kind of gravity towards the window's light – it is the arc one might unwittingly describe if walking across some vast featureless space.

*

That place where everything stays. The shadows that soak back into the sand, the branches that fall already bone-dry from the trees; your passing, and mine. These paths etched like crayon on a dun-coloured page remain untouched by the wind or the rain, as if of other matter, oblivious to the drift of time or human season.

This present path you walked before. You find footprints often, maybe your own. It is hard to tell, when you wonder if you really care to know for sure, because what is imagined is enough, as you follow at your own pace the distant line of shimmering figures that belong to neither then or now. You follow at a distance, but with each day that passes the band of figures, chatting as they go, or pausing for a few moments, their backs arched against the endlessly deferred horizon, are moving further and further away, obscured increasingly by the pools of vibrating sun. And the brilliant coloured snake, thin as your finger that slithered across our path, caught and held by the grinning guide, the cowering dog beside – that is then, but is it not happening now, or has it become a memory within a memory? Harmless, says the guide, holding the snake submissive against the sky. But

the dog cowers all the same. And the acacias hunched in the mist on the plains below belong to this moment but reminds me of a place I am sure I never saw. As I walk, time and again one scene is laid over another – an almost perfect match yet slightly off, like misaligned components of a 3D image beneath the tinted lens.

The pavements shimmer like a Hendrix opening in the heat. If you don't know the one I'm talking about, look it up. There's not many to choose from – only endless variations upon a single theme. The sidewalks were shimmering somewhere on the day he came up with that. As today, all vibrato and wah. *This heat, it's gonna getcha.* Nor was it meant to loop like that, this shimmer, but rising instead with an unbearable tension, before resolving into the irresolution of feedback, which in turn is soon plunging into the riff that farther delays the inevitable, but at least takes you somewhere more emphatic, more of a purpose, in its endless deferment, a wave crashing forward and withdrawing, a horizon that is never reached, *the endlessly deferred horizon* – always nearer than you thought. And at least you are *moving* – off and up and away.

But today the sound, this image that is a sound, loops and loops, grinding away into the back of your eyeballs. Surely does damage there. A figure in a white coat approaches, a small circular mirror is attached to his forehead and when it catches the light shines with an almost impossible

intensity, the desert reflected in a whiteness only. His sleeves are rolled revealing raw-looking fleshy arms, and I immediately take him for a surgeon, until I make out, half blinded by the glare darting and shifting as he walks, that he is bearing a tray arrayed with various tinted optical lenses, and with relief realise he must be an optician of some kind. He stands there passively as I grope around the tray, trying out first one lens and then another. He looks down at me as if from a great height, the light on his forehead a beacon, a lighthouse beam. The lenses are circular like his mirror, but thick and weigh dark and heavy in the palm of your hand. There is no way to attach them to the face except by clenching them into the hollows of the eyes like a monocle – but their edges have not been ground smooth and cut painfully into your upper cheeks. Finally, I find two that match and fling my head back the better to hold them in place, grinning the wolfish grin of the rock star. I can no longer see a thing, but sense the optician’s presence still.

—Why here, in all this desolation? I ask.

He speaks for the first time. His voice holds a fuzz box burr.

—And why in this desolation, indolence? He asks back.

And then in his thoughts, I can feel them, patterning out like a thick slow harmonic wave across the desert:

Why in this desolation, indolence,

and in this indolence,

something that resembles

belief?

There is a pause, a ticking sound, my own thoughts, I realise. He is speaking again, but already the words are lost in the wah, the shimmer, the vovelling wah.

The skies are clear, settled at last. Light pours in through the large curtainless windows, the heavy shutters now all thrown open. Until a couple of days ago the weather had been rather gloomy, the days punctuated by squalls of bitter rain that would blow up out of nowhere, deterring anything but the shortest forays into the surrounding area. And anyway, I was a little too absorbed with the contents of the house itself to worry about leaving it. Although, I have to say, even by the end of day three I was beginning to feel more than a little claustrophobic.

But now that the weather has lifted, any sense of confinement has lifted with it. Curiously, in fact, I feel oddly exposed, have become self-conscious in my movements, as if I am constantly on show to some unseen audience as I move about the house, even to the extent that I sometimes consider seeking refuge in the surrounding trees myself, *alongside the watcher*, although that makes no sense – because I keep having this recurring image of seeing myself from the building's exterior, watching *me* as I pace about the rooms as if in a glass case. I appear at different windows, pacing past or looking out, now here, now there, until each window is filled with a moving shadow. It is not as if I am overlooked by any neighbouring house – I don't suppose

there's anybody round here for miles, and the nearest village which I briefly visited for supplies still seemed almost deserted.

By the end of this first week I am starting to notice that some attempt at an ordering of the material that lies strewn about the house has already been undertaken. Although the dust that lay everywhere had initially indicated a period of long abandonment, there were places where it had clearly been disturbed, as I have mentioned – although again, after my first excited explorations on arrival, it was unclear how much of that was down to me as I scurried from room to room trying, and I admit, failing, to re-establish any clear memory of the house as it was when I had last seen it. I subsequently tried to retrace my movements on that first day but to be honest my recollections of it are rather vague.

And the place that I had dwelt in for so long in my mind had changed beyond any recognition – almost to the point where I start to wonder if it is the same house! Gone are the overly plush '70s furnishings, the cheap hastily laid carpets, the square boxlike feel to the rooms. Instead, what I find are elegantly appointed living rooms, a study, tastefully understated furnishings, minimally equipped but comfortable bedrooms whose tilting undulating floors are somewhat at odds with the solid and uniform proportions of the walls and windows. There are various small anti-rooms, alcoves, a couple of pleasing

staircases that emerge onto broad landing areas, an unmodernised utilitarian kitchen that could have passed back into fashion for being left as such. This was no sprawling mansion, but an airy relatively compact early Georgian house – a kind of architecture that could gracefully give way to whatever later style was burdened upon it – and any subsequent restorations that had been carried out had clearly bedded in over many years. The house bespoke a certain stolid permanence rather than characterful old age.

But I realise that I have described the interior as if it had been prepared for viewing by some new owner, an image of it frozen in space. Because missing from this description is the litter of papers, the tatters of fine dusty cobweb that flutter in ceiling corners, above doorways; the dust itself; the general atmosphere of absence; of having been left.

The dust I discovered was an unreliable marker of time – it appeared to fall like a constant invisible rain, or sediment sinking to the bottom of a lake – but falling unevenly: undisturbed objects bore a noticeable coating of it that nonetheless didn't seem to change. Likewise, any markings on the floorboards remained visible – although if to the same degree it was difficult to tell, while newly placed objects, a paper, a book, within a day or so were soon covered with a subtle tilth.

I suppose it would not be surprising if the house were to appear smaller than I remembered – but it was not so much that – it was rather that

the space itself seemed reconfigured into different proportions: the squares had become oblongs, rhomboids; and the cell-like structure embedded in my mind had become a generally looser, but more effable place – no longer the complex imagined symmetry of the labyrinth, but somewhere easily navigated in a few minutes, whose irregular and asymmetrical plan reassured rather than mystified; and always ending quickly where it began, in the rather dark hallway on the ground floor where I had entered on that first day.

Missing too was what I remembered as a palpable sense of physical ascent as you climbed up to the top floor, to the attic where my room had once been for a while – although I seemed to recall that later I had moved to a less remote room on the first floor. In vain, however, could I locate what I might recognise as either room. The attic was now one large open space, and although looking out of the broad and unfamiliar dormer windows I was presented with the fine views of the estuary, fanning out into the marsh, the low wooded hills beyond which fitted into memory as neatly as a photograph, all sense of that giddy aerial perch, far from the ground, was gone.

As for the room below, where I must have spent my final time – that was nowhere to be found.

My first instinct is to somehow blame the house for these disparities between memory and what I now encounter – as if it has artfully arranged

itself in the deliberate attempt to confound. But then it occurs to me that I must be the one at fault: that there are whole stretches of the past that I cannot recall, cannot bring to mind. The thought – and this I confess is the first time I had considered it as a possibility: that I had at some stage fallen victim to some form of amnesia, in which I had simply papered over the gaps with vaguely imagined substitutes, casually appointed proxies for reality – this I find more than a little unsettling.

*

But from what you said earlier, it might be concluded that your battered memory of those early days is largely kinaesthetic in nature – consists of a series of physical sensations, let's say – to which your imagination has accumulated over the years a number of images, like the debris stuck to a ball of tar rolled around a shingle beach in the endless drum of the waves.

I am moved at this point to mention another thing too that interests me. The postcard you always kept with you, that you received years later, but never in fact mentioned to anyone – scribbled lines that come to you, one might say, from the furthest reaches of your imagination. In your father's hand, written in his native tongue, the tone of which you have never been able to fully decipher. You could make out the words but it

was the tone that eluded you, the letter but not the spirit, gnawed away at your curiosity, your doubts. Is that not so? And strange perhaps its subject – that photo from the municipal archive, of the house as it had been, its many former tenants standing before it, each in the garb of their trade, characters whose silhouettes begin to bleed into the sepia brickwork behind them as the cheaply printed ink fades.

This image of the house that you once called home had come to you from far away, as you describe it: the flip-side bearing the postage stamp with the brightly coloured bird, crowded in by your father's tiny handwritten script that almost appears to spill over the furred edge of the card. You say you imagine him sitting at a brightly lit window somewhere writing it, the card itself laying on the table surrounded by a litter of shorn off words and phrases, all curled up and twisted like little black shavings. Perhaps the bird denotes a distant place – although not necessarily so. After all, coloured birds are not just the preserve of remote islands and imagined forests, the objects of barely believed reported sightings. But to you...? But to you, I wonder.

Because when you emerged from all that blissful wreckage into adolescence, that postcard was the only token you had of your father's very existence.

*

He can be seen, leaning against the wall at the back of the house, wearing only a t-shirt despite the cold. He is clutching with one arm at a plastic rain barrel for support.

Its lid clatters to the ground and his arm plunges into the icy water up to the elbow. He throws his head back as if in relief, as if his arm had been burning from something. His features are lost in the shrouds of vapour that hang about him as a result of his heavy laboured breathing. He can be seen there, leaning against the wall at the back of the house. The brickwork is mottled with dry lichen and soot. The mortar is powder pale. But these details are things you already knew, and from this distance you cannot make out the expression on his face, although from his general posture, his demeanour, it seems he is not in good shape.

Or perhaps he is simply laughing.

*

No pictures on walls, no photographs, no mirrors – no mirrors anywhere. Think forgot to mention before – couple of days before dawned on me – the mirrors especially. Can't remember last time looked in mirror. And walls move. Fold up. Folding panels. Walls

I begin the task of sorting through the papers.

Sometimes I would come across pages arranged in neat groups of ascending calendar days – a whole week might pass in this fashion, although it was clear from the way the writing style and layout differed on each assembled page that the period in question had neither been written down consecutively nor indeed had ever been originally conceived to represent the period that the dates suggested.

And then on other occasions I would unearth a sheaf of papers that had clearly been placed together to refer to a specific location. So that over there by that stool I discovered a collection of writing referring, for example, only to Granada. I spot a reference to a balloon ride at dawn, the city *hunched, brooding, introspective, beneath its mountains*; later, on the same page *a jealously guarded cauldron of secrets*; and more on another page of the flight itself: *ascending through layers of silence, until reaching that pure silence ... that not even the barking dogs can touch*. Flipping back over the page I notice he has mentioned the dogs barking as the only discernible sound, *a sound that rising up through the clear air, pulls the surface of the morning together as if by a drawn cord*. There is some

scribbling here, some lines crossed out, a tangled knot of text, in the midst of which I can pick out ...*to reveal all its hidden patios and carmens, so that the whole stellar geometry of the old Moorish city could be realised at last – as it was never meant to be revealed.* Then more scribble, out of which finally emerges the word *embrujo* repeated over and over, as if he were rolling the word around on his tongue, to taste its sound in all its forms, testing the thick serrated hh as the shadow of the Arabic falls upon the j: *embrujo, embrujado, embrujar, embrujas, me embrujas.*

*

—Meaning? She asks.

—You have literally *inwitched* me, he says. I am *inwitched*. I have become the object of an *inwitchment*.

And deliberately he does not look at her as he makes a show of glancing around him, so that later, when she turns the scene over in her mind, she does not know whether with this silly invented non-existent word he is referring to her, or to the dusty city that has emerged from the plain at the foot of the mountains and now surrounds them.

—No... I mean, what is that *shadow of the Arabic*? Perhaps dissembling now herself, but irritated.

—What do you mean, *shadow*?

—Oh, sorry, I simply meant influence... on the language...

But the playful moment has passed. He feels deflated, and the next few [minutes] pass in silence. I am becoming too sensitive, he thinks, and this is happening more and more. This touchiness – where does it come from?

*

I continue flicking through the pile, releasing its coating of dust, which is as soft to the touch as talc – more like tiny moistened flaking [fibres] – the chaff from skin and cloth – rather than the fine grit I always remembered.

I come across a picnic with friends beside a well-known local spring at a place called *Quéntar*, whose waters were slightly effervescent and which bore the name *Fuente de la Gitana*; *a last picnic* claims the text. The spring, which is contained within a shallow manmade pool, ripples up between the feet of the wading children, and is in fact little more than the brief re-emergence of water from beneath a section of dry river bed – a crease in the limestone that runs down through the hillside scrub choked with stones until it reaches this place, a large depression shaded by the eucalyptus trees under which we now sit watching the children engrossed in their play.

The atmosphere is relaxed – nobody would claim subdued, we could not allow that to happen. And nobody says very much as we busy ourselves

with the picnic laid out on the broad drift of shingle that forms a raised bank between the trees.

Granada is miles away, beyond that pale ridge and then another, and we sit with our backs to the desert that begins in the bare red hills below, and which summons up eddies of scorched air that disturb the cool of the mountain tumbling into the dry squeaking leaves above our heads. *La Gitana*, whoever she was, must have been a long way from home. But even here, the city still holds us, lends our little reunion the slightest touch of reserve, that edge which every gathering in Granada always has unless it is broken or channelled by song, or the eruption of weary late-night laughter. *A mountain people, given to melancholy*, to which you the dreamer were always going to succumb – big time.

You are wading into the pool a little upstream from where the children play. The light is dancing on the surface of the water disturbed by their splashing games. I wish I could describe to you that moment – the light dancing upon the water. You cup your hands into the dancing light and drink, and suddenly you are spluttering, your face lit up with surprise. It's fizzy, you exclaim. It's got bubbles!

I am surrounded by this story. Its pages follow me around the house, are ever present, stick out from under doors, wait for me heaped upon rickety treacherous chairs on the bowed landings. My meals are taken standing up, as there is no available surface on which to lay my plate. At this stage I dare not disturb anything because the distribution of the papers around the house, however random they might appear, provides the only possible clue to their intended arrangement. I will gingerly pick up a sheet here or there, carefully noting its place beforehand, and quickly scan it for some meaningful reference. Sometimes, if a page is lying face down scattered amidst a mass of others, I will simply raise one corner without moving its position and peer tentatively at what lies beneath, as if seeking some rare creature hidden under a stone.

But perhaps the most frustrating find – on a low shelf in the small lobby adjoining the kitchen – were the journal entries which clearly referred to time spent at the house itself. [Thumbing] through them, my initial eagerness soon gave way to disappointment as it became apparent that they were amongst the more errant and confusedly written of all the entries I had found so far. These would require a closer reading, which for the moment I was too distracted to undertake.

I carry a small notebook in my back pocket, a short stubby carpenter's pencil behind my ear (I like the workmanlike effect this produces). So as I move about the house, sometimes purposefully, but more often than not just on my way to the kitchen or wherever to perform some minor chore, I make notes on my discoveries, and resemble perhaps a kind of surveyor *painstakingly assessing the integrity of some vast abstract structure whose limits warp off into infinity.*

I pause at this last phrase – test its weight, its sudden borrowed resistance. I look down at my notebook again, glance back through the lists and jottings, oblivious almost to the possible stories that swarm from the pages, seeing only symbols and words that hop like fleas into infinity... Hastily, I force my mind to cycle backwards, because already I can sense what is happening – sense what is about to intervene: the words have become fleas that swarm on the mat – a doorway in the sun, the cobbled dust bright street hanging in the sun – I pass by, too horrified to look beyond the corner of my eye, too horrified to dwell on the realization that this afternoon will always be about the thing in the doorway – and what is lost, towards which my steps had been bent, what awaited at the end on the gently rising street on that story's gently rising day, will remain forever unknowable.

*

The whole house therefore spun about the axis of a suggestive alternative geography. But the collage that this represented, of wildly conflicting dates, points of view, and unending places, for the moment, rendered the intended tale indecipherable (although I was both intrigued and at the same time comforted to discover the existence of many of these places in my father's memoir which I was familiar with myself). In these at least, there lay a tangible reality, real coordinates that had intersected with my own. These were places, after all, that I should feel I knew.

And I see now that my own drifting course was in fact an attempt to navigate along a set of bearings that had been set down and left, in the perhaps unconscious hope that I might follow.

Because in my mind, my father is always heading south. I do not mean this in its idiomatic sense – although I suppose that is something that could indeed be applied! Thinking about it though, is it not the expression “gone west” that tends to be used idiomatically? Anyway, never north or east. Could one usefully plot the course of a life directionally – at what point of the compass does one end up? Do we all, if left to our own devices, have a tendency to drift westwards – like cities (try to find a city that has developed otherwise)? Why do I find it easier to imagine an Ipswich man in Cardiff, rather than a Welshman in East Anglia – how many unhappy Welshmen in New York, or

indeed Spaniards in Cuba? Does the dying man go to seek out the setting sun, or might he purposefully strike out East in the hope of reprieve?

My sense of my father drifting south – was that something I ever could have verified through the journals? Certainly, one can plot an initial course: Suffolk, London, [down through those Spanish cities] Barcelona, Madrid, Granada, North Africa somewhere; then ending in the Far East? But at this stage it is difficult to ascertain the chronology of these places. Only the starting point is clear – but what use is a single bearing on a map? Perhaps, inscribed within each of us is an imagined course, that regardless of the chronology of our lives that determines the physical pattern, causes us to mentally drift one way or the other. Are we therefore always at odds with our own chronology, indeed our own past? Does time that opposes place always make of us ghosts?

And my father is moving away from me. With every page I read, he is travelling further away. This receding figure who I am starting to know. Is it because he is heading into a place that is strange and unfamiliar to himself – does that somehow affect me too? I want to find him here amongst these papers. Here writing, as I am doing now. Here at this desk in the house. Then memory alone might bring him closer.

*

You know, don't you, that you are overcomplicating things. Do you think that you can recover every step that has been taken, for every footprint find a reciprocal phrase, for each breath a corresponding word? Do you wish to build something that resembles a filigreed paper structure, or create a découpage perhaps, one capable of containing the multiplicity of a single life, the webbed concatenations of even a single thought, or conjure sentience out of black ink? There is not enough room in the universe, nor enough ink in all that blackness. Do not think of the ink inscribed upon the white, but rather the page as a stencil laid upon the black.

The Kantō region. Tokyo. Thumbing through the notes. Outside a suggestion of growing light. The first bird twitters. Unrecognisable. But arresting – comforting. Another life in the darkness.

I sit at the foot of the stairs, the back of my head against the wall. Listen for a moment, as those first opening notes begin to meld with others, become a tapestry of sound. On the side table, next to me a collection of documents describing the area around Tokyo. *And here the text is littered with thumbnail sketches, diagrams that might indicate meeting points, and tiny inked vignettes that appear to denote abstract concepts: haste, satisfaction, affection, appetite, remorse; all seemingly added by another hand, more persistently precise, more eager to convey.*

And indeed, as I read, small slips of coloured paper, thinner than tissue, lodged at random between the pages, will fall out and flutter to the ground. Sometimes they will contain hastily sketched maps – street plans, sometimes labelled but usually just a collection of lines. And as I discovered – my father also mentions it somewhere – that apart from the main thoroughfares, streets in Tokyo do not bear names. If directions are required,

to give to a visitor or even until quite recently a taxi driver, for example, it is often necessary to draw a map, and to rely on local landmarks – a cafe or a shop usually, since there are relatively few recognisable monuments. For postal purposes, each block carries an identifying number, but even within an individual block, building numbers do not run consecutively, instead corresponding to the date each building was constructed – and often this occurred in a rather haphazard fashion as further space was eked out from what already existed. Anywhere in the city it is common to find the diminished residence of a noble family crammed in between apartment buildings build on plots of its own land that it has sold off piece by piece, so that finally the original dwelling is just another house – perhaps a little shabbier than the rest – crammed in to enclosed square of hotchpotch design borrowed from every architectural fancy of the last three hundred years, distinguished only by the whispers of Samurai ancestry, murmurs of dynasty-toppling scandals, – rumours indulged in amongst the more recent neighbours, claims rarely proven.

The map of the Japanese city is therefore the converse of the western system: the blank spaces between the roads are labelled although their structure remains obscure, whereas the roads themselves become anonymous blanks. And in these cities, there is no organising centre – no spatial hierarchy. Rather there are various points of intensified activity distributed throughout

the urban area, clusters of greater energy surrounded by areas of village-like calm. No nucleus, no unifying brain or central nervous system. The beast exists as an amorphous mass in equilibrium with itself, modular, uniform, adaptive.

Was this why, he mused, that making any kind of journey in Japan was, or at least felt, so laborious? Within the city there was never a sense of moving from an inner to an outer, or vice versa. And in order to visit that mountain or that shrine or that particular spa famous for that particular kind of red bean pastry, one had to entertain the prospect of first the right metro line from the many alternatives whose ultimate destination was concealed cunningly amidst a thicket of alternative branch lines. From there, a regional bus, tram, often a ferry, then more often than not a ropeway which was in fact a funicular with thankfully not a rope in sight. He wasn't sure if he was making any kind of sense by now – her features gave away no sign one way or the other – but, he continued, there is never a sense of moving *from* or *to* – simply *along*. He supposed too that there were so many final destinations concentrated into a relatively small area – he couldn't remember seeing a large-scale map of the *Shutoken*, but imagined it would be thick with print. And he had worked out that it was roughly the area of East Anglia. If Ipswich were Shinjuku, the flashing neon lung, noodle bars and strip joints and camera stores, then

Norwich would be the outer northern suburbs, no more tranquil, an endless flow, but still, as elsewhere, darker pockets, vacant lots, the more constant glow of Love Hotels, obscure incongruous office buildings indistinguishable from apartment blocks, spotless industrial zones that extrude smokeless into residential areas. Sudden crowded thoroughfares.

Already, as one approaches Peterborough, there is a sense that soon this must end, and soon, as if in confirmation, the low dark foothills of Nagano can be seen in the distance, backbone of the main island, hub of its seismic trance, with its lounging macaques, its small ill-tempered bears. And heading into Essex, an intermediate zone, the first temples pushing up between the tiled roofs towards Ito, glinting ditches amidst the concrete, snatches of bamboo and pine, uncertain areas of sea nudged up against the slip roads, the lorry parks. The light-gauge railways, their trains like fairground toys. The great stone Buddha, vast, immobile, implacable against the tsunamis that have at various points engulfed it, only its great head visible and still smiling above the swollen surface of the greater surrounding ocean.

Yes, a concentration of places within a space that had no form, and gave no sense of space as you travelled across it, negotiating its rubric of transport systems that seemed to bind this landscape, so riven with valleys and rivers, into an ever-tightening recurring loop. It was like becoming lost in

a complex text where you must continually keep referring back to where you had just started to verify that things are indeed as you thought, as you now find them.

He looks around him, pleased with this last conceit, but there is nobody there to listen. And his voice sounds hollow, vaporous in the empty room.

*

Among these notes, there is far more emphasis on factual information – it was if the sensory had been overwhelmed, given way to the more urgent requirement for the practical, the concrete. A simple need to know in order to live from day to day. But then there are these slips of paper always falling to the floor, evidence to a lived experience – a concealed narrative that loses itself amidst the hastily constructed jumble of this urban landscape that attempts to defy history, to exist without it – because it has been given no other choice. And occasionally, the text breaks free and you find yourself back in those remembered places. How you came to be there you can no longer tell.

There was a time when your thoughts drove forward into the future like the keel of a ship through an errant sea. But that no longer. If time were subject to a gravity of its own, a law that kept things in check, held them in

place, then somehow you feel you are released from its burden, and what is condensing inside you is not the steadying familiar weight of being, but something else. You are – how could you put it – no longer held down by the force of yourself.

Becoming lightheaded. Need some air. Need I need

*May 23rd – (various locations
South: arcing north, north-east (along the
Via D), then dipping again South)*

I take the fast train to B as if on a whim, but if only it were that. Later, as arranged, S saunters up to the café Z, confidently late, looking relaxed and at ease with himself – so different from my mind's image. I don't remember ever seeing him like this. I'd forgotten in fact how together he is in so many aspects. His mind a self-contained and self-regulating mechanism. Before, he'd always come across as rather square, now this just seems like wisdom. I'm all over the place by comparison. He joins me at my table out on the terrace. The passers by the endless flow blend into our conversation but I'm tired and by thoughts don't seem to be joining up to do justice to this reunion. I linger on the edge of the tale, the anecdote falters. The crowds thin and we too move on. I remember an absinthe bar somewhere out beyond the touts, the pushers, the pimps. One time some young chancer had tried it on, attempting to lock his leg behind mine as he asked me for a light in some badly rehearsed street move. A hand paws an empty pocket. I push him back and he falls theatrically, already yelling out at the injustice, working it up, until a more experienced companion, noticing in my eye a sudden flaring recklessness, ushers him away.

Two days later, I cross the border with M at the wheel. A fierce blue wind has blown all the clouds from the sky, scraped the low hills clean. Ruins survive, fable made, clinging to the higher crests. Somewhere, once, late at night, shadows flickered and crept out from those walls, sharp breathed beneath their tunic of flesh, shielding the dying spark of a belief that their later tales wove from song. We stop at a service area so that M can smoke, scratch his balls, stare at passing women. Headscarves offer no defence. Beyond the bleating traffic, the quieter water meadows, a single slender gothic spike fingers the sun.

A pleasant Sunday spent in P, the prompt summer heat modified by sea breezes that have ventured far inland. Watch silver spooned youth, a gaggle of Americans, paddle in a broad gurgling stream beneath a roman bridge, skimming stones across the deeper crystal reaches. Their evident euphoria as they prance about in the shallow water, I wanted to believe, was perhaps tempered, informed even, by the presence of that ancient bridge – probably the oldest thing they had seen in their lives so far.

But this morning quiet flashes of bitterness surface from unknown depth. This is not real, is not life. So many years dedicated to this illusory present. Maybe I was annoyed by the meeting with S, how he takes all this shallow bluster so seriously, how he has allowed it to define him, and how earnest he is about *having his say*. My course, I know, will take a different turn.

I feel my careful routines laid down at the beginning of this trip starting to unravel; the diligent reading, the keeping track of expenses, the care with packing and unpacking, the sensible eating and drinking; all going to pot as the weariness starts to set in. Spirits tumble as soon as the surface is pierced, when you realize you have assembled yourself from this kaleidoscope of borrowed images.

*

Tuesday, Avignon

Wan sunshine, children frolic in the square – reading Javier Marias’ *Negra espalda del tiempo*. Notice my socks are inside out, I hurry to fix them. A phrase sticks: *Writers should be seeking out the shortest route to silence. All writing ends in the “final silence”*. And I see that I have jotted down here as if in reply:

We leave behind us a dim impression, a mould hollowed from air – a restless vibration that shakes itself out through the trees that murmur towards a *final silence*.

I had told the doctor that I cannot stop falling and she looks at me quizzically or knowingly or as if before her sits another fleshy machine with a broken valve/circuit I cannot tell which but my brain and my heart are beating in a way I can never quite manage to convey. But I am loath to disturb her logic for I sense that I have no right to disturb that own sense of herself on which this depends (a bell rings from the tower above the square, an attempt at a

medieval ditty from its battered clockwork. Workers depart from surrounding doorways for their nearby kitchen lunches). Vertigo, I explain – a physical sensation almost – I can function, I confess, keen not to exaggerate or appear overly dramatic. I cannot tell with you she says whether you want a diagnosis or whether this conversation is just material for your writing (workers that have emerged from other doorways in other squares have found this one, they sit with their sandwiches as I scribble, eating their daily sandwiches as I scribble on this day in this wan sunshine tomorrow it might be warmer or dull. Scribble that too. I will not be here. I had had labyrinthitis, I explain – a tiny mechanism locked in the whorl of the inner ear that had got stuck – could it be that? You would be spinning not falling she said – easily cured with travel sickness pills. Take six immediately. Her hand too is starting to scribble now. So why am I falling? With a sigh which I can see she realises too late she should have hidden she takes my wrist. In order to separate for a moment the beating brain the pulse writhing in the chest to separate if I can for a moment this from the day I say: “Do you know that writing seeks the shortest way to silence?”. But my voice is thick and cold with sweat and the words of this phrase don’t dance out as intended. Don’t talk she says to divert her curiosity from her science.

The next day the worker sits on the same opposite stone bench and wonders about the figure he saw writing there. The day is no warmer than

before and his breath hangs about him in vapour as he eats and thinks. And already I am walking back down the slow misted hill the blood twisting and coiling as it tightens inside me, back to my own front door. An image of solace.

Until that moment when I step within.

*

May 25th

Time to head for the recent coast.

Reach N where anonymity matters less. Far less. M gone, back across the border where he belongs, replaced by E, friend from the past; heavy, affable, ponderous and charming in that northern manner. Clipped and neat.

Went to sit on the stony steeply sloping shore but unable to settle and slowly the sea is draining of colour as threatening clouds draw in from the horizon, their mess of shapes seeming to offer patterns, imprints of the past. I just make it back to the room as the rain starts; first probing the white pavements with exploratory splatters before coming down hard, harder than I'd ever seen it along the coast. A real temper tantrum of a storm, a carnivalesque affair, for the revelling in, the dancing about in, the regretting you ever went out in, as great blocks of water and cloud sail down through the

tall bowing palms that have crowded into the rear courtyard outside the window, as if seeking shelter there.

Sun breaks through rain during the drive above the Riviera. Patterns of light play upon the sea below. Late evening arrival at the villa in the suburbs of F. My stone flagged room offers a damp echoing permanent autumn. The next day, lunch with S again whose unexpected arrival provides the opportunity for an improvement in my mood. Now I am full of words that cluster around our table and the good brought food. Through another gap in the rain I follow the brown streets' course eventually to a palace whose curved concourses barely contain the bulging hill upon which it sits. In one room I stand before a tragic Cupid projected and caught by darkness and the fleshy whorl of its own envisioning madness.

Later, another hill under a different sky. Hand gliders wheel overhead on updrafts from the scorched infernal hill. Kinglike I sit alone, invisible behind the brilliant window I lower my face into the customary steaming bowl, as fellow travellers for whom I can do no wrong, grope squinting outside along blinding midday streets. I sip a second thimble of perfect royal coffee.

The road has led as it always does to R, where the conversation turns to gardening, flying, the sinking of wells through limestone, Asian recipes, oil spills and other themes of our old age. The eye is soon drawn to graffiti scrawled webs of colour which the soft stone has already partially absorbed,

leaving the impotent tracery of indignation in pastel shades. Nothing more than angry afterthoughts of a night on the town. Chat in a restaurant with B. Various woodworking implements adorn the walls as if to underline the more down to earth air since the departure of his wife yesterday.

In the morning, I take up my usual position under the colonnades that surround the great square and settle down to watch the priests and the punters. A good place for a day's ending, less for its beginning – the light is too sharp, too brittle with expectation; even the higher powers are a little testy. But already by mid-morning the square has settled to its rhythm, the guiding grooves etched into the day by repetition. For the first time perhaps, as I look on, the surrounding mass of architecture starts to make a kind of sense, and I am forced grudgingly to recognise something of the overly extravagant spirit of that endeavour. Meanwhile, as they always do, the two central fountains sprinkle their reliable gold into the sun, – between them and the purposeful roving crowds that flow around, a condition of mutual oblivion, as all eyes absorb the vast edifice in front.

*

I stop myself at this point. What is my purpose, lurking here in the shade amidst the columns, on the edge of things, observing others go about

their daily routines? Where did I begin, to end here? I have no memory of the past few days, and pausing mid-sentence, I am obliged to flick back over the pages to discover that five days before I was in B, which was the 23rd... Wandering as now amidst the crowds in a rite practised over and over as diligently as any passing daily priest. I could go anywhere from here: cross the bridge to lose myself in the old city, take a bus to the coast, or out to the low hills. And always later returning to the same too familiar room.

This route must re-establish its course. Make for the firmer ground. But keep moving at all costs. You see, I feel too at home here, in the shade amidst the columns, that are like trees on the fringe of a forest in which I might hide. A little reality is required, a little raw data, become the very people that I so casually watch. Do I dare do that? I doubt that I am able. Maybe this self-imposed vagrancy is my only reality – the unlicensed freedom of the watcher. Where must it end? I think I already know.

So, with an almost palpable enthusiasm, the swallows dipped and sprang at the frizzing goutts of mosquitos in the public gardens, and although I cannot reveal which, suffice to say they were gardens of the Spanish capital ...

But there is a problem – and I know this from my own experience: that in the Spanish capital I have never seen a mosquito. The air is too dry and thin. And while in the nearby towns swallows and martins flit about the rooftops in swarms almost as dense as the insects which they pursue, the capital itself is sadly devoid of any natural birdlife whatsoever, and one must be content with the ubiquitous canaries that burble with mechanical regularity from slender balconies, from somewhere amidst the bicycles and the folded chairs, and the rakish potted palms. Like clockwork toy birds they always seem to me, or recordings of same that are triggered as I pass. That’s what a city is, I suppose – a system of endlessly triggered events, a tiny proportion of which are down to you. At least that is what you would hope – what the traveller longs for – *some proof or token* that he still exists, has ever existed. And that he might one day be allowed to enter the moving frame.

Indeed, it is a strange equilibrium which you somehow, despite yourself, are trying to preserve: you tread gingerly, daring not to *disturb that universe* echoing in the mind, while like a child you dream of its destruction as the only means you know to show that you are alive.

But for the moment, while you behave as if you step through a house of cards, you are all too aware that this house of cards is in fact yourself.

I suspect, therefore, the hand of some commentator in these oversights: that with the swooping mosquitos and swarming birds he is confusing one place for another. He is clearly rushing his work again and has also somehow managed to disguise his voice – either that or he has inveigled his way in with the author – a lady not of my acquaintance, but somebody somehow, given the odd nigger here and there, I feel I could trust. But it pains me to think that, even as she writes, her hand is being swayed by the poison of another, whispering in her ear. There is no way she could have written *this*, for example. Just no way.

On the edge of the park, or one edge, that edge not clearly defined by busy two-lane traffic, the edge where narrow streets, unnamed, nondescript – only becoming streets slowly, turning gradually from grass and trees into stone and concrete.

In amongst those streets there is a shop with a door that resists slightly as you push against it, a somehow reassuring resistance that registers the fact that you are stepping from one place into another, that the place you are stepping into is discreet from the place you stepped out of, and should therefore require a little effort, just the slightest, that is then rewarded by the ting of a bell.

The shop, which I later sought out again, but never found (so often the case with places such as these) catered for model makers and collectors: ardent devotees, or part-timers, or the one-Christmas wonders (although a train set is not just for Christmas), the lost ones, the curious feigning nonchalance ones, the people like myself. I stroll past the various cabinets with initial disinterest: the Napoleonic battles, the Burgundian skirmishes, the mass martyrdoms on the edges of burning towns; a woman preparing to cross a crowded racecourse; a young prime minister in shirt sleeves addressing a group of pilots on a small island, the news cameras accurate to the last detail; while across a stretch of jellified silicon waves a Bosnian detention camp shrieks in the night; a desert martyrdom – and here a vast illusion of near silence, a solitude that is post-human (here the model makers had excelled themselves, reproducing the merest background whisper, the whirr of the servers only). I pause finally at a cabinet that contains a modest nuclear accident, set within a gently rolling coastal landscape. We infer from the scene

that unfolds simultaneously before our eyes that time has here been somewhat compressed, because while firefighters tackle what appears to be a minor conflagration in Generator Building C, decontamination and monitoring centres have already been established in the surrounding countryside, checkpoints installed on incoming roads, news crews roam the villages, a lone figure, a beachcomber apparently oblivious, wanders the adjoining salt marsh, and digging equipment is busy shoring up the dykes that surround the plant.

I do not linger too long, however. I am a little pressed for time – do not have the model makers luxury in that respect! But having stepped into the shop I feel it would be embarrassing to be seen to be sidling out too quickly. Glancing around as if searching for something, I pretend not to notice the Rape of Nanking in the corner – a perfunctory study might offend the shop owners – settling instead on two cases on the other side of the room. The first I initially take to be a scene of utter devastation, a bare light brown skin-colour surface slightly undulating, devoid of any feature whatsoever. But looking more closely I notice faint markings on the papier-mâché, perhaps in preparation for a new scene, or something recently dismantled. Next to this in a smaller case, a river scene bordering a walled city with a great gothic palace, its streets teeming with life. But in the low limestone hills that lay some distance from the city, a creature lurks. It proffers a blunt-fanged sheepish grin, that of the too easily vanquished monster: the Tarasque, his guise all identity crisis, half

tortoise, half lion, purring at the feet of the minor saint that has subdued him without effort. The creature struggles to free itself from the confused mythographer's pages, at once roaming the forests, the horny serrations on his circular back that were added later, catching at the tree trunks and branches as he passes through them to gouge out great chunks of raw timber like flesh; or else submerged beneath the murky junk-filled waters of the mighty Rhone, gazing up at its troubled surface for any prey that might become momentarily unshucked from the numerous flat bottomed barges that pole their trade between the brimming squalor of the riverside towns neighbouring the most fetid and vice ridden of them all, depicted here now before me. I allow my gaze to roam through its narrow streets, through the small irregular squares, half expecting to come across a tiny preoccupied figure reading or else bending down to adjust his socks.

But I should be leaving.

With a cluck and a ting this time, the door releases me back onto the street. Night is falling in Madrid, the air cooling fast above the still warm pavements. Instinctively, I test for vapour, exhaling like a smoker would. But nothing, the air is still too dry, even as it cools. Outside the bar opposite, a man and a woman are smoking for real, thin brown glowing cheroots that were once popular. The smoke hangs about their shoulders, held there, static in the condensing air. I wish I had not seen them.

On the morning of my third day I find myself on the wooden steps that lead up to a small raised outbuilding at the back of the house. And I remembered thinking, *Yes, here even the bloody sheds have stairs*. But the outlook onto the unkempt back garden, its old well in the centre, is pleasant enough. I still hold in my hand the notebook containing the lists of people, events, places, observations, quotations often, from various sources – sometimes in other languages. There are short self-reflective asides which don't appear to refer to anything directly related to the story itself, and which I later confuse with my own notes – something I may have written on a whim, or maybe as some figurative means by which I could start to properly envisage the task in hand. So that as I read I might, for example, imagine myself a translator wrestling with the transfer of one language into the flimsy ill-fitting mould of another: *And here the Translatex Pro proved invaluable, although I was determined not to allow myself to become oblivious to the flattening effect of its output, that the very conjunction of the different languages alone produced its own topography, a dimensionality that would be lost no matter how accurately the differences in syntax and rhythm could be rendered. Nevertheless, over the days that followed the mutter and chatter of the machine in the corner as it pondered its choices might almost might seemed an outer*

expression of the sound of my own thoughts, something akin to the fogs and surface mists that the estuary would suddenly conjure up – becoming pixilated, digitalized ...

And so on. To be safe, he had actually searched for the Translatex Pro, imagined indeed that the now daily increasing mutter and chatter of small skittish hopping birds that penetrated the confines of the house was in fact the sound of the machine itself hidden in some spick and brightly lit cubbyhole – the low step going down, the wormy whitewashed beams... the great cable exposed at the socket to reveal not wires of bundled copper but pallid and fleshy interwoven threadlike roots ranging in tone from an almost translucent ivory to a deep knotty brown and which surely connected the machine to the world above, to the antennae of listening trees.

And whether the machine he did finally discover, plugged in and ready for use in the cramped little space below stairs, was in fact a sophisticated translation device, or merely a rather elaborate and expensive photocopier, as he began to make use of it, feeding it with its daily ration of dusty yellowing leaves from his father's notes, the fresh still warm copy that it delivered transformed into his hands started to take on in his mind something that he had a stake in creating, bringing him closer to interpreting, to fixing in place, that image of the shadowy, uncertain figure which his imagination, with ever increasing fervour, now sought.

The notes he had been fated to read were written in both English and his father's native tongue (with which he was conversant), and a smattering of other languages here and there. He had even identified some passages in rudimentary Japanese: the odd *kanji* which he had first taken for some illustration or random doodle. But more often he comes across the simpler syllabic *kana* – used by children or for the rendering of words that have not yet evolved into fully fledged logographic symbols.

He is aware of the machine's limitations – he tells himself that – but is reassured by its presence there in the house. He feels it can bring him a step closer to understanding things, or at least help him to verify certain details – thoughts, expressions, which seemed to be leading him in certain directions, would allow the story to unfold upon its true course.

Only the postcard, kept in his possession for so many years, he does not submit to the machine – the one piece of writing that addresses him directly, that is dated to a fixed point in his past. And he hardly notices his own reluctance to do so.

*

Segovia

iQue cosas, que cosas! This phrase I see I have jotted down too. It belongs, I had gathered, to a street in Segovia, and is uttered by a woman to her companion as a man dressed in a shabby ill-fitting suit and carrying a guitar case, *a man who shares the town's name, walks past them now with a growl, theatrically spitting out a large gobbet of phlegm onto the pavement as he enters the grounds of an elegant Franciscan style church.*

A sequence of chords fills the air, each one appearing almost to stumble into the next with a kind of poised hesitancy, a studied, thought out delicacy, as if each musical gesture were spontaneously imagined and brought into being in that same instant.

That opening snatch of conversation, its containing phrase, I had heard often enough. After some thought and a little double-checking, in a later version which is I think the version Pinkman and Foales got to see, I am sure I rendered it as “Dear oh dear”. The woman who speaks is called Mireia, and as Segovia steps into the entrance to the church he grumpily calls back for her to bring him the new microphone – and quickly about it – *for fuck's sake!*

The great man fumbles inside the entrance for the door handle, unable to locate *the fucking thing* in the deep shade of the doorway. *OK, maestro, I'm coming...!*

And further on *I had copied down in Spanish: It may have been Segovia's soft sausage-like fingers, never as gentle as when they press the strings of a pavane, in a town that bore his name, a place he barely knew...*

There is a hesitation here. The three characters outside the church: Segovia, his two assistants, are suspended where they stand. For a moment, each holds his or her position as if waiting for the next cue. They seem to ponder themselves, their situation, seem to wonder how they figure in the scheme of the moment, there outside the church on this clear pleasantly warm afternoon still in siesta on the hill overlooking the old town. The text continues in English, this time in what appears to be my own hand, although whether the translation is mine or my father's I cannot recall.

Today he pauses outside the church, sets his pristine guitar case gently on the scant dusty gravel, assesses the air, the place's voice, for he can barely see and knows the old pressing stones only through the imagined histories that are themselves vaporous and imprecise representations of something he can barely guess at. And he senses, somewhat grudgingly, that today this will be a good place, picks up his guitar and steps carefully into the mottled gloom, the umber void, while behind him, his two assistants still fuff and chafe about the car.

—¡Mireia! He calls back from inside without turning, voice echoing in the portal.

—¡Mireia!”

(again, the slight echo)

—Tráigame aquel microfono nuevo. ¡Y rápido, coño!

And after a short pause:

—¡Y ahora, donde está la puta palanca!? ¡Hijo de puta!

—Voy, maestro, voy...

I imagined my father, playing the young *aficionado*, having hitched up from Madrid that afternoon, to see in that humble church Spain’s greatest classical guitarist... *earnest and dreaming through the sierras, thoughts lost in the thin light beyond the truck driver’s gruff accommodating silence*. Once through the mountains the great plains of northern Castile must have stretched out before their eyes, *and the landscape strewn with huge boulders of lichenized granite, the debris left no doubt (I mused later, as that younger self, recalling the scene) from the sweeping stride of passing saints, inscribed from above by great wheeling birds, whose elliptical passage through the sky was determined by both the base appetite for carrion and the mathematics of the wind as they rode the eddies from the heights through which the two of them had just passed*.

And which they now kept to their constant right as the tiny truck bobbed along now parallel to the chain of receding mountains...

The town has woken from its siesta and has become another place: people are moving up the hillside, the bars are suddenly all talk on the corners. They do not so much hear the music as it drifts down neighbouring streets, as let its notes, windborne seeds now, hook into the roughened edges of their own speech as they chat, so that their words become a kind of music that ebbs and flows like faintly asthmatic breath, or like dancing water even, or like something that is chewed over and swallowed. It really all depends.

But do you remember inside as we sat third row from the back as always, how, close to its source, the old stones sang?

Afterwards, I approach the heavy enigmatic figure in the loose fitting brown suit. The church is almost empty and he has his back to the door, carefully nesting his guitar into its case with all the care and quiet joy of a new father putting his infant to bed. He growls suddenly and stiffens as a dog might, on hearing my footfall behind him, but continues with his task.

—Maestro, I offer, taking courage in both hands.

—*Estaba magnifico. Realmente bueno.*

Without turning.

—*Gracias, hijo, gracias.*

The tip of his thick flannelette tie falls across the strings of the guitar as he leans over it, absorbed with the task of tucking it into its plush velvet,

produces the faintest *plungg*. But he makes no attempt to turn and address his young devotee. Realising that this interview is already over I mumble another further poorly phrased compliment and stalk out of church into *cooling buzz of Spanish Night where swallows flick at memory of African sky like visible picaro notes that jitter around the roofs and the towers, face darker than the low and inevitable moon.*

*

But as those words seem to literally pour out over the confines of the page I am again walking along the muddy banks, *the flayed litter-strewn hedgerows that radiate out from the house in ever widening quadrants*, and find myself reflecting, somewhat bitterly now, how the journal of a single life could contain such a collection of material so encyclopaedically and utterly disparate. Abutted to the Segovia episode, for example, I find a further fragment which could almost be a character sketch of Segovia himself, entitled *Old Boy*, except that it is obviously of a totally other place. I include it here in case there is any doubt.

Old Boy

The Suffolk old boy is somewhat dissimilar from his well-spoken counterpart. And although this former can come in a variety of shapes and sizes I see him always as somewhat large – raw boned would be the phrase, I

think. And unlike the latter, he will genuinely be of a certain age, a condition generally reflected in a degree of wry wisdom. This old boy never preaches but tends to instead nod gravely in the direction of the truth, preferring to witness others grope their way towards it, guiding them while uttering a soulful *yeaah*, or with a surprisingly agile flick of the stout neck like a carthorse bothered by flies, and eyes rolling momentarily heavenwards, to register his disapproval at some folly of modernity or other. At such times, a softened plosive *kk* is emitted. Nevertheless, often to the respectful surprise of his younger disciples – and he will have many following in his ponderous wake – the Suffolk Old Boy does not feel bound by convention or common sense nor is apt to take the common view, for he is a revolutionary at heart, wary of the artifices that go with wealth or prestige, never afraid to show his respect for the underdog, the also-ran, the picaro; this old boy takes a quiet satisfaction in stirring things up, safe in the knowledge that he can never truly offend, or that anyone will ever take him seriously. Tarot cards would never receive his sanction or approval, although that is what he would be best at. Because, *hijo mio*, he reads you like a book.

*

I put down the paper headed *Old Boy* in exasperation. Even an encyclopaedia has a unity of tone, of purpose, renders the truth and all its thousands of entries to a single contingent plane. But what I have here is nothing like that at all. There is an unevenness of tone, of style, of quality – and the mostly hand-written script veers from almost indecipherable scrawl to a passable copperplate.

You might think my confusion lay in figuring out the chronology of events that the papers referred to, and in this you'd only be partially right. In fact, each page was painstakingly dated, as if the author himself was determined to inscribe the stamp of chronicle on a life whose narrative thread might at any moment evaporate into meaninglessness.

But on closer examination it became apparent that the dates sometimes referred to the day on which an event occurred, and sometimes to the day on which a remembered event was written down, and in the latter case there appeared often to be a lag of many years. The reader was therefore being continually shot through different “time zones” like a shuttle through a loom, in which the very points of departure and arrival shivered with uncertainty.

And I saw that between the subject of the journal and the object that is in the act of reminiscence there can be unending subterfuge, infinite play. I began to realise too that the act of writing takes place within its own narrative time which is discreet, complete, and sealed within itself as it bores

through the strata of other times and, regardless of what is being written, is its own story.

*

The nightmare revisited, again and again, the suffocating stillness of waking nights, the digger trapped, burrowing out through the blinded hours, surrounded only by the pressing darkness of himself, fearful to close his eyes – though it made no difference – lest the small bubble of silver that knocked against the inner surface of your eyelid penetrate the brain like stray shot. And all the while a greater fear, that on reaching the surface you will find yourself falling away from it, plummeting into the void, away from the very earth that contained you.

*

Suffering from an acute shortage of paper. Having to erase sections to write over them. Fortunately, a quantity of the material is written using a rather blunt pencil and a light hand. The graphite disperses easily, too easily perhaps – the already faint script becomes smudged at the slightest touch of the fingers across the page, and leaves no impression on the paper. In fact, it is often easier to simply write over it, or feed it randomly into the *Translatex Pro*. The pale grey marks that are left beneath the darker print appear

to give the new text its own shadow, lending it a curious 3D effect. But there are certain phrases which somehow resonate, so I've left them where they sit *like chunks of weathered ancient rock sitting in a carefully tilled field.*

I enter the outbuilding, looking back over the unkempt lawn towards the rear of the house, its many windows in the afternoon light are liquid, a molten colour of peat. I find myself tense with the expectation of seeing faces staring up from beneath their surface. Po's face, perhaps. I dimly recalled having found a reference to him amongst the papers, although the name, now I came to think about it, perhaps belonged to another story. But when he spoke I would surely know.

I step into the sudden dark interior of the shed. Inside the air is dense with the smell of damp, of the mould that blooms like embroidered cloud on the surface of long stored timber. My lungs take a moment to adjust, as if to a new barometric pressure, my limbs heavy as I move to the middle of the tilting floor, tongue now thick with the taste of iron.

And if the child, who you now realise you knew only as Po, is dreaming at the window, then perhaps he is thinking about the time he mimed the crosses, their form against the ridge dithered and torn by a clattering of fledgling choughs, the bubbling iron chaffing for perches, dry claws scrabble and cling, puffed or smoothed by the sloped-up gusts arcing up from the fell. At that angle, his thin outstretched limbs appear only marginally narrower than his trunk, his own cloths as puffed or smoothed as the downy

feathers of the young birds, their flattened heads tilted, critical, gazed. And I, affected, rocked back, face big and raw to the biting wind, teeth singing, guffaw. For in his pose he embodies both the slender iron crosses anchored but how into the sponging peat and leaning as if against the current of time itself, and the squall-shook resignation of the fledglings. Rock back, back parallel almost, to the ground, think of Po's gift and of rooks not choughs marching across furrows like small bobbing Blackshirts, not here but of orange remembered clay clotted and thickened and swollen by rain.

Air of different pressure darts between us, the clouds sing and gape, as the roving figures sing and gape, lifeless above the churning soil. Po knew and in his eye a fury of knowing unlocked the sky further, the clouds luminous behind the clicking interlocking branches that sway in the buckled lanes where the browed valleys meet.

We had stumbled upon the crosses, a cluster of about a dozen or so, leaning this way or that, in a small mossy depression on the hill's eastern lee, sheltered somewhat from the stormy crest above. Their general condition and sunken posture seemed to indicate considerable age, yet there was no surrounding or adjacent ruin to provide any further clue to their emplacement, nor any obvious sign that any other structure had ever existed. Just this small unbounded iron thicket interrupting the otherwise smooth contours of the hillside.

Was it that same small valley, no more than a gentle fold between low rounded hills where the stream had found its course, where a year or so later you and Po had built your dam of sticks?

The flotsam and mostly vegetable debris from the stream was starting to build against the jam. How far back could it go? *As children, by the unused flint-locked church on the bend of the high banked shaded lane forever damp at the little bridge crossing the gravel stream that had cut its channel wadi-like through the friable clay of the gentle enclosing valley, cloyed by the tufted ringing grass, we toiled amongst the lost hours to damn the flow, oblivious to the trickle of watching cars coming down low geared from the hairpin.* Tuned only to the water that motors over stones, lost often beneath mats of watercress, roving shins snapping through the succulent brittle stems, the delicate ticking leaves whisper cool as we mine clay from the banks, stud our work with sticks and flint. And still the water slips past us, our structures fail, the massy clay keyed by the babbling crystal fingers that probe and poke, the growing muscled gelatinous ribbons pock marked if you really look pouring over always in the end. We lay back dismayed, glare down at the passing incurious sky and are home before tea.

But something pulled us back there the next day, where to our astonishment we found our broken dam had grown and prospered during the night. Free to apply its own stubborn laws around our initial planting wish, where each tumbling stick and leaf, spinning down from miles back, had found

its place within the mathematics of rhythm and flow, held or freed according to unguessed at patterning, whose only bonding element was pouring time itself. Thus, the small trickling brook had become choked and swollen, rising by three feet overnight, spilling out into the surrounding meadows.

A figure in green overalls stood on the bank above the tangled mass of debris, his posture mirroring our own sense of disbelief as we all stared back upstream across the floor of the shallow valley, which as far back as we could see was covered in a thick, evil-looking scum, whipped up inches deep by the breeze so that it resembled the firemen's foam I had once seen demonstrated at a local fete, the fire engine's operator gleefully showing us the barrels of pigs blood required to produce it. With relish, he had sprayed the laughing crowd, but later as he showed us around the "appliance" as he called it, he had grown serious. Fondly patting one of the huge barrels, I remember him saying, "Best there is, boy, best there is... good stuff, this, good stuff..."

Now, horrified by what we had caused, but too startled to think of running, we approached the man in overalls. The three of us stood there together gazing on the bank. What words were exchanged I cannot recall. There was no thought of denial, our crime seemed too vast, too complete. But neither was there any indication of anger from the man. He had been younger than I thought at the time, I realised later – just a few years older than

ourselves. He seemed embarrassed, apologetic even, as the three of us cleared the blockage, gingerly prodding with our boots from the water's edge at the spiny alien mass, until with a great surge it gave way and began to disperse its load of froth downstream.

Later, I discovered that the likely cause of the foaming river would have been phosphates leached out from the surrounding over-fertilised soil, the same compounds of phosphorous contained in pig's blood, that naturally form cell-like structures, helping it to foam – so effectively, in fact, that it is used by fireman to fight fires. Phosphorous used for fighting fire, blood to smother the flames, and which is the foundation of the cell membranes found in all living things.

Beyond the shallow bridge, beneath which the water and its accumulated dreck now surge, lies the darkening copse where even then we hesitated to set foot. The bridge, forming a cool dappled tunnel below the road, now seems to separate that bright valley from events that occurred years later. And I stand looking out upon the bare morning hillside and see the ancient *acequias* that score the rocky slopes opened to release their slender trickling ribbons precious as silver to quench the almonds and the olives below, as helicopters hover like metallic flies over our bridge, over the silent millpond in the darkening copse.

I realised today that it's all here, all the bits, the fragments of jungle, the swollen knotted surfaces of forbidden rivers, it's just that all the elements are held in place wrongly, what we call reality – time has been stretched across like a false membrane, itself fluid, but thick – gelatinous almost – which holds everything in a kind of stasis, so that time appears to move while objects and places must remain fixed relative to that flow, or must retain a fixed position relative to each other, and cannot blend. Memory allows us to travel through time but always between points that are fixed – though the paths between them might appear distorted, or as shifting as the paths that I follow as I explore the marshland and grey tidal reaches that extend beyond the grounds of the house.

There is another story here, that belongs to this place.

Po is stuck behind the lines. The voice which is how Po would, might have been, is stuck beyond the boundaries of the story, the unfolding tale, waiting at the close edge of the sea or the land or the near sky. And the only thing that would allow me to differentiate between these things is time itself. Something I do not possess.

My Dear Jons,

Thank you for your recent dispatch, which we have studied with interest.

Firstly, I hope you will forgive us if our own missive comes across as a little stereoscopic. Here's the thing: both Pinkman and myself – or should I say Foales and myself – have both contributed our thoughts in more or less equal measure. And although there is a great deal of concordance between us – flecked through, you might say, with the slight yet inevitable nap of discord, the grain of delicate alternative truths – it would prove tiresome to unravel and delineate our own respective positions at any kind of length.

The I(s), myself(s) and me(s) can therefore be read as less singular than they might first appear; the we(s), ourselves, us(s) less regal. Or – “one” could proceed thus, but a little too stiffly for my liking – one comes across as rather dislocated in the indefinite – rather like the knuckle of this sentence which is being bent against its natural inclinations, as one creeps yet again back towards the autocrat's throne like a previously sanctioned yet persistent cat that ignores one's threats.

But I think the use of “I” makes us appear a little less like an entity (impersonal, numinous, yet with its own implacable will to power), even though this approach might seem more than a trifle schizoid. I use the term in its looser sense. Although there is something more particularly schizoid about this whole business, don't you think? Just be aware that in our use of “I” there a hidden dialectic of sorts, more

than might otherwise be the case, at least.

The publishing industry, especially our own specialised mossy little alcove, is subject to its vicissitudes, as you know. When business is not quite as brisk as it might be I am given to while away the long hours with scrabble – a pastime not incompatible with my profession you will agree. And I always enjoy a little etymological banter with my writers, as with myself. As I started composing this letter, for example, I felt the sudden urge to deploy the term *toncture* somewhere within the paragraph – felt that it suited me rather like a nice old hat – lent me an air. But I note from my Collins that the word does not yet exist. I suspect it is one of those words that floats around in search of a subject until appropriated one day by the medical industry. I suppose I could wear it until then, until it becomes part of a procedure for the effective treatment of ringworm or some such.

Strange though. Seems a perfectly plausible word to me. Just as one suspects that certain words only exist as part of a scrabble-jocks' conspiracy or part of a shady ontological plot played out in some hidden vault below the headquarters of the OED, there are others (words, I mean) that are quite unjustifiably neglected.

But I fear that the boundaries between worlds are already starting to dissolve. I didn't start writing this in order to immediately plunge us all into the troubled waters of my own fetishist semantics (as the grappling pair topple over the lip of the boiling falls). No, while navel-gazing can be a worthy pursuit, the line must be drawn somewhere, and that somewhere should perhaps be located well before the successive liminal thresholds of language are reached.

You refer to the work you have submitted as “galley proofs”, but

they are hardly that – unless this is some ironic reference to the found ship that you briefly mention in your text. In fact, I might venture that the script that you have submitted is a little rough shod (as an old friend of your father I think I can speak candidly), even for a preliminary draft. You will notice therefore that we have reformatted your original to reflect something of what the finished piece might look like – with the aim of suggesting a greater unity of style, and indeed of purpose. But I should stress that this represents a cosmetic gloss only, and apart from the glaring typos, we have made no editorial changes to the text itself at this stage. We of all persons understand that a contorted grammar or violently slewed syntax may conceal many a vital clue to an inner world. The guts, so to speak, spilled out upon the page’s secret.

You will recall your father’s unfinished speculative historical piece, which you have presented here: *The Rout of Hadleigh Wood*, which in his own words sets out “to explore phenomenologically events that occurred in the aftermath of the paradigm crash of Big Data”. This is surely written as a fiction, more indicative of your father’s attitude to certain aspects of the society of his youth pre-Big Data than what actually took place subsequently. Yet you seem to lay great store in the possibility that the female character is in fact your mother, and the child mentioned, by implication you yourself. While this suggestion is not in itself totally implausible, I would urge you most strongly to bear in mind that we appear to be dealing with characters within a story here, the events of which are by no means verifiable. Even the background to these events, described at some length in your father’s texts, is still being argued about by the commentators decades later. Remember, the destruction caused by the virus was pretty comprehensive, both amongst the adult population and the data banks themselves, which

still had to be programmed to a degree. At the time, Dysnarratavia was not properly understood, had only been studied in relation to Alzheimer's. While your father, and many of that younger generation were largely unaffected, it remains unclear the extent to which the narrative sense of that whole era was compromised.

Also, for our present purpose there is the problem of those passages that clearly lapse into parody. Although these are, I think, quite distinguishable from the more substantive sections of the text, they do cast doubt upon the verisimilitude of the whole ...

*

He sits on an improvised bench he has created out of a couple of oil drums, and an old length of scaffold board, spongy with rot but just about serviceable. He has placed the bench against the wall of the outbuilding where it catches the morning sun. The building's tarred boards quickly absorb the sun's heat and warm his back, while the tar's sharp tang he finds somehow comforting. He holds the publishers' letter pressed to his lap against the stiff breeze coming off the estuary. He had come across it rather by accident. Plodding back down the rough track that led up to the house from his late afternoon stroll, he had noticed for the first time the wooden mailbox attached to the side of the five-bar gate at the junction with the road. It was half hidden by the thick blackthorn hedge that ran next to it, but perhaps the reason he had not seen it before was the fact that it was attached, somewhat illogically, to the gate post that bore the gates rusting hinges, the opposite side from which he normally passed through.

The mailbox itself looks almost new, although its unpainted door is swollen with damp and does not close properly, letting in the rain and a soggy litter of tiny leaves from the blackthorn. Within, he finds a single letter bearing his name. It has the air of being recently posted although half of the envelope is soaking wet and the postmark has completely dissolved.

Now, sitting with his back against the warming timbers of the outbuilding, he appears absorbed in the letter's contents, trying to make sense of the words that seem to be dancing about the page as the enactment of some bizarre fanatical game, trying to decide how seriously he should take all this.

But all the while one half of his mind is returning to the actual writing to which the letter refers. He is not sure if he can remember what he submitted, whether it was his own transcription of something he had unearthed from his father's notes, or whether it was something he had woven in himself using the imagined tone of his father's voice, while simply embellishing it. Whatever it was that he had written, he could not decide the degree to which the publisher was taking him at his word: the letter, putting its eccentricities to one side, seemed to be expressing both scepticism and credulity.

But amidst his bemusement there is also a note of excitement, because the letter represents a kind of recognition, has lent a sudden unexpected stamp of validity to the activity in which he has been engaged. Again, he tries to remember what he had written. The letter had mentioned something about *a found ship* – *the found ship*. It was something that had been preoccupying his thoughts for a few days now – ever since, in fact, he had found its unconstructed timbers stored away in the outhouse. He had surely made reference to this in his own notes – but could those notes have found

their way into his submission to Pinkman and Foales? He couldn't think why he might have purposefully done so. If anything, the business of the ship had been a distraction from the task in hand, something best kept unspoken. But the very fact that it had been included in the letter suddenly lent the whole matter an air of unreality, as if the ship itself was a kind of fiction, and this troubled him, because until that point those solid forgotten timbers that he had come across in the outhouse had been the only thing that had seemed real. He had often entertained the notion of a life that is lived as it is written, but this pre-emption of events he found disturbing. And then there was the mention of his mother – by contrast perhaps the least tangible of all the thoughts that had been swirling around in his head at that time – although he couldn't quite say why. Nevertheless, as he had approached her through the writing – whether it had been his father's own text, or his interpretation of it – he felt as close to her as he ever had.

Of course, he could go back into the house and check all this, but the sun is warming his skin through the chill morning air, and instead he finds himself reconstructing the passage from his father's notes in his imagination. The opening lines, he realises, he has already learnt as if by rote.

The Rout of Hadleigh Wood

He loved clinging to his mother's back, wrapped within the small pocket of still, silent air that dwelt between her shoulder blades as she sped through the roaring city. The squeal of her vinyl jacket against his hands and face. Its lung tingling head spinning vaporous cellophane reek. His eyes sealed by tears from occasional stolen glances ahead into the screaming wind. The whirling streets reduced to a single concatenating shout. He pulled his head back in, pressed his cheek against her back, wondered if behind the taut unyielding material of the jacket he might detect his mother's beating heart. And amidst the pulsing waves of engine throb and clamour that wracked her body and his as the old four-stroke cannoned down the city's crystal defiles, its ditches and chines, yes, he imagined that he could.

The feeds were coming in from all over today. And all morning people had been running up and down the stairs, bikes hurtling in and out of the mews where the unit had set up its small anonymous little office. It wouldn't be long before neighbours' complaints started to attract unwanted attention and they would have to move on. But for the moment business was brisk. Couriers and their young pillions jostled past each other on the narrow stairs up to the first floor as they came and went delivering the morning's catch.

Both of the soundproofed interview booths had been in almost continual use throughout the morning. They had even had to send out for more paper as the scribes' pens flew. Rather than directly transcribe the stories in situ, it was soon discovered that young people, especially children, since they seemed to be unaffected, were able to hold information in a coherent manner for relatively long periods, at least until it could be dictated back to the scribes at the office. But in order to suppress black market activity, information retrieval required a difficult to obtain license. And operations such as theirs came and went overnight.

Lanten mused on how things had moved so fast, how within a matter of months everything had changed. From his perch on the window sill next to his desk he sat monitoring the entrance to the mews for sign of anything untoward, one eye on the screen checking the feeds as they came in – tiny parses of information were all that the hastily improvised valve-driven machines could manage. Short phrases or part paragraphs at best.

Everyone had become a courier, the streets now a sea of runners, cyclists, bikers. Big cities, it was quickly realised, were already perfectly configured as data banks. They contained large concentrated pools of information in human form, information that could be transferred manually from one site to another in a matter of minutes in this fashion.

Modern cityscapes, for so long configured as exercises in collective forgetting, now once again became thriving hubs dedicated to the narrative past, trading not just in knowledge, but human experience. Once a critical mass had been accumulated, went the

thinking, the algorithms could be rebooted. If not, it would be a case of reinventing the wheel.

Anecdotal memory exchanges had started springing up: people quoting a price for their own contribution – information sought at every level: surgeons, caseworkers, addicts, magistrates, policemen, pimps, chefs, farmers, and consumers of every kind, were barely outnumbered by the technicians and engineers and experts, whose knowledge, now void of its encapsulating narrative context, had to be painstakingly pieced together again from scratch using whatever resources of logic or instinct that came to hand.

After those first few nervous edgy weeks, in the end, all the whispered post-apocalyptic scenarios had proved unfounded, as the mechanics of commerce retied the connection between those who might have competed with violence in the fight for survival. And the belief quickly spread that, after centuries of searching, centuries of humanistic endeavour, the model had in fact already finally become established: that in the sprawling infinitesimal algorithms created by clucking data machines, lay the secret of life itself, not in the answers such machines provided, since those answers were always contingent and transitory, but in the very processes themselves, which it was realised, were a metonym for the ecological processes, or chaos, that constituted the Complex Adaptive Systems that drove the planet.

And there was more. People were talking, doing a lot of talking. And it was a strange paradox perhaps, that with all this talking, there proved little scope for rumour, or subterfuge, or humbug – no empty spaces for such things to take root. Quickly, it

seemed, rhythms of life started to re-establish themselves in ways that people started to see followed their actual experience of it – something leaner was emerging – a trend that was by no means to everyone's liking. Colonies of artists and poets flourished like never before in human history. Except that everyone else was too busy now to care or to notice what they produced.

Just eight months on from Big Data – the crash – the unadulterated facts were starting to become clear. The crisis, which had threatened momentarily to hurl the entire planet back into the Stone Age, had been caused by one single event, could almost be assigned to the single flick of a switch, the pressing of a single button.

Quantum. The name was on everyone's lips. After decades of exponentially increasing binary computing power, after years of speculation, claim and counter claim, the first fully operational quantum computer was unveiled. Test programmes were tentatively launched. The effects were immediate and catastrophic.

Such machines no longer relied on the vast arrays of individual electronic components that powerful computers had once required. Single organic units had been developed – had in a manner, "evolved" – to take their place, existing as amorphous single blocks of matter, and were to a large extent, indecipherable at the level of their basic functioning. Only the tiny nano-fluctuations in energy levels across the system could be monitored, and, claimed the researchers, manipulated accordingly. The task of monitoring – the interface – had to be carried out by more traditional computers – in fact, those

developed to track and predict the movement of weather systems were the only things deemed powerful enough for the job.

These machines, interconnected across the planet to form a larger whole, just as the internet had done through wires and electromagnetic signals, could now operate just below the level of material reality, as something akin to the unseen and intangible force of nature itself.

The new technology depended, not on the huge levels of energy which operated within nature, but on the very blueprint that conditioned that energy's flow – that which held it all together, the quantum nebulae of scarcely detectable information which regulated the universe, information that was not quite matter (and therefore contained almost no energy itself), but behaved as if it might be.

When the switch to the Quantum system was thrown several things happened very quickly.

Its systems immediately read the web for what it was, and what it saw reflected as itself – a vast interconnected system – a single entity self-generating and existing independently of the creatures that brought it into being in the first place. Within a fraction of a second, it had analysed every single piece of information accessible on the web. It did this by generating trillions of near simultaneous queries. But things did not stop there. It sliced through the most complex encryption systems like a knife through butter, flashing every data base in existence. The programme itself was not malignant – and the data it generated was far too massive in scale to become humanly readable through

any kind of interface. The systems it unlocked reacted as if threatened. But Quantum was too quick even for the most advanced defence, slipping through and dismantling automatic fail-safe devices even as they started to react.

But this was only an initial phase, lasting nanoseconds. New forms of radiation were generated almost instantly, flooding the traditional electronics of the interface computers with previously unknown types of superconductive particles. For the briefest of moments, an invisible but all-consuming electron storm raged across the global data networks, frying every interconnected electronic circuit on the planet. The existence of this new “radiation” was in fact only theorised much, much later. Benign and undetectable by humans or their instruments – had there been any that still functioned – this new infinitesimally low form of energy hung in palls over the cities, spewing out from the machines that had once held it as “data”, or “information”. There were mutterings in the press about the “reconciliation” of quantum chaos with causal relativity, of “rainbow gravity”. But one scientist, who later won the Nobel Prize, described it as “the immaterial gossamer membrane that holds in place the codes that govern existence, that once degraded, moves one step closer to becoming matter”. [I believe she used the analogy of words condensing on a page].

People seemed to experience no immediate adverse effects, therefore – although there were numerous reports of greatly enhanced dream activity, and even, during waking hours, of the air, the light, seeming to buckle and distend – an experience one commentator described as like being in a recording by Adrian Sherwood.

But what nobody had realised, and of course I am only writing this in retrospect, was the extent to which the human brain had developed, in the course of just a few generations, a symbiotic dependency on electronically synthesised data. During this time, the ability to story, to develop and perpetuate a narrative grounding for one's self-existence, and that of others, had become artificially "propped up" by the ever-increasing "ambient intelligence" of personal data devices. The brain's narrative function had become weakened.

Narrative accounts of one's daily experience, whether a project at work, the course of a personal or family relationship, the course of one's very life, were suddenly no longer accessible to the individual consciousness – people felt the same bonds as before – evidence, perhaps, of an innate propensity for empathy – but could no longer plot the emotional pathways which had led them to the point in their lives where they now stood.

*

There had been outbreaks of disorder and violence – more than just pockets – mass lootings of commercial centres, hostage taking, standoffs, pitched battles between groups who had managed to identify some opposing view. But it had all happened in a ragged and haphazard fashion without the availability of the instruments of mass media to conjure the illusion of movements or historical inevitability. And the lootings soon died

down after it was realized that many of the most sought-after products were now unusable. Although a thriving black market in high-end fashion persisted.

During the prolonged and bitter winter of that year many of the fiercest battles had been fought in small towns and rural areas where political differences suddenly seemed to spring into sharp relief. The Rout of Hadleigh Wood was one notorious episode, and perhaps the most emblematic of this early stage – the true nature of the events that had unfolded remaining veiled beneath the canopy of ancient chestnut and coppiced beech.

For days, the battle raged. Smoke and commotion rose out of the forest and rolled across the open fields. The occasional yelping of hounds could be heard, the whinnying of horses mingling with the snarl of chainsaws and lesser battery-operated power tools. There was talk of child soldiers, of improvised napalm and other chemical weapons. But verification under the circumstances was difficult.

The Commuters, as they became known, were better equipped and more disciplined, but outnumbered by the ruthless fanaticism (which surprised even themselves) of a vast emerging hoard of the dispossessed and non-urban poor who seemed to have materialised out of nowhere, driven by a by now inter-generationally engendered – one might almost call it genetic – class envy that had lain seething and barely suppressed throughout the long post war period of welfare (as they saw it) appeasement.

In the confusion, people sought out odd allegiances, desperate perhaps to confirm to themselves if not to others some kind of identity. A freshly burgeoning Keep Music Live briefly formed a military wing, just as quickly disbanded after it was reported that most

of its would-be leaders, the national heroes from a glorious musical past, now lived abroad.

Allotment associations, newly empowered and forced to defend their strategic assets, organised Home Guard style operations around their plots. There was even rumor of one enterprising group having assembled snatch squads to pre-emptively target members of the village youth club – although it was said that this was as much to do with settling old scores as protecting current produce.

A consortium of fast food franchisers had cunningly decamped to a suburb of Northampton where many of their main supply depots were located, seeing a future business opportunity, they had quickly rebranded their products under one name: Fast Byte. Whole areas were hastily flooding with free food as the refrigeration units in the vast warehouses failed, with an eye to creating a loyal customer base for any future market that might emerge from the chaos.

In such areas, life on the surface at least, carried on much as before.

*

It had been a curious thing, seeing the crumbled dome in the distance, surrounded by what otherwise seemed like an unblemished landscape. The grazing animals still dotted the open scrubland of gorse and heather as it ran down to the sea, while even the lone aimless figure could be seen wandering along the shingle banks. The other

facilities had been shut down in time – although in many cases it had been a close-run thing: the self-regulating systems, bathed until then in their own interdependent binary galaxies of data, were unable to grasp incontinency on such a massive scale as this. Browning moth-eaten handbooks were hastily consulted, disaster averted.

Except for here, that is. The surrounding area had been “moderately irradiated” to a distance of about thirty miles inland. Hotspots had been identified and isolated, it was said. Those who chose to remain in the area were advised to continue with their iodine tablets until further notice. But the truth was that in the face of everything else going on, this small pocket of country was left more or less to its own devices.

We had travelled down, unbothered by the slight risk, like the lonely figures on the shoreline, driven by some instinctive need to return. But home had become a different place.

Barcelona, November 1991

I spend a lot of time walking across the city, from one side of it to another. My feet ache with the effort, but I carry on. Sometimes I will duck down into the metro, exhausted. But usually I continue on foot until I arrive back at my own door – any pleasure I might have taken in the exercise I had begun hours before long having passed. It must be that I am searching for something – and maybe that something is a place where I can truly exist as myself – and by this tired phrase I mean a place where I can find a degree of equilibrium with all this welcome unfamiliarity, and the familiar unwelcome past. But I am disappointed. I do not find what I am looking for.

I am not oblivious to the sights and sounds – far from it – there are surprises on every corner, countless tiny events that produce a narrative always at odds with the expected: from the sharp impossible reek of a drain, to the sudden eruption of spleen in a bar that moments ago was half asleep with flies and sun; a narrative that my senses continually strain to process, until slowly I see how I am falling in with the rhythms of the city, the old rhythms. Is it this which disappoints, finally: that in the end I can find no narrative that fits within these rhythms, nothing that will take me either into

history, or beyond it. I wait, frozen out of even my own tale, unable to find a way in.

Walking now in a drab colourless space. The pigeons still swoop in gags across the squares, the crowds swell and recede around the markets the churches, the barely noticeable tides still paw limply at the dusty tattered beaches, each day that dawns is still as perfect as the day before it. What had I expected: that my presence within this place would suddenly ignite all its hidden colours and meanings? No, in the end the opposite occurred, and those places washed out of *me* any colour that had previously existed, and made of *me itself* – *in that same image which I now saw it*.

As such, I became all but invisible, existing only in the bleached out tones that surrounded me. I had become subject to a kind of inundation of information which had left within me no unused space, no lack, no conscious absence, no desire. My emotions, such as they were, simply rose and fell with the days. This is what it felt like at least, this living in the moment. And I can only elucidate these things now by approaching them through memory.

And I was aware that these things had to change. This restlessness, you will say, is it not itself a kind of desire? But it is not that – it is merely an agitation of the molecules of the self, an undirected particulate buzz,

producing in the end only stasis. You are held in your own self-generating field.

I begin to write, like a blind man groping for his stick, or a sighted man moving from a glaring obliterating light back into the shadows – feeling for the words, reaching back, beyond the place in which I find myself, back into memory. Desire has found its line of flight.

*

November 3rd

Such talk! I can hear you say it. Last night we went to a bar tucked away in the corner of a quiet square. An orange light emanated from its opaque frosted windows, the small panes thick and swirling as if the glass, still molten, had been pasted in with a palette knife. The light [emitting] from the bar was of a similar hue to the street lights outside, rendering it a fuzzy undefined appearance, as if it might disappear at any moment.

Inside, the place is busier than might have been indicated from the empty square. Quietly animated groups sit hunched around low tables decked with plates of embotits and clay garrafas of wine, the room thick with smoke and the truncated, abraded syllables of Catalan. As we enter we are greeted by the somewhat bleary gaze of a large elderly man, with a stout neck and scant yet neatly Brylcreemed hair, seated at a table inside the doorway. I would have

taken him to be concierge of sorts, ready to collect la consumició, had I not seen the cards laid out carefully in front of him, and I realise he is the resident tarotista. Although, for either of those roles he does not quite fit the bill – not the small neat man I would somehow imagine, and in fact *did* imagine that I remembered later.

Nevertheless, he is now eyeing me shrewdly, a look I might not have expected from him a moment ago, and from the five cards on the table, placed there as if for someone to challenge their veracity, I notice he is using the Moorish deck of 48 cards, consisting only of patterns and symbols, or *pentacles* – the minor arcana – no lovers, no fools to intercede between this world and the next, no wise men or devils. He is watching me, me in particular. A moment of recognition passes between us. I feel I would believe anything he tells me.

And indeed later, lumbering through the crowds in his ill-fitting suit, he approaches our table. Without referring to the cards, he starts to “read” our assembled company. His words seem deliberately staged, delivering what is expected of him. Let me indulge you he is saying, I will play this game for you, and I can do it quite well. He reads three of our party in this manner, and then, with a rather dismissive wave of the hand indicates that he has finished. Three

lives, bah! he says, in an almost petulant manner. And I think again of the small neat man I had imagined sitting in his place.

Suddenly, as if he had been waiting for the opportunity to do so, he turns to me. Something about him has changed, and again I feel I am being singled out for attention, to the exclusion of everyone else. You, he says, looking at me intently with those curious eyes, I see that you, hijo, have lived *a hundred* lives already. He touches my shoulder gently, in an avuncular sort of way, and wanders off. I look away blushing, me the youngest, greenest of the crowd, who are now either laughing or looking at me with renewed curiosity, or are even in some cases I sense a little piqued that this comment should not have fallen to them. I stare down at a greasy floor, strewn with scrunched up paper napkins, the discarded rind from cured sausage, olive pits, my cheeks burning.

And you are delighted that he has noticed.

I'm trying to recall, because my views have veered one way or the other since then, but I think alongside a firm disbelief in the existence of god went an equally strong disavowal of superstition and any belief in fate or destiny that this might entail – tarot, I am sure, would have been included in this. However, I was willing to make exceptions: anything that referred to me personally, to be exact; and for years afterwards I bore the tarotista's apparent insight as a secret stamp of approbation in the face of every kind of adversity and personal failure. And like a cat (if a hundred lives already, who knows how many more) I became impervious to danger.

Despite my stated reservations on the subject, therefore, it is possible that I had become unconsciously swayed by the culture of necromancy that was still quite prevalent in the city at that time, and it is interesting to note how many of the established writers who have taken up residency there have been swayed also. But this was a more abstracted and mathematical relationship to the spirit world than I was used to. A mystery of symbols and symmetries, rather than the irregular, the eccentric, the contorted personae of home – no sinister angled shadow, no hackneyed bumbling ghost. Here, it was not the closed door or what lay around the corner that one feared, but the mirror. Here was not to be haunted by some lurking other, *but haunted by yourself*, the pristine image of yourself. Where even the puddles, *the charcos of*

the pigeon girl, became the reflection of a merely putative sky. The older sections of the city could justly be referred to as “gothic”- areas suggestive here and there of a gathering and unrecounted gloom, replete with the textures of old stones that appeared to leach out the light even from the brightest street lamps. – The city’s interiors, on the other hand, were still decorated predominantly with the reflective surfaces of Formica, or chrome or smoked glass, the trends of a couple of decades past. Those interior spaces where people spent most of their daily lives were either lit with a shadowless artificial glare, untempered by consideration for patina or tone, or with a tired sepia glow, the dull light from once lustrous objects: a refracted orange – in which doubles abounded.

But today all this is gone: that dark city crouched, puzzling over its lot in history, its dark and tortured past, its back to the sea; the shunting yards and ghettos and seafood shacks that backed onto its dusty forgotten beaches are gone. By the time Columbus’ ship arrived back triumphant, the wharf was dressed tastefully in a golden limestone from Sitges, and the modest re-enactment as he stepped ashore was overseen by a giant smiling fibreglass shrimp. In the background, the new background hills sported another bristling Roger’s tower and people said they were reminded of Los Angeles – California that is – of Beverly Hills. The ship, though, exact in its every life-size detail, in its bobbing faintly absurd pot-bellied roundness, was not to be long for this

world. Ever eager, the Separatists for A Cause, already infiltrated by so-called Postcolonial Cell, reduced it to ash before it could be paraded before the proud Olympic Committee, borne and propelled forward by 700 scouts from a nearby suburb, tacking this way and that across the mock silken waves of the *Estadi Olímpic Lluís Companys*; the tenor clinging on for dear life at the poop, gamely giving forth as he swayed with the ship as it went.

But the ship was burnt to the bilges by the determined band and, with a hiss as the glassy harbour waters met the now glowing ballast bars, the remaining weighted down husk of it sank with a plop or perhaps more like a kind of thwop to the bottom.

But I am talking as if trying to conjure up a place of odd juxtapositions and jarring discordance, a postmodern place. Barcelona barely had time to become that. Its success was too quick and too neat. And anyway, it is too sober these days in its staged enthusiasm for the carnivalesque. It is never truly unhinged. These are managed descents. Juggling stands in for the dark arts. So now it is bereft of both the strictly codified and hidden symmetry of its black magic, and more tellingly perhaps as one walks its perpetual high season streets, its entropy.

And as for you with your hundred lives, you stand there on the edge of the sunset golden wharf peering into the clear water at the place where the ship should have been, and can see no sign.

I think it was around that time that I started to frequent The Champanyet. It did not have a resident tarotista, there would not have been room for him to sit, but nonetheless it had an air...

When, years ago... No let me begin again: Just recently, I walked into The Champanyet again, a bar ran by a family that made its own cava. The last time I had walked through that door, many years ago, was on my way out, and I had banged my head sharply on the metal shutter, which was partially lowered to indicate closing time. The air outside I remember was thick with the prospect of dawn, of the vapours that came in from a sea whose existence can be totally forgotten in the space of a few hours.

I never did enquire about the origins of the cava, but my image was not of rolling vineyards and cellared oak – rather of polythene bins and lean-tos, an operation on the edge of town. Hangover on a stick, you remark, shouting, then wincing as you drink, elbows tucked in against the crush of bodies in the tiny overheated space, cigarette raised above your head for safety. Through a process of osmosis, we eventually find ourselves over by the wall and are able to slump down onto a just vacated bench beneath the strings of

guindilla peppers, and probably the dripping and perpetually nicotine curing jamones, to give our throats a rest against the din. Only one man is capable of negotiating the throng, and he is the slender waiter who with lightening efficiency emerges prising himself from the crowd every few minutes to deliver fresh supplies of chorizo or anchoas or the gritty salt-sweet berberechos, and of course the brown nameless ampollas de cava. Effortlessly he communicates orders to his father, who busy preparing aperitivos and drinks behind the bar, in turn calls through the orders to his wife and daughter in the kitchen.

I walk in, the bar is less than half full, it is still early perhaps, there are tables free; the smiling bespectacled patrón is still there as before, as before arms spread wide, fleshy hands, like two squat pulpitos you had said, hanging over the glass cabinet of tapas atop the bar in an unconscious gesture of both ownership and welcome. Having ordered I stand over by a small marble topped table and observe him closely. Strange that he has not changed, not changed at all after so long, not even in the slightest. Until, that is, a man resembling the other walks in from the kitchen, hair as white yet clearly much older – and I realise that I had mistaken the son for the father, that the father was the patrón that I had known, and the portly man who had just served me is the slender waiter pushing through the crowds towards us with a plate of anchoas. Altro, si us plau. I am gesturing at the brown ampolla, mouthing the words. Against the grain of the imperative I proffer my request as only the English

can. He smiles at you, through you to me, gives the table a hasty wipe with his cloth and is gone again, slipping back into a fissure in the heaving crowd. Later, much later, leaving, with a great clatter I bang my head on the steel shutter. The air outside, as we emerge, is thick with the prospect of dawn.

I don't know how long I have been standing here. My body does not adjust quickly to the chill or to the heady vaporous air, but my eyes can already make things out ahead in the darkness which is pierced by bars of light from the poorly shuttered windows. I stoop down to avoid a low jutting timber, closing the door behind to stop it banging in the wind.

An entire keel section is suspended from the rafters. Heavy notched oak. There are ribbed sections hanging from the walls – fragments of hull, which seem like giant pieces of broken nutshell. Deck boards, a stern plate, pine spars, stacked at the back. Coiled ropes, canvas. Pitched sleepers, running boards, rails. A great steel rudder. Ingots of pig iron. Buckets and boxes of brass. All this stored away – an entire ship in pieces in a shed above the ground. Of course, I can describe all this now...

And in this dank and gloomy space mingled with the smell of rot and confinement, that of a ship at sea – not the briny smell of the shoreline – but of the deep ocean, ozone and sky and salt, bearing with it a smell that is also alien to itself: in this cramped shed on stilts above the ground, become a submarine grotto, a shanty assembled by random tides on the seabed.

Po is speaking. In the perpetual dusk of the room I see only the voice. Closing my eyes in the greenish light, I find him swimming up towards me as he speaks, kicking gently upwards, the words streaming past his shoulders fall spinning silver to the depths below, fall to a carpet of pale scattered metallic light. The words are gushing from his mouth now in jellified globular shawls as he brushes past me, I reach out to catch him but become wrapped and entangled, buffeted and held in his wake as he passes propelled by a buoyancy I do not possess, held in a whoosh of bubbles that press softly upon the skin, in which I become aware that the word spoken is *the ship... the ship*

In a great soundless commotion above I see it, the black hull that breaks the surface of the water which itself seems like a gelatinous skin, creased and torn as the blunt prow pushes clumsily on. Po is now a distant figure made more tiny by the vast form of the ship looming above him. He is kicking still but his progress seems painfully slow in comparison. He will never reach the ship before it passes him. I am suddenly aware that with each kick he is becoming shorter of air, that he must reach the surface before it is too late, before his lungs burst. I feel the sudden suffocating pressure in my own lungs, and know now that his survival is linked to my own, that he must reach the surface on my behalf, in order that I not drown.

Frantically I thrash around in a bid to escape the glistening cocoon of bubbles. Maybe I can reach Po, help him, or maybe I can reach the surface

where he has failed, to save us both. I am spinning now, arms flailing. And it is then that I am struck hard on the side of the head – a heavy blow that knocks all the remaining air out of me. There is nothing about the force of the impact that suggests it is cushioned by the enclosing water, this is something hard and heavy and unmodified, coming out of thin specious air.

*

I stand on the shallow bridge. The stream that flows beneath it is barely two feet wide when not swollen by December rains. And in this slow land of alluvial silts and clays the water is unexpectedly clear, gurgling along merrily enough. Its sound is everywhere. It is the same sound, to my ear, of the clear crystal waters that flow in the hills above Granada, along the old Moorish acequias cut hard into the volcanic stone, descending by degrees through the terraced orchards that at certain times of the year resemble tropical gardens in their abundance. Beyond, lies the shaded copse, the same ivy clad chaos of slender storm felled poplar and ash through which the stream browns, darkens and disappears for a time. I notice that sections have been recently cleared – I can make out in the gloom the discs of freshly sawn timber still white with sap, trunks and limbs poking out at ungainly angles through the briar. The stream will emerge again later – twisting never straight between its clay banks, between boggy pasture and cold indifferent runs of wheat a

factory green. The running brook, Belstead Brook, is stopped short on occasion by some stubborn oak whose elbowing roots it bites at to form a small deeper pool beneath, where we dreamt of the trout that lay hidden there beneath, and having read somewhere that it could be done, vainly tickled for – not realising that those streams existed only as tumbling commotions of water where the chary trout might just be tricked through into streaming fingers, not our own cold pale skinny versions groping wormlike through the careful dappled silence of the water that was stopped there. But at each obstructing oak the stream must turn again, this way, then that, passing beneath another lane, a concrete carriageway, to end finally, some two miles from the shallow bridge where we began. And all the sticks and tokens that we had thrown from the bridge, all our doughty little imagined craft must one day end up there, at Copdock mill, at its deep and motionless pool: I know by heart the passage of every stick and twig, its twists and turns, of the first fragile hedgerow plants which bloom now and that I have chosen to cast into the flowering water by the shallow bridge.

But that is a story belonging to another, and is not for me to tell.

*

On the western side, the meadows and the sky open out and the stream meanders in broader loops through the mottled grass. Along the right

bank runs a narrow open path interrupted at intervals by smaller rivulets, the run-off from numerous springs that lie nestling in tufts of thicker vegetation that dot the gentle ridge above the stream.

Down this path you have set out determinedly this morning to discover the source. It is often summer days that come more readily to mind on occasions such as these: those childish expeditions into the heart of nearby; but at that time, you had been experimenting with an icier communion with nature. Summer, to tell the truth, represented what was often a most languid and penetrating boredom: at times an almost physical sickness. Winter, on the other hand, induced a different kind of agitation, a more brittle yet more positively energy, cheeks ablaze within seconds amidst the scratching troublesome knitwear. Barely a teenager, winter, this winter, represented that “edge” you were beginning to search for, a boundary into something else, to be confronted and crossed. Discomfort was an accepted part of the mix.

The frost helped – to elicit the thrill that is – that caught you just before nature got left behind, forgotten for a period, in the pursuit of other things. That year, a hoar frost *such as had never been known* turned the ground, the fields, to ringing iron platforms, ponds to marble floors, the trees the grass to crunchable exploding hydrae, the *hydra of upturned roots* you think. *Because your mind was all glass and surface, fractured, dazed – you could see into the future and your breath hung in the throat like a steel mucous clamp, a detonating frozen shell.*

I never make it to the source: the fences are spitefully barbed, the hedges scratching thick, the frozen bog a brutal tripping ground of channels and pits. The Belstead Brook, without pausing, becomes Spring Brook on the map. It slides onwards behind you, back towards the way you had come, ribboning like silicone flesh beneath its armoured platelets of ice.

Disheartened, you strike off the hill, then across a deeply furrowed field, rigid and jarring beneath your feet, giant ripples in the earth. You crash through the hedgerow out onto the lane, where you see on the opposite side behind a sparse row of blackthorn, the frozen pond. Arses slewing, a pair of moorhens clatter stilettoed across it and off up the farther bank as you step onto the ice knowing without checking that it is inches thick. You take another step, and then another. Why are you so surprised that this ice, your ice, *is as slippery as ice*, as your whole body is violently spun as if on a pivot. Your legs fly into the air, your trunk revolving about that point in your midriff which is your centre of gravity as, with opposite and opposing force, your head is slammed downwards onto the case-hardened polished surface.

Somehow you make it home you feel a splinter of steel has pierced your skull you slip into the house barely knowing that you did so you cannot speak or remember your name when asked by the surgeon later so go unnoticed for a while until at tea your shoulders give you begin to sob gently

at first then uncontrollably racked by it howling now into the hollow surrounding space.

As all the world opens before you.

*

The sumptuous cool of the grass on his cheek. He smiles [at] the languid satisfying coolness of it. He runs the palms of his outstretched hands across its surface, the surface cool, which is slippery with moisture. He is gliding across the oily lubricated grass, nothing resists his way. He is a perfectly moving thing. And then the pain hits him, and then the retching, and then the trembling, and then the awful emptiness. Something is gone from him. He sees himself there, curled up and shivering on the wet grass against the low circular wall of the well. And he is as cold and alone as the surrounding night.

Come in, and see the struts upon the floor, the sections of dismembered frame, the prised out oak bolts that once held the whole structure in check, but only in check for whatever brevity of a lifetime was chosen for it – like the dots that punctuate and define this text, as easily removed and redeployed. Watch the curved back, the hunched shoulders, labour beside the looming hull, shavings and sawdust falling about the feet in fresh litter, and the finer older dust collected from who knows where that now released buzzes in the slanting light, before seeking refuge back amidst the leaning bevelled spars. See all this,

the curved back on its stool like a brown grub labouring for hour after hour, lost within the grain of the wood, the steel feather sharp, chipping, honing, probing the grain for corky rot or bone-like resistance.

Dearest Jons,

Forgive me (us). I have been far too sweeping in my judgments. I realise now that I had somewhat missed the point. In spite of their shortcomings I see now that these extracts that you have submitted represent a reaching out – on the part of your father, I mean – that there is a wish to communicate something beyond the snares and pitfalls of the story itself. I did not register this immediately, purely because it was not a reaching out to me (us). It is possible that I am mistaken – I am rather prone (one of us at least) to providing connective tissue to the corpus, where a simple lacuna would suffice. It is an age thing: brick up the silences with words in case they start to give, or if not words then at least grunts and coughs.

But I detect an intensity, a vibration almost – it is as if your interpretation gave earth to the current, that your presence here in all this has completed the circuit with those words from the past, from your father's forgotten pages. Suddenly a voice emerges from beyond the parody, the masks, the figurative play.

Accordingly, I am given to re-access other sections of his writing. Characters who I took to represent imagined encounters along the way so to speak are now seen in another light. All is open to question. But I must confess to a certain uneasiness still. I understand that it might be very important for you to get to the bottom of things, for you to understand the nature of your parents' relationship, the nature of your father's absence, and in order to do this you might feel it necessary to

plot a passage through all the contradictions and grey areas, at least to map out a plausible version of the truth. But I believe this is a perilous undertaking. Forgive me if I cannot quite explain why. There are intensities, presences that stalk these texts, one might call it a kind of errant alter ego, a shadow. The extent to which these represent your father, or anyone else, remains unclear. You may encounter your mother there – perhaps as you never knew or imagined her. You might encounter yourself – or your own ghost.

You see, Jons, you can never quite be sure the extent to which any text belongs in this world, this world of objects, those things we can touch, I mean. When I was younger, for many years, that realm of the senses held little meaning for me. Curiously, I don't think I was alone.

I know young adults are supposed to be in a continual state of thrill seeking, sport, sex, speed, excess of every kind. But I think that for many their sensory apparatus is actually quite muted, as they live the dream, move out into the world, they are still immersed in that abstract syncretic landscape of association in which the phenomenology of the senses hardly features – the sensory world of their infancy has been educated out of them by culture: every sensory event has been previously scripted.

Those rare irritating few – we've all come across them – who seem able to live in the moment – are usually regarded as overly energetic and airheaded, if not actually psychopathic – unless awarded by success of course, in sport for example, in which case what might otherwise seem like a fanatical attachment to the moment is applauded.

Then behold. Look what happens in maturity: memory intercedes with all those stored sensations that had been registered on the skin, the olfactory organs, etc. – those senses that have been less tampered with

by art – kept tucked away waiting to disgorge their load. One becomes a sentient being once more. And what’s more, if one has the knack, one can combine this with the syncretic, so that briefly round about the age of 48 one feels like a species of superbeing, a living nexus of potentiality.

Unfortunately, by that time, thrill seeking has become fraught with every kind of pitfall, moral as well as biological. One is obliged to withdraw inwards once more, but before you depart the stage you may gather up all those fresh garlands of sensation that memory has tossed up at you...

It is at this point that the story takes on all its colour and brio, you have become the story maker par excellence: the myriad associations, the texts that flip through your mind, are flooded with the cool granular light of materiality. You become aware of, can pinpoint, through simple will or physical discomfort often, every organ in your body. Your skin as it always did, but so often unheeded, now registers the exact humidity of the air, the radiant energy of the most insipid sunlight, the hidden codes to other deeply buried endlessly repeating series.

I remember describing something along these lines to your father once. That’s random, he had said. And that was it. All of us had fallen silent after that, I remember, but I could tell that his curiosity had been piqued, at some level at least. He had been musing to himself for some time – only half listening I suspect, doodling on a napkin, as was his wont. The other half of his thoughts I think half-caught by the light twinkling in the lite whickered beer that held, like objects fixed in amber, images of the now honeyed chairbacks, and other images of the surrounding room, pushing through the glass into the very liquid itself

by the low slingback sun whose post-light bleared somehow thru the opposite churchyard's imposing prehistoric (we had previously surmised) feathered tapered drooping tree, which reminded us all, nearly all, of a giant mare's tail, that ancient marshland plant, but with its branches drooping down, whose form, we decided, of this vast tree *above* ground, was no doubt mirrored by its form *beneath*, which we had further surmised must consist of a single tap root, pale and peppery as a Japanese mooli, and as deep as the tree's height, which was considerable, being higher than the church tower beside it, penetrating down to pierce the chalky bedrock through into the water table which it capped, the only means by which it could quench its great prehistoric thirst. [and breathe] Needless to say, it is no longer there, our tree, and the post-light now thrusts thru the pub's opposite facing liquid window unchecked, so that the barperson should she or she be still there, is obliged to squint over the beer taps at certain times of the day and into the longer summer evenings. No doubt its geometry had exceeded the forces that held it in place, those more imprecise gravities experienced today: it looked unfit for the nature of our current storms, although god knows, it had seen enough, and was perhaps deemed dangerous to the mere oak of the Tudor surrounding structures, although the flint tower beside it would I am sure have glanced it off with a shrug, accustomed as it would be to shouldering its burden of bells and dogma locally sourced.

Such a shame.

Forgive me, Jons. I do go on so, I know.

But those scribbled-on napkins of your father's – he tended to leave

them around as tokens, as if he were Picasso or something – I even used to think it was some sarcastic reference to his artist brother – now fled the scene. But on this occasion I had surreptitiously pocketed the scrap of paper myself – not wishing to appear *too* interested... Lost now, of course. Although I suppose it might crop up again somewhere – you might even find it there in the notes. You see, it sort of summed him up. I remember it began: *And in every pair of eyes you come upon...* But that's it, don't recall the rest. I felt slightly guilty actually – because it was clearly meant for someone else, your mother almost certainly. But even so, I sensed that he wanted me to know what he could never tell me directly about all that – there are certain sentiments that I suppose don't really belong in the real world, in the now or the perhaps never. And your mother was already gone by then too...

P F

I imagined them there, sitting around the table on some lost boozy afternoon. In that now empty pub in the village perhaps. Characters that came and went. Interchangeable in the mind. Transparencies leaving, melting to air. But my father always remaining as the still centre. The last man left on the page.

And I never did find that fragment mentioned in the letter. Perhaps it would have provided a vital clue to understanding my father, or what was

happening with my mother at that time, perhaps not. But something else was becoming clear. This was no longer a simple exercise in plotting a course as if something I might do on a map.

And other sections of the letter still echoed in my mind, sections I have not mentioned here because I cannot remember them clearly, memories cast within the *shadow* or was it *shade* of a *vast feathered drooping tree*, the *rounded tufted dunes*. And that was all,

was all it was the sand in fact

tiny scales of silvered stone.

The afternoon falters.

The solidified beer had lost its pop its foamy pre-twang. The tree twisting fitfully about its arthritic and rhetorical root.

Its inaudible pre-sound.

There is a brief window of sunlight. Opening in the room.

He thinks of his father his glass a half hollow crystal moon rising beneath his eyes glistening slow with the lingering glycolic. The bar person shuffles mopping rags. The low treble of voices gutter and straighten, gutter and burn.

And the evening all the evening all the while descending.

Later, leaning against the night:

am I moving or am I dreaming step outside the church bells streaming
and I overhear:

am I moving or am I dreaming

am I moving or am I dreaming

Stop.

The girl that cleared the tables of the now empty pub clutching to herself the still twinkling empties, still young enough to be surprised by the smell of the place as she entered, the smell that all bars have but which to the adult is accessible only through the memory of adolescence: she picks up the neatly folded paper napkin, sees writing there and reads:

And in every pair of eyes that you come upon, woven into the corneal flecks of hazel or amber or graphite or copper, moistened and chaffed by these winter days, you see the starburst of another infinitely unfolding tale.

Hmm, she thinks, folding the paper into her pocket to keep. The effect of this small memento, its later affects, its subsequent history as an object in itself, is sadly unknown.

And Foales, some two weeks later, rummaging in his coat pocket discovers a paper napkin, neatly folded, checks to make sure, just in case, that

there is nothing written upon it, molds it into a ball and with some practiced skill lobs it into the bin on the other side of the room.

I never got to see those words, how could I have done? I never saw anything at all, in fact, because it was never sent – he never got around to that. That was him. Is there then some part of a mystery I am not privy to – that renders me oblivious? I do not believe so. I remember and I imagine – that is enough. And anyway, I do not believe in missing links; for what is it that is linked? In the end, it is all one – or it is nothing.

Jons!

Sorry! Sorry.

What was I thinking. Digression has got the better of me once again. The whole purpose of my letter was to respond to the work you have submitted. And there I was bumbling on about the past... I fear I have committed indiscretions. Wipe those. And don't read too much into anything I've said, tempting though that might be.

Returning therefore to the question in hand. It was Foales who turned to me (Foales always recently upon speaking turning: you know it's that new swivel chair of his, to which he is overly, irritatingly, fond) and said he found in your work "a thin yet unremitting voice in the ablative" how very like him to say that, I thought; words redolent of a penetrating truth that is always somehow slightly *off*. I, for example, would have put it slightly differently. I would have said, a voice that has undergone a process of *ablation*: as if a laser had chiselled away at its surface, or a glacier that is eroded into bizarre formations by the rays of the sun, yet leaving its frozen trundling core intact (I could go on). Though – through what agency in your case I cannot quite say. A question, I would have thought, that begs our attention (although we are quite busy just at present).

Maybe I'll just wait for Foales' next epiphany, catch the trajectory of that curving ball as it is swung towards me from the swivelling chair. I wonder if he realises that I am always watching, always on the lookout for that moment when it comes – those tell-tale signs that precede it: the head suddenly raised and erect, like a young doe alerted suddenly from the undergrowth in which she grazes, nostrils switching to receive the incoming data. And then, as I say, the low curving ball, the

suggestion of spin, coming at me to field as best I might. It gets quite tiring in our office sometimes. The afternoons especially can seem bruisingly long. There is even, and this struck me only yesterday, an unspoken competitive edge to the scrunched-up papers tossed with a feigned nonchalance into the bin, as if there is some perfect prescribed arc that it must follow, *lest all be lost*. Only last week I had been wondering why the bin – wire, dented on one side so that it appears partially melted, stooping – had been placed in the farthest corner, beneath the Titian (oleograph), as far from our desks as it was possible to be. Now, I see that its placement is naggingly clear. And – and this is surely my fancy, but in Foales’s case each projectile flung from that carefully rifled palm of his seems further aided on its course by those angels’ wings that flutter above the mouth of the bin, wafting it on its way under the fawning gaze of that ridiculous dissembling bull. Picture if you will my look of utter disdain, resembling in fact that character from another of Titian’s masterpieces, *A Man with a Quilted Sleeve*. Indeed, it is this very look that I try to affect, but it is lost on Foales, who has already, with a crisp snap of the lower body, swivelled himself back into position at his desk. I had even gone as far as to try and secure another reasonably priced copy of same to hang on the wall adjacent to his desk – a permanent reminder of my dissatisfaction with his behaviour. But so far, I have only been able to trace the original. A copy of which is provided overleaf.

I do wonder about Foales sometimes, you know: that icy gust of bright irreverent laughter that reaches me from the stairwell at home-time, for example, echoing up to the office floor as he scampers spiralling downwards towards the street’s dusty light that surely beckons beyond the brown anonymous backdoor – the stage door as we call it, referring

to what lays beyond – our little shared joke, or so I thought. But I cannot now decide whether the occasion for laughter exists in his imagination or in my own.

Anyway, keep up the good work, Jons. Along with the usual caveats, I think you're making progress.

P F

The existence of the garden well has as yet barely been mentioned. Not in so many words. Jons finds this strange. He searches his notes for some reference to it but can find no direct or indeed metaphorical clue. Ever since that morning (two days ago now?) – when, coming to, he had found himself beside it (or had crawled forward semi-conscious and only remembered from the point that he had reached it – he had no way of knowing, no independent witness to verify the facts), ever since that morning the well had featured rather strongly in his thoughts.

Our protagonist is not sufficiently guileless as to be unaware of a certain Freudian significance to the well's presence – and indeed, certain livid, and unspeakably alive images do pulse in his mind, which are borne out by later descriptions found in his notes – notes that suggest at that stage he was still able to interpret such things in something akin to a dispassionate manner, could still distinguish, still assume *a perspective*. Yet it is for now the sheer force of the well's presence in his imagination that surprises him the most – something he feels lies beyond ordinary interpretation.

But why does he find himself beside it now, soaked in dew? The timbers of the ship: stored in the raised outbuilding, he remembers that much

– and a swimming dream – and part of him that was lost... This he feels strongest of all – this sensation of something irretrievable. And if he were to have the words, he would describe what had occurred as a kind of reverse epiphany, an answer replaced by a question, insight converted to doubt. The well, whether it formed part of some wider mental geometry to which he was unconsciously drawn, or whether it had simply coincided with the drama of that moment when he had staggered from the outbuilding, half falling down the stairs and crawled out onto the grass, or the well as merely an object encountered at random in his path, had nonetheless become in his mind a thing of special significance, part of a possible solution to some of the many questions that floated in his mind.

*

The well. The bright well, its low round surrounding wall. To descend would be to discover its layers of variegated stillness, modified at levels as the surface the sky rose higher above you. One could explore this through an act of the imagination; one could lower oneself on a rope, or by falling. One could think oneself into the mind of the other, falling. Peering into a well, one's spatial awareness is that of a narrowing fluted column, stoppered at the end by an unblinking eye. Falling, one's spatial awareness is inverted: the column

dilates, broadens towards the enclosing smothering shout that forms its base, as the disk of sky above contracts, blinks no more.

Concentrated rounded by gravity a shout a droplet of water its mass trails off to a pointed comet-like tail.

To the steeplejack, the well no more than an inverted chimney stack chip chip tap tap, enclosed above or below, the same ring of sky will bring you back up, it's all the same to you. You take what work you can get.

Each time I pass the well I am surprised – I am surprised that it is there at all – because it does not figure – I have searched the texts and it does not figure – in my memory it does not figure – would I not have found it, however buried and hidden it might have been, lost within that dense little jungle out the back? I am surprised *by its offered mouth of sunken darkness*, when I had always imagined something else: *the spangled light of an undersea grotto, or some stabler subterranean lustre, or simply a faint suggested translucence, the result perhaps of thinner, purer air issuing up from below that now hovers in uncertainty above it.* But above all I am surprised that it exists so precisely in place – as I stalk past. And how steadfastly it refuses to be ignored.

All I have is a photo, I hold a large framed photo in my hands, taken from the air, *as the hawk sees it, the airman*, that shows the house the gardens and a browning lawn – it has clearly been a long hot summer – in the middle

of which is a paler, yellower disk, the kind of feature that archaeologists find on aerial surveys. And to the rear of the garden, where the grass is shaded from the sun and is lush and has clearly not been mowed – you can make out its [rippling] surface in the photo – there is the blue upturned hull of a large boat, the shape of an arrowhead (the paint is thick, it has taken many painstaking coats to cover its uneven ruckled surface), a vivid aquamarine glossy sort of blue that glints in the sun, piercing the deep rippling green – only the photo holds it still, mutes and bleaches its colours. The children are coming out of school, traipsing back up another September hill. They roll the empty drink can clacking back down the melting road – a recent trick – roar and shriek as it is flicked on further by the slipstream from the occasional passing car; they shimmy up the steep dry earthy bank to poach the few plums (their dripping nectar amber beads) from the allotment where there is never a soul except for when as now there is the sudden unthinkable indignant yell. They make it home breathless cheeks burning with unrequited guilt, busting through the back-garden gate. They collapse ecstatic, delighted, on the browning grass, calling for water, gaze up at the hot nebular sky, let the memory of tomorrow smiling fade.

According to the report, they had discovered that the well was effectively bottomless. On discovering this news my feelings, I confess were somewhat mixed. The very thought induced a giddiness, a fluttering in the stomach – that in this innocuous and rather featureless back garden existed the conduit to another place, totally alien to the world above it.

To explain further: until the advent of the mains in the 1920s the house had been supplied by a hand pump housed within a small annex attached to the rear kitchen. The pump itself was supplied by one of the many springs which ran in a line along the bottom of the steep sided escarpment some half a mile from the house, carried the distance by means of a brick lined channel set on a carefully calculated incline, that supplied through gravity a sump situated beneath the floor of the kitchen annex. A ball cock mechanism within the sump chamber ensured the supply never overflowed, and that any excess was channelled for use in other parts of the grounds such as the kitchen garden. However, despite this modest yet ingenious feat of engineering, the whole system was at the mercy of the water table, which during a dry summer only needed to fall an inch or so to render the supply inaccessible. At such times, along the flank of the hill, where the ground became already soft and

marsh-like before descending into the valley, the sand genies that danced in the little scooped out bowls of clay easily missed in the long grass would lie down exhausted at last. During such times, there was no alternative but to haul water from the garden well, a reliable yet arduous alternative. Those who had the task of hauling it up knew that this required nine turns of the large cranked handle attached to a thick chestnut shaft by a single rusty gear, which meant that the surface of the water lay at a depth of about 36 feet.

The depth to the bottom of the well, before my arrival, had never been established, and was deemed “bottomless” because the base of the well’s shaft pieced the roof of a natural chamber in the bedrock, a large flooded cavern forming part of a chain of similar formations hollowed out from the underlying limestone. Knowledge of the existence of such features in this area was rare, due mainly to the overlying strata of clays and gravels that had been dumped over the region by retreating ice sheets, smothering the native rock under a blanket of debris tens of meters thick.

But deep wells of this nature are not uncommon. Sinking a hand-dug well to any depth presents a number of technical challenges – far better to exploit a natural fissure in the bedrock as a means of accessing deeper more reliable water reserves that could not otherwise be reached. And deeper reservoirs are more reliable, not generally subject to the same degree of fluctuation in the water table. Underground water is easy to find in most areas

relatively near to the surface, but stable water sources at these levels are rare. That is why most shallow hand-dug wells of any age will invariably prove to be dry, as the water has channelled itself elsewhere or to deeper levels. These days, most wells that still contain water will, beyond a certain depth, make use of deeper, naturally occurring shafts in the bedrock.

However, there are exceptions. The well at Woodingdean, just outside Brighton, is the world's deepest entirely hand-dug well at a depth of 1285 ft. – 800 ft. of which lie below sea level. Started as a local workhouse project in 1854 and taking four years to excavate, several dozen of Brighton's poorest citizens were given the opportunity to escape "the bane of pauperdom" by descending daily into the 4 ft. diameter shaft, man woman and child labouring naked in the subterranean heat as work continuing around the clock (the concept of day and night for the workers involved having become somewhat academic) in a bid, as the local papers would cheerfully have it, to open up a shorter route to the antipodes.

Due to the stepped nature of the shaft and its limited diameter, winching equipment was impractical. Instead, human chains would be formed, each link in that chain perched perilously on a narrow wooden platform as buckets of soil and rock were passed upwards. To excavate such a well, you typically dig to the point where the ground literally bursts beneath your feet: the crust of rock or earth through which you have digging becoming no longer

thick enough to contain the artesian pressure of the aquifer below it. This process is not without its hazards, and helps to explain the high mortality rate amongst well diggers in the past. Fatalities during the digging of the Woodingdean well, however, are not recorded. But as luck would have it, the initial inundation on finally breaching the roof of the aquifer was slow enough for the workers involved to effect the 45 minute ascent to the surface unharmed.

Strangely, for a project of such philanthropic scope, detailed information is relatively hard to come by. The site today belongs to the NHS, and the well itself has proved a popular topic for local drama groups in Brighton.

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Every person who had lived at the house had at some time dreamt of the rippling silver subterranean disk, a diaphragm, a fleshy diaphanous valve, between the known and the barely imagined, that lay at the bottom of the well in the back garden. For many, the point of entry is endlessly deferred, the sudden start, the clammy beating silence on waking; for others, partial entry ends in suffocation, dismemberment into infinite pulsing waves as the self shatters under the weight of its own sudden immanence; while others still pass through into a pleasant oblivion, to be washed up later, heedless, onto a familiar and benevolent shore.

The unkempt lawn that surrounds the well is blotched and stained with darker patches of chamomile and coarse stunted burdock that seem to gather towards its base as if drawn by some centripetal force. And is it my imagination, or do I detect the arc of a perfect but almost imperceptible curve in the path that I have cleaved through the rough grass, as I pass by the well each day, in what would otherwise be a straight line between the outbuilding's steps and the rear of the house?

*

Morning flickers on the blinds. The tug of a cord reveals misted window panes, and in the mildewed corner of one, the remains of a cobweb strung with beads of moisture, hanging bedraggled from a single thread like the storm wrecked rigging of an impossibly delicate ship. Despite my own befuddled state, it holds me fascinated for a moment. As my eyes refocus beyond the glass I am surprised to see a group of figures assembled around the old well in the rear garden that is overlooked by my window. Instinctively, I move to one side to watch unobserved, and as I do so another of those brown unmarked vans passes by silently along the lane beyond the back fence, blue light flashing.

A greying salt and pepper head emerges from the well. Its features are

heavy with pasty flesh and perhaps three or four days growth of more salt and pepper stubble – the skin nevertheless bearing the leathery appearance of the mariner, a mariner kept too long away from the elements that had fashioned his features in the first place – and closer examination would surely reveal networks of tiny faded veins mapped out there upon the cheeks. The head swivels round a full 360 degrees, but the eyes dew-laden unmoved by the sudden daylight, give no indication that they have registered their surroundings at all. A body clad in green overalls follows the head now as it carefully climbs out over the lip of the well, steadying itself with large gripping hands made from the same pasty flesh that clamp upon the crumbling brickwork.

The man in the green overalls, who I now know as Leifden, has turned and is making towards the house. There, on that first sighting, he seems vaguely familiar, and I feel I could assign him a name: *Archbold*, I wanted to call him, something like that. His very presence here – this sudden intervention in the pattern of my days – lends him an authority I feel he would not otherwise possess. And it is the random nature of this authority which stirs in me a kind of fear – as if in some way the order of memory had been reconfigured. But if he were to speak...

He walks with purposeless strides, as if making his way across a

planetary surface of uncertain gravity. Having pulled himself from the well with one deft powerful movement he does not now appear very comfortable in his new surroundings on the ground, the body language awkward and imprecise. But as he approaches I am surprised to see he is looking up at my window, pale eyes fixed upon the glass.

He'd always felt a certain anxiety concerning anecdotal stories – often finding himself marvelling at those who had the gift of telling, or those with no gift but spoke anyway – wondering how the moral had been woven so seamlessly into the self generating plot. He was genuinely confused – how could reality be made to appear so contingent upon words, how could the journey be so clearly defined, so unshakeably known? He later came to understand that self-doubt is seen, for many, as a rather private matter and “holding forth” merely its Shadow. But when, on rare occasions, like early sex, he attempted it for himself, more out of a dull but prescient sense of social propriety than from any instinctive need, the result was always the same: feeling at once strangely disingenuous, and suspiciously unconvincing, as if some poorly rehearsed understudy had stepped in at the last moment to speak in his place, while he looked on from the wings, shaking, aghast.

One configures reality in a certain way by speaking, and by not speaking one configures it in another. Those who ponder at the non-speaker never really grasp this. And the speaker who believes the non-speaker can only listen, do nothing but listen, are sadly misguided, for the non-speaker in fact

listens only to himself in relation to a world in which the speaker barely figures, but mourns their passing nonetheless.

As for myself, that part of me at least that you refer to as Pinkman, you will have surmised by now that silence is not an option. Imagine your surprise then when I tell you that in certain situations I too am cast as the listener, as you are now; that there are languages which I will simply wade into – silently that is – those languages where everything is inferred. Here, all I can do is listen, float around, as if in a semi-translucent pool of meaning where nothing is fixed or points to anything else, not knowing what lies beneath me, simply floating uncomprehending upon the surface. I experience a kind of weightlessness, freed from the vertigo of being, no longer subject or object in what I imagine or remember.

In Japanese, for example, whole paragraphs, a whole afternoon, can pass without stating who is speaking, or to whom, or even about what. And to this lack of egocentrism, this 名詞 (although here it will never be that), which is nonetheless not without agency or cause, to this you will be astonished to learn, I yield. I relinquish my own will to act and understand. In this deferment of responsibility, I am suspended, at the point where the meaning turns, the bend in the lane – the place where nostalgia hovers. This way or that, to you, to her, from him. Of me.

One can never *declaim*, not truly, in a language such as the one I describe. One edges forward, places one's feet carefully, one after another into the clear and unmirrored space ahead. And faced with this, this blankness, confronted by it, I fall silent. I listen. Not for me, in the end, these borrowed ill-fitting clothes, be they the robes of an emperor.

But somehow a fluid, mobile certainty is created all the same. More collective than I can manage, at least.

*

You drop like a stone, or a flighted falling dart, into the past. An act of faith, hoping there will be something to break your fall – the sea, a cloud, the back alley sack-filled skip. Either that or stop believing in gravity – that law that like a language must be learnt – at the infant school of hard knocks. Suspended at the mother's breast, is there not already a sense of vertigo developing? The comfort of the breast, the hardness of the distant floor.

But all I recall is the quality of the light, its heat and its degree, the severity of its peculiar and unforgiving shadow.

*

That's me, he said, flicking the ungainly broadsheet smooth with a snap of the wrist and gesturing towards the unseen page he was reading. You? I thought he must be referring to some photo on the page, an incidental face in the background to a main event, or even some small dedicated article relating an undoubtedly bizarre involvement in something or other. But as he carefully smoothed out the large unruly page onto the table I saw that there was no photo, that the image of himself that he was referring to was simply that act of reading a newspaper, and whatever it was that was encapsulated in that flicking of the wrist, the snapping taut of the sheet of unruly throwaway print.

Yep, that's me, he repeated, almost absentmindedly to himself. And I thought then of a term my father might have used – *distráidamente*. I had seen it written somewhere. It was a word that somehow fitted the situation more closely, combining as it did a sense of *distraction*. Yes, that was it. The speaker is distracted from himself. And the listener, distracted also, must follow.

}

Nowhere in my father's diaries can I find a direct reference to his brother. The presence of him between or behind the lines? That too, is difficult to say. Let's face it, his own presence is fleeting and obscure enough. And as Pinkman has pointed out, the identity of other characters – my mother, for example, can only be *inferred*. But there could be something I have missed – or simply something which as this reader I have not been party to...

But there is one instance that I found. It is not clear whether it is some imagined sketch of his brother's thoughts as he in turn imagines someone else (who?), or whether it is something of his brother's that my father has simply copied down. It is simply headed thus:

Paul Flannery

They would say that like a Picasso or Braque, my memory of you consists of a composite of surface planes that link – they would guess – to an inner reality, an essence that I might call “you”.

The thing is, in my letters the apparently *physical* symbol that I use to denote you does not conform to any physical image. It is pure abstraction,

beyond a name or a pronoun. But look at it there on the page: there is a sense of a bending in, a concavity, that begins at the neck (which is somehow facing forwards to the viewer), and the upper calve. The shape thus created resembles an inverted **C** or the Latin open **O**, or better the mid-section of an inverted **K**, except that there is a dimensionality that allows the viewer to see the **K** not exactly head on, but at an angle of about 45°, so that the < (actually, >) where the symbol's *arm* meets its *leg* just below the meanline (both of which are slightly finialled) is in fact receding away into the massy blackness (yes, *the massy blackness*, do you remember?) to the right. The symmetry of the *character*, if we might call it that, is therefore distorted by perspective so that the *leg* appears longer than the *arm*, or you could say *italicised*, and is, in addition just a little more *bowled* than the subsequent “)” would normally suggest.

I chose the symbol at random, in a hurry for a quick cipher, the nearest thing to a single pen-stroke other than an “I”. A bass clef did come to mind. You would be flattered by that I think, in terms of your background certainly, and maybe aesthetically too. But the clef is too florid and two-dimensional, too self-possessed, would involve joining all those diverging lines so that they would never point to anywhere except to themselves. There is something about the strangeness in the perspective of the **)** that I find appealing; its vagueness. And I like the way it can snuggle up to the preceding word without the need for a space. But discreetly so).

I have ended up juggling symbols again, symbols that do not account for the sense of absence which the figure maintains – not so much an absence contained within itself – if such a thing were possible – but an absence of elsewhere. A remorse.

But when I think of), I feel glad, comforted. That other sadness.

Barcelona July 16th 1992

Mid-afternoon, and it is getting muggy in the old town. Attracted by the coming Games, waves of visitors even at this hour. They look determined, with their maps and packs, like twitchers eager to prove the existence of some non-existent bird in the wake of a reported sighting. We duck into a dank unpromising looking passage way, the sky a narrowing slit above. About half way down a large arched entrance leads into a leafy arcaded patio, a hidden garden canopied against the sun. A low marble fountain, a simple scalloped dish in the centre of intersecting stone paths, burbles quietly to itself in what is otherwise the impression of a soundless space. Beyond that, on the far side, another archway, another alleyway slightly wider this time, at the end of which in the bleached-out light of the open street, noiseless droves of passers-by, passing on heedless. All seem to be peering ahead into middle distance, their anxious gaze trying not to miss anything else.

The patio is in the process of being restored; on one side a newly refurbished staircase leads up to the surrounding balcony on the first floor. Around the base of the stairs lush tropical-looking plants have been arranged

in huge ceramic blue and white containers, while on the other side of the patio nothing has yet been touched and retains some of its mouldering charm: an old oxblood leather sofa propped against the far wall, a wooden clothes horse, a picnic table with a stub of candle in a tin.

By the stairs, on a freshly painted section of ochre wall is fastened a large transparent acetate panel of the kind often found in modern museums; and photo-printed onto it, like an advertising hoarding on the side of a bus, is the image of a velum-coloured document, a facsimile of a handwritten medieval-looking manuscript. Drawn in by these inscriptions, that dance slightly in the dappled light thrown by the potted palms, I approach the panel to examine it more closely. The writing is neat, the letters generally crisp, precise, but often ending in scythe-like flourishes as if some larger emotion can barely be kept in check; and the lines themselves undulate gently across the page, swell and contract as the passage proceeds. The words carry the air of something, solemn, binding, yet appear to have been written on the hoof, a hastily improvised dictation laid down in the face of something unprepared for, a bridge too quickly assembled between the certainties of the past and the future unknown.

What I am looking at is Columbus' contract with Isabel of Spain concerning his rights to discovered territory in the New World. its spidery Castilian script, hesitant, groping words, hazily spelt, feel their way forward

towards some new meaning which already begins to defocus the foundations of a certainty, a belief, marking the beginning of our time. And the elements of an imagined place become its own inventory. Its doom is sealed.

*Do you remember the photograph,
the shadows falling across the text in the garden?*

Later, past the old port, kicking up sand along the tideline. Activists had already burnt the replica ship that was to take pride of place midst the celebrations. I had read the headlines: [] I don't know what I expected to see – a few cinders floating in the harbour maybe. But nothing, no trace, the wharves swept clean. People milling about as usual. On the beach, we discover a large hard-skinned jellyfish, bulbous, punctured, like an abandoned alien football. I cannot bring myself to touch it, even with the toe of my shoe.

*

Gold was the symbol of goodness, of purity – that which was left after the darkness had been burned away. Gold was vitality, evidence of a land's fecundity. Without it, all was cast into doubt. But Cuba and its as yet meagre traded offerings represented a suspension, of belief certainly, and briefly of impending history. Not yet the brutal and relentless inland incursions of the

conquistadores, the annihilation of tribes. This was an incursion of the mind, the narrative's course not yet established. The story's still open to speculation, to human possibility, the senses flaring, the yielding flesh intact.

Mas, onde porra estou – Cipangu?

The pagoda in the next valley, surely?

His mouth spread like a chinless guppy in concentration as his mind flounders around for the next thing. But he knows he must press on regardless, whatever the outcome. Sink or swim, that's the way of it. The shark gives another languid flick of the tail. The guppy hurries on, darting left then right. The sentence, the segment, its ecosystem, is maintained. But barely.

—Say something, she says.

He turns from his reverie, this gentle swirling melancholy of brightness.

His smile falters,

—I... what should I...?

—Talk to me.

—I suppose I could describe at length your many amazing qualities, but...

—but that would be stating the bleedin' obvious. A rather bland exercise. Any more cliches?

—Well then...?

—Tell me something I didn't know.

—Rather a large topic.

—Oh, sir, you do demur so... Tell me about you. *You*, for goodness sake!

Finally, he raises himself to begin. But when he does so it is the stranger who speaks again, the uncommon man. Because – and the realisation hits him at that point – most stories are never told, remain as a million floating elements that never reach their compound state. Pieces fall out from occasional pockets, bits of fluff, accidental change. Do not search for the teller, therefore, but the voice.

He had already driven his three small walnut ships doggedly south, bobbing and plunging down Atlantic rollers a mile long, running with the *la volta do mar*, called later the Trades; the sailor's instinct, navigating far from what might seem logical, away from the 40th parallel which would have delivered him up to the temperate autumn shores of Hudson Bay. Why stop here? Let's indulge our imaginations a little longer... South.

Mas – meu deu! Que calor!

He wore a clouded, hunted look, this old school dead reckoner, aspirant merchant-king, adventure-capitalist with skin like dry striated parchment. Only the eyes, dark remembered harbours, set far apart by the closing beak-like ridge of the nose, always framed, in his own mind, against the prospective waiting beach, a soft landing between the reefs, I pray you. Only the eyes – as if inked in later.

Head south until the butter melts, they said, and then... well, just let the curve of the wind take you. There's a point, you see, where it kind of bends west. Yes, at the point where the wind bends, hang a right. 'Cos that coast down there, man, hell it ain't f' you's. Hombre, you already seem to have the world on your shoulders,

no harm in letting nature do its thing, a little – and in the *mean*-time you doing something *different*, man. After that, ten dozen turns of the ampolleta – *ten dozen and true, mind* – and *bingo!* S’pose you can rely on your boy to do that, turn those sands of time, spin those grains – the little fella not gonna crash on you now, is he? No? *Excelente!* Then just go with the flow, brother. Go where the space is.

He looks down at his feet as if in shyness, averting his face from this speaker, partly to hide the childlike excited smile playing about the corner of his mouth, partly to free himself from the speaker’s insistent gaze, to think through more clearly this moment of affirmation. He grasps the other’s shoulder to steady himself, to give thanks, still staring at the ground which is foaming white over his battered sailor’s clogs, his Japanese getas.

Give me a moment. I’ve got to think about this...

*

Whereas, Most Christian, High, Excellent, and Powerful Princes, King and Queen of Spain and of the Islands of the Sea, our Sovereigns, this present year 1492, after your Highnesses had terminated the war with the Moors reigning in Europe, the same having been brought to an end in the great city of Granada, where on the second day of January, this present year, I saw the royal banners of your Highnesses planted by force of

arms upon the towers of the Alhambra, which is the fortress of that city, and saw the Moorish king come out at the gate of the city and kiss the hands of your Highnesses, and of the Prince my Sovereign; and in the present month, in consequence of the information which I had given your Highnesses respecting the countries of India and of a Prince, called Great Can, which in our language signifies King of Kings, how, at many times he, and his predecessors had sent to Rome soliciting instructors who might teach him our holy faith, and the holy Father had never granted his request, whereby great numbers of people were lost, believing in idolatry and doctrines of perdition...

*

They had allowed their sails to simply follow the circular winds, rigged square, Spanish style, bulging out *en redonda*, hardly needing to reset them once during the entire voyage. No need the Moorish lateen sails which would have allowed them to narrow the angle, beat closer to the wind, bear west-nor 'west.

As the weeks passed, in the midst of this ocean of doubt, the admiral, or his translator, found himself inclined to the lyrical: "Found the sea like the river at Seville, "thanks to God," says the Admiral. "The air soft as that of Seville in April, and so fragrant that it was delicious to breathe it".

South

South South West

South West

Steady

Steady. Bearing 233

But the cabin boy – light headed on the meagre rations, and not a little distracted by the fearful uncertainty of it all – had indeed *crashed*, dozing, with his eyes half open (a trick he had been determined to learn) often for hours at a time, had slept through many a turning of the *ampolleta* so that time on the little ship ebbed and flowed with alarming imprecision against the admiral's steady linear measurements across the empty space of his chart, hand always plumb steady against the cant and pitch of the ship.

Indeed, there were moments in the early hours, or during the rigidly observed siesta, when the entire crew would be asleep – the watch, unknown to the rest of them, slumped also over their posts, the ship not drifting at will as one might think but steered always by the infallible winds upon a predetermined course. At such moments, time sat insensible at the bottom of the glass, as the last grains of the future filtered downwards and [ceased].

Inevitably, the cabin boy was caught asleep on the job, beaten soundly, and sent up to the crow's nest to be put on permanent watch on pain of being flogged this time to death and cast overboard into what must surely

be the ghastly purgatory of those unknown waters, while the admiral hoarse from the curses he had rained down on the cowering boy's head, curses that displayed all the rich multilingual and idiomatic variants that his tongue was capable of, now kept time firmly at his side, the sable grains running freely again at his elbow with a faintly imaged rustling hiss, [masked by the roaring nameless seas beyond], as he poured over his calculations, checking and rechecking, searching for the trick that he had missed. The past becoming the future.

His name is Rodrigo de Triana. I came across him once, just strolling about one afternoon. In that district next to the river, a little statue close to where he might have lived fixes him in white stone as if he had been frozen pointing out as he clings to the mast. From his windy exile high above the tilting deck he was the first to spot land. If the hour any longer meant anything by that stage of the voyage, it was 0200 hours on the morning of the 12th of October 1492.

But as the days had progressed, a kind of relativity had taken place aboard in which the ship's time, as recorded by the admiral's diary, had become compressed, no longer corresponded to the encircling sun and moon whose actual time now lay in distended folds around them as they sailed on. And within these folds the islands thereabouts had become fickle, shuffling

uneasily about them in the darkness, hunched coarse-backed feral creatures. Earlier that evening the admiral had reported having seen candlelight bobbing in the gloom which he thought might indicate the presence of a settlement. The watch was doubled at all quarters of the ship.

When Rodrigo finally spotted land in the early hours, becoming the first European documented to have done so, compared to his own forlorn and lonely position suspended above the deck, where what terrifies him most is the thought of tumbling into an ocean whose name he does not know, that vague outline must have seemed like a familiar sight, a homecoming almost, that the ship was coming into dock beneath the low hills of his native Lepe. In every first sighting there must be a moment of recognition, a kind of kinship, before the actual recognition: of the unknown, its full yawning extent, sets in – a fleeting glimpse of an Eden that for a moment might have resembled home, that can never again be realised. An Eden towards which he now forever points, surrounded by the soft, evening splash of Sevillano traffic. In fact, he seems not to be pointing in the expected direction: west, but inland, back to the place perhaps where circumstantial evidence claims he was born.

In another incarnation he returns, considerably less pale than his representation in the plaza, no longer the terrified bedraggled cabin boy. Barely a year has passed, but like a bronze now, more robust in his bearing, a little more insightful. Though he is washed out all the same: the 10,000 maravedís

promised to the first man to sight land was never awarded – the admiral’s earlier sighting of possible candlelight rendered the outcome undecidable. So he returns poor as before, renounces his faith, goes to Africa, and is never again seen.

October 15th

Along the strand ribbons of colour, mud blacks revealed from beneath garish melting browns, the brackish greens and greys of tidal wash. Water sliced foam white by tilting smacks, as summer recedes daily, drawing the light somewhere south from here. South.

And the sky is marked increasingly by the geometries of migrating birds, as throughout October the landscape shuts down, erupting here and there with a few last spontaneous gestures of fruit, gilded almost instantly by decay. All descends into a sumptuous rotting feast, a sensual excess alive with the scent of decomposition, of raw earth, smouldering leaves, the years last mowings, already irradiating heat, an alien warmth. Until that first pristine frost, the air brittle with fear and relief. I should go, before the winter sets in, before I am consumed. Borrow a little time elsewhere. A blander season to

stem the madness. This all here is too much. Find a place where words matter less. Let me lie back now and just drift. South, veering westerly.

I pause from my work, looking over to the house. Initially it represented a kind of order; there was a kind of method amidst the chaos, an attempt at a kind of stability, a will to fix things in place, to isolate patterns and strands. On the part of the protagonist at least, perhaps a project doomed from the start. Should I see it that way? Should I succumb to that overriding sense of a failure *to make sense of*?

But in trying to find order in this environment of found objects I myself have started to lead a rather feral existence. Having now redacted large swathes of my father's material into discreet chunks, I have in the process been able to scoop out habitable areas around the house in which I can exist more comfortably, rather like a hare scoops out its shallow form amidst the furze. I now have several cleared areas where I might fitfully doze, or eat, or work. But I must confess I am spending less and less time in the house. Much of my father's writings I feel I have committed to memory – that which appears relevant at least – the spirit if not the letter. And there is much description

that can be reduced to a single phrase, much else that can be dismissed as fantastical rambling.

The man in the green overalls is back at the house. A man of few words I discover, who has difficulty holding my gaze. My apprehension at his approach had soon given way to irritation as I greeted him at the back door – a greeting which he seemed to ignore, launching straight into his theme:

— No contamination. The levels are fine. The casing's good.

— Sorry – levels?

— The levels are fine. Casings are fine. A signature here and here, please.

He hands me a slip of yellow paper, indicating where I should sign. I look over his shoulder towards the well, where the other figures I had noticed assembled around it before seem to have already departed the scene. The paper appears to be from the Local Authority and contains a checklist of technical items I do not understand, with the heading:

Radiological & Non-bacterial Contaminants Inspection Class II: Aquifer Penetration Points – Radius A.

*

And so I had proceeded with the task in hand. I think it is my frustration at the lack of progress with the project relating to my father that causes me, increasingly, to spend time in the outhouse “fashioning” as I like to think the timbers of what I now refer to as the “ship”. In fact, the outhouse now resembles as much an office as a workshop – those papers of my father that I have sorted I have brought here, where they sit arranged along the benches amidst the debris of my other labours. And the light is good and strong from the large windows that give out onto the marsh. Strange though, this will to construct – if not the abstract, then the concrete – both offer their own kind of resistance – one always in substitution for the other, the one tying us to the other.

But I am tired. I write this with chapped fingers blackened with dust and grime. And I notice now that the newly roughened skin on the side of my hand audibly scratches at the surface of the paper as I write, a sensation I do not remember experiencing before; and I have grown oblivious to the splinters and scratches that I would previously suffer the moment I started handling the timber.

Maybe I am making progress in other ways. I have identified the spine of the ship amidst the litter of beams and spars. The task became easier! I could add that the ribs have followed. Imagine them – tenoned squealing as they are pressed back into the notched oak backbone, the source of all the

boat's strength, its whip and agility – pegged with soft willow bolts before being sprung against the rigid curved longitudinal *inwhales* that form the outer frame of the deck. Normally the ribs would have been added after the *carvelled strakes* that form the hull, followed by the *garboard* and the *transom*, but in order to establish the vessel's original shape I must work to the defining pattern that the ribs provide. You'd be amazed at the casual precision with which each joint has been cut, and how the different tolerances of each kind of timber have been chosen to work against each other, to yield one to the next at exactly the right degree to create the required torsion in the frame: the pithy willow that mushrooms outwards on being struck, expanding into its oak socket, for example, without cracking the encasing wood, its stringy grain resistant to shearing within the tight uncompromising planes of the joint. And there are bucket loads of iron pins as thick as your thumb, swollen with rust. Leifden says that on a wreck these are usually the first to go. Boys from the village would wade out into the marsh and within a couple of hours strip the boat clean. The iron – melted down and used to make horseshoes – was prized for its phosphor content, absorbed from the sea, producing a very hardwearing finish.

*

He would continue for hours in this way, the broad shutterless windows of the hut blazing out across the marsh into the night. Finally, he would stretch out on the bare boards, oblivious to the dust and shavings and stare up through the skylights at the passing stars, the cautious patrolling clouds. He found himself wondering about his encounter with Leifden, trying to reconcile the image of the man he had seen with that image he had of him from the past. Was this really the same figure that had stood watching them build their little dam by the low bridge so long ago, or was his memory playing tricks again?

He thought also about the extract that Pinkman had attributed to his father, trying to recall the time it had described, roaring through the panic-stricken city clinging to the safety of his mother. Some kind of parable or benign apocalypse...? A fantasy dream world – but one in which he was somehow located through some misplaced memory. But the moment eluded him – only eddies, the barest of sensations.

As he drifted into sleep, finally, he thought of Pinkman's letter, or was it Foales', or both? Damn them! As unconsciousness overcame him he could hear Pinkman's voice – yes, he was sure it was Pinkman, the elongated bespectacled features bellowing into the frame: the problem, he was shouting, the problem is that there are words you want to use, that don't yet exist, take *toncture*, for example, ... *toncture*... stories that have the wrong words...the

Oh, Jons, Jons...

The naked man from the beach moves forward, cautious, but more curious than fearful, for his own common sense immediately tells him this is neither warrior nor king, this accumulation of material, this heap of drapery that has stepped gingerly ashore on its pin-legs – an errant sage gone wrong perhaps, thinks the naked man on the beach, with maybe herbs, or gold, or dried fish hidden somewhere beneath all those layers. Things he might profit from at least.

Hey! says the admiral, extending a hand from beneath his cloak.

Ho! says the naked man from the beach, in his own tongue an exclamation of what might have approximated, in another time and place, bemusement. But certainly, more puzzlement than confusion – because somehow, he feels he has seen all this before. In this man's mind, there is less room for mystery than you might think, because mystery arises out of ignorance, of knowledge that cannot encompass its own space, and he was certainly not about that. We might say that he had watched these farcical beetle-like creatures clamber from their boat, had he possessed a sense of farce that is, a sense of how what appears to be can be bent and distorted, its features amplified to produce certain effects; and when we consider that later back in the village, around the flickering fire (its dancing shadows) how he

mimicked to a howling audience the scuttling movements of the crew as they made their way up the beach, we might conclude that he did.

But whether there was a catch in his laughter as he spoke – that we cannot tell – understanding as he did that those lines so carefully inscribed, so painstakingly drawn across the pale unblemished velum skin of the admiral’s map, had converged upon the point of their own truth. And he felt in his heart, a shimmer, a thrill even, not of immediate threat. A discordance.

Hey! Says the admiral, his hand extended.

Ho! The reply. The invisible voice.

Leifden pays me a visit today. Green overalls again. The man I had seen clamber from the well had seemed older, but today clean-shaven, I realise he is only a few years older than myself. I recognise him at once, although he has changed a great deal from the tall imposing figure we had encountered, watching us from the banks of the stream. He stands as I saw him then through my child's eyes, but broader, heavier. Then we had automatically imagined him the owner of the field, the brook that ran through it, the guardian of our whole little territory, in fact – a being who in real life we were never supposed to have met. But in reality, he must have been little more than a farm hand. But as I greet him now, in my mind he still bears that seal of authority, someone a little intimidating. He introduces himself again, a little less reticent than previously, but still muttering in that rather diffident manner – something about the well out the back again as the reason for his calling round, water tables, I think he said. But I can tell he has come to just nose about. Knew my father he says, seeming to know I am the son.

I leave him to go off and examine the well. Neither of us have much to say, but afterwards I take him across to the outhouse to show him the remains of the dismantled boat. He had been watching me curiously since his

arrival, obviously keen to know more about my purposes here, or for news of my father perhaps. The boat seems to divert his attention a little and he perks up on seeing the old timbers that I have sorted into their various sections piled up around the room. He even lets out a little laugh when I tell him I am thinking of trying to reassemble the thing and wishes me luck. He seems relatively knowledgeable, brother was a fisherman he said, something of a boat builder too. Rare example, he says, pointing out a few pieces with his boot whose function I had failed to identify. Quite the little ship, he says, could take you anywhere. Broad beam yet shallow keel. He examines what remains of the bulbous wormy hull, pats it with what I take to be approval.

After his departure, I return to the outhouse, remembering the letter from the publishers that I had left on the workbench. I pick it up to review its contents but can already hear its potted, muffled laughter. Whoever did write it, it does seem to have a slight echo, like two projected voices not quite in sync.

Somewhere I am aware of a figure, gagged and bound from head to foot. It jumps around helplessly, as desperate it seems to communicate something important as to escape, but in doing so manages only to achieve absurd comic effect. I know I should pay closer attention. There is something here that perhaps after all I should heed.

*

Imagine if you can: the ship. A sketchy confederation of dim recollections, of poorly executed unseamanlike voyages hold it together; its mast, a troubled rod that trembles and twitches at each passing of the moon, at each winking satellite, is rigged with looping vines and gossamers that at the slightest breath of wind outside will in misplaced sympathy begin a determined idiot hum, while various misaligned spars would shudder and rub, grain on grain, creaking out an animal whine, or an occasional more precise simian shriek. Echoes of distant forest canopies once inexplicably spotted tilting beyond the reef.

Hull: a porous casque of arthritic timber; iron spine scabrous and prostrated in the soupy bilges. And the engine – prod and peer in gingerly at that lump, why not? A great block of lifeless dark matter – a super-dense material from some unknown outer planet, or at least from the outer edges of the periodic table, dark as a pluton day. Silent now in its slurry-pit grave where once gurgling in its own filth it met a pitiless end below decks. As an engine, as that entity which produces energetic force, it can now only exist in that other dimension from whence it came.

The surface of the vessel, its many surfaces, presents a collage of pastel textures rich as any DIY catalogue of designer interiors – a patina for every taste – stippled and distressed by the wind’s briny picking fingers, the loveless sanding of the waves, the tug

and cluck of the quenching desiccating mud. And many a quayside scraping and beached, barnacle-bottomed, mooning stand-off with the tide.

The ship's technicolour hues of greens and reds, yellows and blues, are all tastefully subdued therefore by the elements, blended with the coarsened open-pored bleached out pines and furred greying mahoganies whose specks of remaining varnish occasionally glisten upon the timber's surface like sweat.

To this conglomerate whole add a thorough strafing of evening sunlight, which now streams in again for another pass, through the many gaps and holes that were left before – sunlight, carried it seems by the very breeze, bearing the tang of salt in through the large open windows.

Do you get it then, this dream ship?

In the morning things always seem a little clearer – even if by midday this feeling has become muddied by the jumble of objects that litters my workspace. Not only my father's papers, but all this other stuff I am finding around this place that begs my attention. I try to begin the day with the journals. I feel I should be on firmer ground here. The publishers are right – reading too much into the fictional extracts could lead me astray. Are they really portraits of my mother, disguised in imaginary situations – or perhaps

even real ones? Can I imagine that they might sometimes refer to me? And then the journals in a sense are no less oblique. The entry I am now reading, for example, is clearly dated and *appears* to refer to by mother, to a time when they were already apart – already over forty years ago! Because of this I am moved. But what if I am mistaken? Even if I tell myself that this does not matter, there is still little to go on in terms of facts. I am forced to use a little imagination of my own – maybe I should use these entries as a kind of guide for that purpose...

I try to think of you as just a construct of my imagination, to which I have attributed certain traits, traits that conform to the narrative of you which I have created, traits that conform to the image I have of myself perhaps. If I can create you in this way, like a writer might, as an assemblage of symbols and functions organised within the text on a page, will you become less real?

If I can think of you like this, maybe I can also think you away, dismantle you piece by piece until there is nothing left, just an outline or a frame, becoming therefore just another generic outline amidst the multitude of images.

But then in the solitude of this room, you approach, you sit down carefully at the table where I sit, the spindly incongruous chair yielding to the bow of your hips...

There is a kind of a break here; a few doodles and indecipherable scribbles follow the last phrase. When the writing resumes, the handwriting is a little looser than before. A different session, a different mood, perhaps. I would love to know what took place in the space that I now fill with these words; the passing of a week, the passing of a cloud across the sun?

But as I write I am aware always of an encroaching torpor. Is this the awareness that the act of writing itself constitutes the ultimate banality, that the moment of inscription represents only the ultimate solitary non-event; or is it something very different – the numbing panic that something is about to be torn like a tooth or a piece of flesh to fall bleeding on the page? And the writer is a kind of pivot in a mechanism that always moves towards stability – the one who reconciles the world of shared values with the molten morass of the craven unmade self. Each violent act is countered by indifference. Each act of indifference results in undreamt of consequences.

A finding of levels. In a second the ink is sealed, the mimetic wish locked and ticking and the sequence of fictive death initiated. This, I guess, is entropy.

I see you sitting amidst the reeds and dry grass on the low bank, the flaking mud path behind you points to your presence as if it leads to you alone, only to you, as if a star's trail has been etched upon the earth ending at the spot where you now sit in an irradiated patch of bare soil. Your tangled hair is blown in counter rhythm to the reeds as they sway sideways and return sprung back by the resistance of their stems. I try to resist the notion that my ghost is interchangeable with yours, that without the walled-up ego our memories might mingle and blend and that our images, now yours, now mine, might echo and refract, even to the extent that in time they might be glimpsed by others amongst the dykes and sunken sheltering paths.

Your eyes are staring, locked into mine. You cannot stop looking.

Toledo April 9th

Memory has texture, mass – a tactile resistance – which is why we crave its reality before an ever-dissolving present that is always contingent on the next thing. In the pursuit of remembrance, we build inventories – catalogues of objects, objectified desires, an attempt to recreate the imagined places of our lives in which memories dwell.

And tempting always to revisit these places with irony, whether in the form of apparent self-effacement, or through the keenly directed, elevated gaze – either strategy, the bungle or the sneer, an acknowledgement of the allusiveness of essence, that truth has a hollow centre. Self becomes a mere contrivance, a random sample taken at a point where different cultural currents intersect; the Other is no more reliable a pursuit, as its encapsulation already involves the appropriation techniques of language. All experience is thus scoured through like striated glass by the same doubting transience...

After an interval of time through which you appear to worm, as through a block of rushing air, of pithy, barely yielding matter, and muffled intercom squawk, you find yourself standing outside in the balmy evening air of M. An ignored clock proffers an hour:

11.30. More urgent the breeze, the kind that caresses the skin just a degree below the temperature of the blood, hardly a breeze even, just stirred up convectional eddies, the remaining depleted motes from distant hills, gentle commotions in the surrounding air, or perhaps the spent blasts from aircraft engines. Whatever its origin, something lost is evoked, something recently dreamt.

Jons. Jons, I have the impression that as I write I am writing into thin air, that there is no corresponding page that these words might become fixed upon, no porous surface – skin, paper, the thin granular coating of memory, through which they might be absorbed. Because, throughout my earlier ramblings, and no matter how oblique my rantings, I never lost sight of the fact that you were my reader – you were that still centre about which my thoughts were spinning. No matter how bizarre those thoughts.

Consider: three points of living will. Each separated within its own channel of events, each secluded within its own quiet valley of experience, yet nourished by the same subterranean rivers where memory flows unheeded, or unbidden...

For the moment, this story appears to fail because the lines have not yet been drawn between them. We are just like places on a map, which as they appear on that map bear no obvious relation to each other. It is only by moving from one place to another that we attempt to make this relationship clear, all too often becoming lost within the frowning contours, toiling up this slope or that, to plunge into the shaded areas, the forbidden hatched-off zones, to encounter the shores of a river, the banks of a stream that are suddenly no longer the veined arterial representations on the page but multifaceted planes of memory as one stands before them.

As you attempt to trace the footsteps through the pages of this journal you are in fact attempting to plot a series of bearings, and the most

correct and plausible course between them. Necessarily this will be an undertaking that like a map must always take place as if in the 3rd person, at another remove. It could not normally be otherwise: no matter how hard you try, the subject must contemplate its object, the object that is caught fast upon the page's smooth calendared surface. For sanity's sake.

And then there is that other presence, who cannot be reached by conventional means, one for whom the guiding grid of language no longer figures, who now exists beyond that troublesome yet somehow comforting skein of words that binds us to ourselves.

When you witnessed her condition, sensed the yawning clarity of vision set free from the cluttered delimiting landscape of words as she stared bright eyed and sightless from her bed, you somehow knew then that she already lay beyond the logic of the story. In the desert, in the pure clear air, one has no need of memory's conceits and stratagems. You must leave her there now, installed within your own composite image of her, by the flickering screen flocked with static, the long window's dipping shadows, and the portrait of herself in its gilt frame – that apposite and unopposing mirror – that picture through which, this time, her gaze penetrates like a beam.

Leave her there, if you can. Where she will be safe.

As for yourself, destined for the moment to remain in this place, all you can do is wait, register what you see around you, wait for that engagement with the past that will start to make the present breathe again. But the truth I know is that you feel as if enveloped by cloud. Because this is the problem – you look around you, see for example, the

ancient climbing rose, at once withered and vital against the chaffing lime-washed wall; observe with a scientific discipline the progress of the tides as they creep and withdraw across the mudflats, that expanse of bubble-pocked mousse. But you can make no sense of your relationship to any of these things. You have stepped into a pre-made world of objects and events in which each thing is contained *within* itself – there is nothing left over, no jagged remainder, no gap which your waking consciousness might stumble into to begin again. To begin again...

It is as if the nervy vessels which might have connected you to this outer physical world have been clamped or cauterised. You wander amidst these signs and symbols that have no meaning, as one who walks beneath the ceiling of the richly decorated basilica of a mysterious and unknown cult. But no, symbols are never mute. Their strangeness will always speak. Always there is the will to the other voice. The voice within will out.

Delve deeper into the journals, Jons, which by contrast you will find are coloured by the presence of a ticking self. And realise, that incomplete and sketchy as they are, it is your own engagement with them that makes them live and speak. ...

Only now, looking back, you realise increasingly, that you can no longer distinguish between what was written, what was lived, and what you remembered having read.

In a long panelled room, you are in conversation with a tall man. You feel hot and itchy in a buttoned-up duffel coat as you explain that you have to admit that you hadn't been prepared for – what should you call it – the *corporeality* of his presence: you are referring to your father and the house, you add.

If there *were* to be ghosts, you continue, you might at least have expected him to appear like some semi-transparent hologram that you could put your hand through. But that, of course, is just a filmic metaphor for disembodiment. That the causal links between body and the specious essence that drove it had been severed never meant that he could not exist in space as a physical entity, just as, inversely, the strokes of ink drying on the page in their molecular reality already stand for what cannot be written.

You explain all this to the tall man in the long panelled room, and as you hear yourself speak you wonder at this sudden facility with words, because in fact, you feel hot and itchy and embarrassed by the physicality of your own presence.

The man responds with faint smile but remains silent. I continue, warming to my subject:

We had of course all expected his arrival in some form or another. And had he himself wondered how much longer it could carry on – this waiting, held between strands of woven time as if trapped within the cords of some great conducting cable awaiting the return of current? And there was something about a train – was it from the journals?

I pause for a second, searching for the words, willing them out, and start to describe how the train had shuddered with effort as it inched its way through the darkening approaches towards the vast concourse, rails thrown out from their central starting point like glistening entrails, and as it slowed had appeared to be readjusting itself to enter a different mode of time.

Could it be, I ask, that each track represented a different channel of time, cutting through a landscape that no longer became a mediating influence on the traveller's passage through it? Could it be that the towns and their conjoined leafy environs were reduced to the background montage required for thought about other things, rather than the direct object of any mediation?

The man is staring at me intently now – with what I take to be interest. I press on. Does our insistence on background: music, colour, crowds – serve to foreground our thoughts, to hold and define them within the self, or do these very backgrounds simply form a melee of jumbled second-hand

impressions into which we tumble? How well do we in fact subconsciously distinguish between the layered counter currents of the spaces we inhabit?

The tall man in the long room, without a word, gets up and pulls a large file out from the shelf behind him. He begins to quickly leaf through it, searching for something, all the while glancing down at me through the flickering pages. The duffel coat scratches at my neck. The panels of oak wear their patina of age, the tables of more recent battered Formica are polished and shiny, reflecting all the light and every other surface in the room.

But who will you really talk to Jons? Who will be there to hear your tale?

On that day as we climbed, zigzagging up through the bracken and furze, the still air punctured occasionally by the fusile pops, as Foales referred to them, of crow scarers in the lawn-like fields above us, both of my companions were aware at some level, I think, that they were there to be observed, that they had been brought along for that very purpose. But this fact barely seemed to register, accompanied as it was by the prospect of a leisurely lunch further up the valley, and the idea of the outing itself – the opportunity for amicable conversation in a setting such as this, on a day such as this, released from the confines of their respectively gloomy, cramped lodgings, each as chaotically furnished as the other after the manner of its occupant, each with its own throne-like armchair from which both of them in their own way were wont to hold forth.

They made their way up the path that could hardly contain them as they walked abreast on into the bare trees, hugging the side of the escarpment, the grey river uncoiling below as we approached the barrow. As if by convention, I fell in at a short distance behind – the oculus, I thought, the vanishing point that lay somewhere outside the frame. The day had been made for them they felt (I could tell), and they relished this chance of playing their

role. And already as they clumped and puffed, the conversation, wrapping itself around them in scarves of vapour, was taking its usual turn towards the impenetrable bramble of titles and covenants and the granting of hundreds and bloodlines and bishoprics which before long had taken us to the crest of the hill where we suddenly found ourselves quite breathless in an open field amongst a grouping of low, truncated mounds. Carefully manicured, they resembled burst or erupted zits, their bulging hoards long spent, dispersed like spores into the wind.

I could easily have portrayed myself in the role of care worker accompanying two psychiatric patients on day release: they helpless yet heedless to my guiding hand – without the physical means in fact to be here at all: no transport, no money, no cigarettes, although these last effortlessly blagged from hapless solitary drinker, from young mother with pushchair at bus stop. Every unsatisfactory transaction rendered more so by the clutch of dirty coppers proffered in exchange for the scrounged item.

But this was later, back in the small December town that smelt of coal tar, leaf mould, melted butter – or some plausible substitute.

I was reduced that day, felt impossibly insignificant; within the scene little more than a punctuation mark placed between these two ebullient Alphas. And I wondered about my other self that might have been with you there instead. Taking a more leisurely

path through the trees, we could have foraged together, kicking through the fallen leaves in silence for the things that you needed. Drifting like smoke perhaps, yes.

—You know what I think? That this was the hasty burial of an exiled renegade nobleman, an outsider, I venture.

They stare in my direction for a moment as a crow scarer lets out another flaccid bang – Pinkman’s phrase this time.

*

The accepted thesis, Foales insists, points to Raedwald, whose great hall may have stood nearby in the depths of the forest and whose baptism by the Gregorian mission paved the way for Roman authority to validate the royal line, while also protecting the newly developing Christian establishment within his own kingdom.

He ruled according to the first written English law, established by his father and inscribed in a distant unspoken tongue. In it, his own talionic impulses for bloody retribution were modified. For the first time, it defined the value of human life in terms of money: for the level of compensation to be paid according to social status for a killing or a ransom. An eye for an eye no longer, but perhaps for a ruby, a tooth for a glittering coin.

Animated by Foales' account, Pinkman now describes the chamber in which the forgotten king had lain, containing he says, not only work of local craftsmen depicting animals and birds, but treasure from far off lands stamped with a new mathematical language of signs – not quite yet to be described as Koranic – that nonetheless translates nature into formal structured hierarchical patterns, these entwined with the clumsy asymmetry of beasts summoned from the darker latitudes of pagan imagination, from Raedwald's own world.

But, in accordance with his own recent holy affiliations, in the spaces between the fishes and the dragons and the stags and the impossibly filigreed strands of woven gold, simple graven crosses start to emerge – though the gold holds sway, its worth both sacred, and embodied in the monetary value of flesh and blood. Even beyond the grave, says Pinkman, the corners of his mouth by now rimed with spittle, material possession cannot yet be so easily renounced. And to Foales' laughter: this was indeed a tomb fit for a cyng!

*

He could almost see the approach of the ship as it clears the last loop in the river, its shallow keel gliding over the unchannelled mirrored flats with barely a ripple. The waiting tomb behind him would now be in clear view,

surmounting everything else in the landscape, pressed out from the swaying forest that itself reached to the shores of the sea some miles distant, where it broke suddenly upon the chafing dunes and the sweeping bay locked in by its shoals and shifting treacherous banks. They would have prepared the mound in advance, he thought; have cut a straight sloping run down through the beech and alder brake, into the reeds that fringed the muddy shore, to haul up the ship with as little delay as possible, under cover of darkness perhaps, to set the ticking spell of forgetting in motion, seal it in smoke, in torch-lit silence: the great ship lost in the hill.

And indeed, night was already falling, and soon the contours of the surrounding hills would be studded with the trceries of a thousand torches, beacons; blazing back into the silt-pocked tide, the drowning sky.

The air is turning chilly. He gathers together his great canvas bag of treasures, his day's bits and bobs, and starts back, down towards the house.

June 27th, Granada

An eye blinks in the dark. It must be close to dawn. The silence still velvet black. Surface. Depth. A series of syllables bob around inside your head: IN.. OC.. CU.. LAR.. CULLAR.. OCULAR.. They swirl and combine in one blissful essence at a point that spreads downward from the back of the neck, buries itself in the small of the back.

Sleep. Do you sleep? Does this spreading tissue of light happen in real or accelerated dreamtime? Thin breath as if at altitude. Daybreak – like... like a frozen needle buried somewhere amidst the bedclothes! Your sudden darting pulse is at once drum-tight as you hear the waiting engine now ticking beneath the sill and you look around the featureless room in panic, alarmed at the wreckage strewn about that constitutes nothing but a disassembled version of something that once, until only recently in fact (when was it?), you called your *self*.

Pero, tranquilo, hijo! Tranquillo... Just relax, lad, why don't you.

You've been thinking about the street again, Calle Navas. Granada. How many times had you woken in that street as a visitor, years before – four, five, half a dozen times? Never the same room.

As a street, Calle Navas has a certain charm, but may not strike the observer as anything unduly remarkable. At least it often seemed that way as you hurried home... But let's consider this a little more carefully. Being a pedestrian street its rhythm is somewhat different to its neighbours whose fomy daytime somnambulant air, or indifferent and empty after-hours routine conform to a less human ebb and flow.

In fact, Calle Navas works to an opposing pattern – a variable resistor in the circuitry of adjoining streets. For most of the morning little seems to stir – the odd delivery to premises that half-heartedly open their shutters around ten; the inevitable *farmacia*, source of essential chemical succour on every street corner. A luthier's shop window proffers illusive gifts to earnest foreign would-be *flamencos*, already fidgeting at the shuttered doorway, who have often devoted whole careers to trying to capture without success that slippery essence to the music which the locals nonchalantly and unjealously retain and refer to as *duende*.

Kiosk-like bars administer thimbles of soupy coffee and rounds of toast laden with tomato and oil to would-be workers who seem in no hurry to be anywhere. Amongst them I notice the guitar shop owner, locked in debate over some issue or other, oblivious to his eager would-be customers waiting impatiently a few steps away. During the long winters these tiled alcoves are

chilly, comfortless places, in the summer they are places to linger and, if that is what you strolled down here for, to dream through a finger-flickering Bulerías.

And later, in a different life, on your way home you have strolled or hurried along that street too often to count. Your problem is this: between the visitor that wakes each time in a different room, and the person who strolls or hurries *home*, there is a gulf you have yet to reconcile. An unbridgeable, shall we call it, dichotomy? Yes, yes, that's it.

Y esto te da mucha cosa, hijo?

You bet it does. It bugs me like hell – me da indeed mucha cosa.

And you look at me with that look, barely trying to hide your curiosity. You look away, pretending to stare into middle distance. Then, without turning your head, you twist your eyeballs round as far as they will go, to observe me undetected. But you cannot maintain the pose, and as I turn to you I catch you in the act. And we fall about.

In these thoughts, we fall about.

At last he had reached the house, which lay by now in total darkness. He groped his [way] through the rear garden, almost colliding with the brick surround of the well to arrive at the back door, where he deposited his day's catch of beachcombing and pickings from the forest floor. The blood throbbed in his head from the march back along the towpath and the exertion of shouldering the heavy bag of driftwood and other debris. As had become his custom, he entered the house without turning on the light, throwing his head back to absorb the force of the interior's peculiar massy blackness that engulfed him like a great breaking wave as the door closed behind him.

For some time now, since starting back along the towpath, he had been conducting a conversation between himself and that voice with its almost imperceptible echo, that might one day soon, he thought, drive him to distraction. As he moved more gingerly now down the corridor the voice became a kind of prickly silver light that scratched at the corners of his eyeballs, as if the sound had somehow transformed itself from one kind of energy into another – but which nevertheless he found he could understand with perfect clarity:

—Pomegranate seeds, Foals was saying, adopting a stage whisper, actually garnets from Constantinople, tossed back into the cold unsympathetic clays as valueless glass by the old ploughman.”

—You see this? The voice coming from a different direction now. Many of the dagger hilts use the same design – starburst millefiori. From Persia!

—And look here. Silver escutcheons, wrought with the delicacy of embroidered cloth. Eastern, you think? No, he hisses. *Wisbech!*

And Pinkman now, in hushed mock-gothic tones.

—Walk into the heart of the oaken ship, its dream-room for a sleeping king, nested there amongst the ribs and strakes; the clustered frame. And in amongst the innards of the ship, a fair bed!

—Shhh... You’ll wake the king!”

—Your despair, Jons, is caused by your inability to properly *incorporate* all that you perceive around you. See how the gold about you writhes...

But the king is already awake, and when he speaks, without stirring from his rigid pose, his voice is gently curdled by a low burr:

—This is a story of the earth, Jöns, – not one that merely relates to its surface, but a riddled warren of dark subterranean energies, the inverse

of the living natural world above. This should come as no surprise. We've all been here before...

... you say that this was the burial of an exiled king – hastily laid to rest amidst his assembled plunder on the fringes of an alien land.

In a sense, you were right. The emblems and symbols that you see around you are the instruments for this negotiation between worlds, between your world and mine, between the story that you believe, and the story I am still even now wont to trust.

Think how we come to this place? I came by sea. Others have tunnelled through sand. Which way would you choose, Jöns?"

Silence descends for a moment as this information is digested. When the king speaks again his tone is less ponderous.

—Tell me, he said, what became of the groundsman here? The one who drove the brown Allegro – of English Ley Land... The last that I knew of him he was trimming the gorse somewhere there just above my feet. Then he was gone. At a great pace I sensed, from the thunder of hollowed iron that reached me through the earth. It's just that I seem to be missing a toe ring...

30th October

I am reaching the end of Spain. Take that any way you wish: my curiosity spent; a finger of empty rock pointing to a near but alien shore. Well, no, I'm not quite at the end in the way you were thinking – or perhaps hoping – still more to do on that front, I'm afraid. I mean I am physically one or two steps away from the Orient. The languid dream or the racing pulse. Why not have a blend of both? Fancy coming along?

Wouldn't be the first time Spain got used as a stepping off point towards the orient – heading west to get east, that old trick.

And as you press on through the artifice, do you not wonder at the familiarity you find on every corner?

We would keep on walking, out into the valley of El Darro, towards the frozen peaks that were once called the *Mons Solis, Mountains of the Sun*. You would/will not have to travel far to reach them. This city has no suburbs but ends abruptly at the banks of the river. The last buildings seem precariously bent over the milky mountain waters as if pushed from behind by their neighbours in a suddenly halted headlong rush. And in the inverted topography of this space, the mountains are much closer than they appear,

placed under some hazy ancient spell that seems to render them inaccessible. An unapproachable, beatific image that bears the almost imperceptible scars of some past malevolence. Mountains forever locked within a murdered poet's dream.

How often is the observer – I know it is not only me: I sense it in the streets that fall beneath these mountains' shadow, in the busy restless streets that fall suddenly silent at certain times of the day – stricken with that sadness that comes from the realization that such beauty cannot be incorporated, that the duality between the inner and outer world must remain intact if one is to continue living, and why finally every [Moorish] king, surveying those mountains from his opulent fastness within the city itself, had longed for nothing but his own death. Because each day in this city is like a working through of something – as if each of its elements has been presented to the mind as a riddle to be solved, the words of a garbled sentence to be rearranged. And people fret without realising why they are fretting, become inquieto without realising their subconscious is working on the solution and failing to find it. And then there are those who fall silent.

But within four hours you could be standing aloft at some midway point, looking down on the plains of La Vega below you, whose orchards once extended from beyond the horizon to the very walls of the city gently raised upon its three hills to your left. It was through these dense endless groves, of pomegranate, lemon, persimmon, plum, that Isabel the Catholic's hoards had

dragged their cumbersome machinery of war, where Boabdil, the last Moorish king, had looked on from the walls of his fortress knowing that beneath that green canopy below a vast unseen army laboured, harried relentlessly by his archers hidden amongst the trees, but nonetheless pressing on with grim force through the rotting unharvested fruit towards the outer fortifications.

The city is flanked on three sides by mountains, but to the west extends a broad plain known simply as La Vega. They say that beneath the plain of lies a great subterranean sea, and along its shores, its sulphur reaches, swarms of bats wheel like negative monochrome gulls to feed on shoals of blind anaemic fish as they flip into the fetid air, and that here and there fissures in the rock cause rays of light to penetrate the darkness as a mariner might witness the rays of the moon penetrating through the clouds of a storm laden sky at dusk.

Thinking of those old myths, in their modern telling, one is never fully aware of a landscape, the protagonists themselves obscure their own backdrop, are too present in the foreground, there is not enough room left in the frame. They move too quickly for us to examine the traces that they leave behind. But these stories were once rooted in landscape – its features, its textures, were fused into the utterance of every word. The story was necessarily a response to the landscape in which it took place, and thus represented an imprint of it, woven from the rhythms of human speech, human action. Later artists

struggled for centuries to remind us that this could again be so, as preponderant Madonnas were prised from their tightly fitting panels and dropped back into some quiet corner of a teeming field. It perhaps began with the anguished faces of Giotto's frowning saints, alien figures in foreign lands, counterpoised by the promise of distant dreaming surely familiar hills. But the terrain through which these represented beings wandered had now become allegorical, a language of signs. The embodiment in landscape contemplated by the originating myth had been lost to textualised abstractions.

Pinkman's pen hovers for a moment above the page. A copper light extruded through the leaves that scratch plaintively at the window which frames him. The window which frames him and is now blank.

There is nothing left in the frame.

March 19th

Too much time in this place – the air thick with it. I start writing to you – but look what happens! I become the person I oppose. This is not me writing but him. Nevertheless, I continue – believing in what – a kind of exorcism? A record then. Now let me disappear... These diaries will save me,

I know. The thought of them, their writing, I cast around me like a protective spell. They will save me I know. A protective spell. Safe. Sí, sí... así es.

The house still in darkness, he awoke to the sound of water, at least, that's what he had imagined; water that ran gurgling along channels that zigzagged down a parched and withered hillside. Blearily he found his way down through the sleeping house and into the kitchen's wheeling constellation of gadgets that winked out at him into the blackness.

Feeling for a chair he plumped himself down to listen. Bright combinations of numbers from various digital timers floated about him, seeming to make the darkness still more complete, but the sound of running water that had percolated through his dreams had disappeared, only the purr of the fridge, reminding him of when as a child of six or seven he would often creep down sleepless into the kitchen, clamber onto the tall fridge, and in the warmth that emanated from its rear, snuggle up next to the high window, press his forehead against the cold glass and watch out for the intermittent approach of container lorries that he had been told were heading for the nearby port, sweeping past like clattering comets as they ploughed through the night in a miraculous rush of air and light, causing the cold glass against his cheek to judder thrillingly, before they vanished quickly into silence.

He wondered, even then, why he had so often been unable to sleep, so eager to break the boundaries of his childhood curfew. An early indication, perhaps, of the restlessness that, he now saw, had doggedly pursued him all his life. He had rarely been openly rebellious, but heedless always to imposed limits. Later, at school he had become the trickster, the one who always, somehow, got away with it.

Shifting in his chair he thought about returning to his bed, but he was fully awake now. Time, he decided, to review the situation, to consider the story so far. He reached for the small reading lamp which he remembered had been placed on the table next to where he sat, but the bulb appeared to have gone. Reluctantly, he got up from his chair and located the wall switch, breaking the kitchen's spell as the room flooded with hard fluorescent light. Returning to the table he picked up his notebook, glanced up at one of the blinking timer displays, and began to write.

27th October. Evening

Outside from the street far below the rumour of traffic. Trying to finish that piece on Granada but am rather distracted. I like that word *rumour* – the way in resonates – oscillates – between the English sense and its Latin roots: there’s both a concordance and a disruption. I like that. Will have to use it – but that’s a word you can only use once. Ancient, poetic, and in a piece of contemporary English prose, instantly disposable. Strange how that works. Guess the world is full of rumour. Rumour heaped upon rumour. My enthusiasm for the word is starting to wain already. I wonder how Italians feel about it? If your language has a word for noise that actually *sounds* quite nice, does that alter your feelings about noise? *Rumore, rumore, rumore...*

Whereas *pettegolezzi*, on the other hand, is something definitely best avoided: all those “circulating voices”, those *circolano voci*.

That’s one thing about all this travelling and writing on the hoof. You can’t just reach for the etymological dictionary whenever the whim takes you. Considered carrying one once, but the thing weighed a ton. Only solution is not to appear too clever – drop things in by all means – but sweep around the

traces a little, cover your tracks, – always give it some space so that you can claim you skewed the meaning a little for ironic impact – never overcommit to a word or some bugger will always catch you out. If you really want to know about a word, all you can really do is return to the source – ask someone. It's amazing actually, how often barmen can be of use in this regard. They usually have an opinion at least. Even if they are completely off the mark, they can lend a word a certain atmosphere, and maybe that's what counts in my line. A shrug, or a look of contempt can attach itself to a word forever. I'll have to ask my pal P. He usually manages to steer things in the right direct – at least he'll have a view. I pass through his establishment perhaps three times a year, and because of this, unlike the distain awarded to his regulars, he greets me like an old friend.

Anyway. The problem of you remains. It's a shame in a way you can't just read this. Might make things clearer. However, on reflection it's probably best that you don't. Not that there are any unsightly revelations. Amongst my imagined readership is my dear departed mother who continues to sanction me from the grave. You would be surprised to see how rarely this edited version of me uses bad language, for example.

But all in all, I prefer that you have the version I have already given you – although I have to say I often come away feeling that to be a little tepid. I think this is why I send you these notes, these little imagined asides: let's

just call them allegorical representations of an inner life whose outer expression does not come too easily.

So in fact you get two versions, the walking talking one and the mythologised one, neither of which stand for much on their own. What happens as you toggle between them, I wonder – does something *unspoken* emerge? Is the essence of things in fact a residue – the dripping sap, the by-product created by the conjunction of different processes, something that usually goes unnoticed?

Don't know why I'm suddenly adopting this confessional tone, when all I'm doing is talking to myself. Actually, that last bit I think you would have liked – maybe I can incorporate it into one of my allegorical asides. But the way things are going with you recently I suspect things could start to get a bit confusing. Maybe I should start paying more attention to the “tepid” version, the one that doesn't get written down, to observe what naturally emerges, rather than what is *delivered*. But then it occurs that maybe that is what is being written down by you, in *your* head...

For the record, lest *I* forget, or before I lose it, I'll put down here the last actual note I wrote you. If you remember, it is a continuation from the previous one. This you will have read. Call it allegory. Call it nonsense. Call it what you will. Seems a little odd now, but I remember the whole thing was triggered by something you send me, entitled, “Written in the hope that this

will never be read". Your letter was very moving, very revealing, made me realise what I was getting into, or rather out of. But for the life of me I can't think what I did with it.

But I think I was trying to respond in a light tone while trying to say something more serious. This is what came out by way of response – a little bit bizarre, I find myself thinking, that I should include here this actual note as if it were an imagined one you will never read, when it is in fact something you have already read... I suppose the context is changed, or denied, or somehow neutralised by all the other contexts that got in between – and that changes everything.

*

You forget that I have just been kitted out with new reading glasses, and that under the terms of the Buy One Get One Free deal, I have opted for a second pair of x ray specs that the salesman claims will allow me to see round corners, through walls, into the osmotic systems of ancient trees, and into the heart of the one who claims to be a stranger. All this for only £9.99 extra, and including an anti glare coating. Above all, they will, he says, allow me to see into the white space that lies between the lines of what is said or written. So, one way or another, throwing out letters in the hope that they won't properly be read was never going to be an option.

But I begin to suspect that I have been sold yet another gimmick, that the lenses are nothing more than standard ones with an unusual tint – that already I could read between the lines, peer into the white space if I wished to – the only requirement was a little faith. So I am thinking of returning them, and wonder perhaps if he might offer instead some advice. He did seem, when all is said and done, a worldly type. Would he be able to suggest, then, a cure for the emptiness that no one, however loved or loving, has ever touched...?

He smiles sadly. At first, I think he is going to point me in the direction of Boots across the street, which, after all, is currently doing some very good Buy Two Get the Third Half Price deals. But instead he reaches under the counter and pulls out a small brass telescope, the kind a mariner might once have used. He shrugs, half embarrassed. I am an optician, you know. Take this, it's on the house – you're going to need it. These new BOGOF deals are all very well, but I don't think they have a future – the public are cannier than that. But that girl, the troublesome one, she's waiting on the shore – we don't yet know for what or even for whom, but you better get started, there's a long way still to go. With that he turns and is soon lost within the dim confines at the back of the shop.

You had laughed, you said. You sap, you said. The girl waiting on the shore indeed! And when you said laughed, you used that elongated vowel sound, that slight west country burr that occasionally you let slip back into your voice that lets me know you are real.

It is evening. The street is alive with rumour. But I have sap on the brain. Sap, sapper, sapped, sapling, sap. I will go down and consult P behind the bar. He'll have a view.

I am trying to jot things down before the images fade, yet already the faces are gone. Some characters are gesticulating on a line sketched in at middle distance, their form resembles that of a fencer, not the swarthy burlesque cavalier, but the suited-up dualist, the white plastic slender figure whose only sign of personality are a limited series of pre-rehearsed choreographed movements. One such approached me on a corner, had something it needed to say. But that is the only real impression I retain, the sense of their urge to speak, to convey – the contents of which is now lost. It is that urgency beyond will, unstoppable as muscular reflex, that remains.

In the diary, you seem to remember having read that the air at that hour is the colour of a mellow Muscat wine, before the relentless hammer of the sun beats down everything to dust bright flatness. And that, at the far end of the street, framed between the leaning balconies, there is a mountain...

At this point you pause. There is a mountain, yes, in that direction – the highest in the country. Its peak you feel is framed by the end of the street.

But can it really be seen from there? Must you always find your bearings from these distant points which are as mutable and shifting as the tides? And how can it be that amidst the litter of objects, other peoples' "remembrances", and the sensations of other places that drift into the space of your thoughts like the smoke from a just extinguished candle, that within all this there is *you* as the common factor? The eye that blinks in the dark that you had imagined belonged to some other extrapolation that lay somewhere outside, between the self and some external shadowy existence, is it in fact merely your own, guttering beneath the closed lids of another lost afternoon on the sun-drenched hillside.

That is why you find yourself longing to know what will happen next, barely it seems aware that this is something that you yourself will determine, that it cannot just be *thought out*, spun from this spool of rough sensation and gathered in, clutched at memories – not that alone. You must rise first from the chair to initiate the sequence, pausing no doubt for a long moment at the window, that intermediate holding zone between thought and actuality in which your half-mirrored image already blends with that which waits beyond the pane.

Jons – allow me to interject yet again. No doubt I am becoming tiresome. But things are playing on my imagination, playing out in my thoughts. Let it lie, says Foales. I say *Foales*... Foales insisting on the 3rd person recently... But somewhere ahead of us, somewhere in the future, words, ideas, expressions of our innermost identity, are on a collision course with materiality: that oft referred to collision perhaps of showing and telling. First, we will prove it on paper, a poem or two, then a tract, a mathematical formula perhaps. Next, it becomes real.

And Foales also, whose mind had been by no means idle, had wondered if it could be possible to live a life entirely contrary to the psychic interconnection of archetypal symbols that underlie it? To live by acting, and making conscious choices that are moving continually against the flow of the unconscious? This question suggests that the consciousness is preformed, a fated entity, rather than constructed from the ongoing accumulation of the matter of our existence, or that it exists outside any dialogical relationship with the conscious mind.

I used to think that, no matter how a place acts at a given moment on the senses – the wind blowing across the estuary, touching your skin, the tang of the mud, the warm slanting October sunlight – the intensity of that moment refers to something else which is not present – as you are not present – the self in fact is found elsewhere. And where does that leave consciousness, I ask myself?

Like the best friendships – those which encompass a kind of dissonance, an awkwardness never quite resolved – these are also the

kind of friendships most easily abandoned because they require the most effort to maintain, and appear to yield up little in the way of comfort or recognition at the time – but something is being “worked out”, a grinding process of self-assessment whose results may one day be realised. I see myself writing to you; I see your father writing to.... whoever it might be, and I wonder if we are really speaking the same language. Yet I know that in this very disconnect there lies the answer to something beyond both the speaker and the listener.

You will think it strange, but in the mystery surrounding your father’s whereabouts, his movements and motives, I have come to understand something about myself, freed from a kind of gravity of knowledge. Your mother also spoke of him in this way – as if the actual weight of his presence was too much, in itself unreal.

Always I would awake from the swimming dream, she said – from what she would describe as a sense of impending suffocation, and of a kind of heavy debilitating buoyancy, into the thin air. Only then, on waking did I gasp for air, my mind “flailing about in in the light”, was how she put it.

But for the most part, the sun, when it shone, with its vapid accompanying ether, felt high and remote above our heads. We felt closer to the earth than many, sunk into some thick temperate/glutinous zone that lay close to its surface, emerging only for our act (when they entered the room it was always as if from behind a curtain, looking around them to quickly take in their potential audience) into a place that left us lightheaded.

At least, that is how I interpreted her words. Look for it in the notes. See what *you* think.

That is how I fell, how we all fell.

There can be few people who are able to dip in and out of different worlds as I was then able. Do forgive my lack of modesty in the matter.

I know it's the done thing to strike out, put yourself about out there, There was a time when the term *carpe diem* was the not just preserve of that small privately educated elite who would stride purposefully out to apply its methods to the rugby field, or to having an interesting social life, or to doing creative things with shells on beach holidays with their children, or to getting stinking rich in the City; but these days it feels like the whole world is obsessed by the concept, in fact they're so wrapped up in carping their diem, their own little corner of it, that they fail to notice anything about the world around them. A little more *cogita diem*, a little more *umbilicum spectans*, please!

Anyway, I'd spent a lifetime doing that: endlessly searching for some elusive something – recording, voiceless behind the eye's wide panning lens, the panoramas, the close-ups, the endless breathless single take, that always inevitably is bent inwards by desire, is refracted inwards so that the camera eye now stares unblinking, obsessed, at its own images as they are projected onto the screen of the self.

And when you rise up again, into the bright turning world, you reveal yourself from beneath the caul of the camera's focusing hood, white-eyed and purblind, gazing like a fool at the sun.

Wishing to escape this fate, therefore, I have retreated to the cutting room to edit the footage. The shutters are drawn and the slippers are on and the cat competes with the projector's purr and scrivenings litter the floor like turnings from a lathe. And the coffee is hot and sweet and

burns the tongue and the now remembered sun burns and burns and
burns. ...

We cross the bridge to the island, a neat sugarloaf covered with dense dark vegetation through which at several points architectural structures, whose function is as yet unclear, emerge, hybrid structures of no known style, the kind you only find on islands, as if the architect had never set foot on or seen anything from the mainland, created something from what he or she vaguely remembered having been told. The bridge delivers you up to a kind of central crease in the island's rising mass, now lined with small wooden shops selling brittle trinkets garnered from the sea. Other establishments offer steaming bowls of obscure marine delicacies or platters of artfully arranged fish, more familiar. Yet, always in you I am aware of a discomfort, a certain wariness – you were born in the remade city, and when you encounter these “heritage sites” you enter into a carefully staged conversation with them as if you are addressing an old decrepit relative. You are hesitant in your manner, overly polite. Because here there is no connect between the city and the country, no easy transition, no way back. You have evolved into a different species, adapted for survival in that space between the present perfect and the near future. Wherever you find yourself, you are custodian of the moment,

orphaned from the past, but also released from its duty of care, can patronise at will.

As this narrow cobbled street ascends you are thus wilfully detained for an hour or so from the labyrinth of paths that dive into the forest above, where the cobbles give way to mossy stone steps heading off in various directions to the farther parts of the island. This forest, not quite temperate, not quite tropical, gives the sensation as so often here of being not quite indoors but under glass. This is a contained, artificial reality, and the air is damp and thick, yet cooling like in a cheaply air-conditioned room. At points the steep paths loop out onto rocky bluffs and a torpid grey sea presents itself, its horizons smudged in mist. As you stand there an occasional barely perceptible drift in the air puffs at your skin with new heat. The trance is pierced by the unexpected appearance of a great hawk wheeling amidst the eddies of the cliff, its eye near as it regards you carefully. Spaniel brown and suddenly real, large enough to carry off an island goat, it now propels itself upwards and back out of vision behind the sharp lee of the hill.

The path descends onto a platform of rock surrounded on three sides by the sea. It is as if the whole island had once been scraped off to one side, leaving the stump of its single tongue-like root exposed. Brackish pools furred with ribboned weed dot this expanse, probably the accumulated spray from recent storms. The surface of the rock itself is sinewy, veined, its features

worn, rounded down, aircraft grey, yet still course to the touch like emery cloth. Swarms of sand fleas scurry to and flow like microscopic herds of bison across a model plain. The rock meets the sea at a low cliff where short quick waves slop noisily into scooped hollows and jagged holes, withdrawing with a sinister foaming hiss.

*

Later, in recurring dreams, he would find himself wading chest deep through what he took to be that same sea, stormy now, grey like fabric as before. Close by, a steeply rising muddy beach, but the waters, engorged and threatening, will surely overwhelm him at any moment. Protruding through the waves at intervals, he becomes aware of peculiarly formed mounds of mud, moulded into bizarre shapes by the waves like squeezed potter's clay. He is struck by their surface, slimy-smooth. Towards these, he is somewhat relieved to see, other waders gravitate – dark forms, arms stretched upwards. So, he is not to face the storm alone after all. Each mound, the other waders tell him, somehow managing to communicate without effort over the roar of the mounting surf, has a very specific and specialised name that only the initiated are privy to. Back on dry land, in an old shack used it seems for social occasions, he shares his experience with others who were out doing the same,

although he does not recognise any of the waders he saw before. Never did he feel any sense of danger out there, conscious only of the air of conviviality amongst those who had joined him there in the dark water. Smiling, affable, he minces ginger for a meal that is being prepared, onto a white plate that seems too large for the purpose. He thinks about this as he walks down a long straight road that passes through a long straight village in the near rain – he thinks about the affable crowd in the shack, the warm buzz of voices as the communal meal is being prepared, the voices that he felt had somehow saved him from the threat posed by the waves – not through any physical intervention, but simply by the fact they were there, indicating that he was not alone, as if the act of the prepared meal resonated outwards, deflecting any threat posed by the sea. He passes a large timber-framed house, obviously derelict, its white paint flaking and powdery. The entrance is set into a deep alcove with an old oak door to one side, beside which has been placed a large green jerry can. Looking down at his feet, he notices skeletal leaves, blackened with moisture, their fibres spent, slowly sucked back into the freshly turned melting earth. A pool ends the fading imprint of a brambled path. Starting fish bomb through above the cold weir as, waiting, he listens straining for the sound of a clock, anything, please... he thinks. And everywhere now, water dribbles or gushes along its stubborn course.

And now the dream has turned. Watching through the window in the still grey moonlight that dapples everything within – cold patterns of sickle leaves that are no more than shadows of shadows – you could see it registering on his face, if you knew him that is, because his face does not change.

He is deep in. No longer aware that he is dreaming. That freedom of space has vanished, a space that is inconsequential, because it holds acts that themselves have no consequence, that float free of the gravity of consequence. Instead he walks in a cool prescient reality where everything hinges on what happens next. He passes the doorway again, the house. And again he passes, keeps passing the door set in its alcove, although his feet remain fixed – it is the house that is spooling past, over and over. He knows now that back along the road that he has just come, over the ridge and into the next valley, densely wooded, that sweeps down to the estuary is a house where someone is sleeping, dreaming in a too pristine room. He can see their face deathlike in the grey light. He stares at the house before him, the short unkempt path leading to the heavy door. The clouds are laden with rain that might start to fall at any second, he must find shelter, and as he looks up he notices that half the roof is missing, torn away to reveal severed horizontal lathes that poke out into the sky like bones from receding flesh. He winces as he feels the sharp bones, fish bones, sticking in his flesh, in his throat. And at each take of the restless image of the house that stands before him he notices another sign of

dereliction: the windows he sees are frameless, boarded up from within; the gutter twists and sags. He is in the garden, the old apple tree *twists and sags*. How old can it be? The stream beyond it runs through a deep cleft in the long grass and disappears beneath a crumbling wooden building attached to the house, and his heart is beating, and he has an abstracted sense of his own breathing, as if someone is breathing for him. Beyond the building he knows there is a pool and his heart is beating against its thick stillness, its heavy quiet. He can hear the weir again. The starting fish beneath its white comb. He feels comfort also – that he knows – that the pool and the weir are there, on the other side – comfort like a sleep against the beating stillness that, because he knows, he does not have to go and look.

But the valley, which he realises is little more than a broad bowl with the stream running through between high rising banks of what he recognises as bracken, is filling with water. He cannot tell how this is happening, but the water is already creeping up over the grass which has become sodden beneath his feet. Soon it will reach over the windows of the house, or the openings where the windows used to be. He can see weed hanging from the slots in the brickwork on the upper storey that once held the wooden sills. He looks up again through the greenish light at the surface of the gently swirling water, the house suddenly massive beside him impossibly blurred by silt. He feels no panic. Someone is breathing for him. But there is a dim fear yes – that close

by there is a darkness that must spread and invade and merge with this greenish light – that these two things can no longer be separate and contained.

The breathing subsides, falters. Resumes as before.

I choose my words carefully. Because I have grown suspicious, wary, cautious of what might follow, of what I might lead myself to believe, how I might act even, or what in error I might attempt to create.

Because I confess I am swimming against the current, little by little loosing ground, driven back by the shear weight and volume of the relentless tide that is always advancing, threatening to overwhelm at any moment.

Until you reach that point where its surface expands exponentially, the silence shattering across the boiling chord of the wave, its implacable, flailing will. Your arms flailing, as you fall. At that moment when you thought you would be suffocated, crushed, you find yourself instead falling through empty space.

And he starts to suspect that amidst these half thoughts and sketched impressions his mind is growing soft, his ability to give structure or definition to the outside world dimmed as if by some premature old age, as the possibility for a clarity is slowly engulfed by memories that reconstruct pale delicate trceries, skeletal insubstantial worlds formed from rods of ash that as soon dissolve upon contact with the brackish bubble pocked waters that creep twice daily – twice daily across the clinging strand whose vast emptiness seems now to suggest everything that ever was or ever could be.

You are hardly surprised by the distant figure you see wandering along the firmer gravel-lined channels at low tide...

...when with a start I realise that it is only myself.

But for the moment he knows that he has no option but to go on. Each day he rises early to begin again in the hope that through repetition, the establishment of a rite, a form will emerge, the founding image will reveal itself.

Up with the birds, he finds that he can work solidly until mid-morning, at which point the craving for the smells and textures of the timber become too strong, and after a short break, eagerly makes his way to the outhouse, mounting the steps four at a time. Often he finds himself there with hardly a pause until dusk.

Having removed the shutters, the large sliding glass panels giving out to the gently rising wooded slopes to the west, and the flat endless expanse of salt marsh to the south, provide ample daylight until close before sunset, even on overcast days. The marsh itself, inscrutable and ever-changing, is dotted with numerous outposts of inviting surer ground; the pale crescent shaped toothy grins of shell banks, and here and there even small outcrops of alien looking rock, a kind of dark, striated sandstone, humpbacked and chined by wind and tide, each guarded by its own carefully graded circular beach of

brackish debris. And there are the curved tidal bands of driftwood so dense with flotsam that one can walk along them as easily as a purpose-built trail.

There seems so much space between the ground and the sky here. Great blocks of rising air maintain the cloud base miles high. The sea, some half mile distant, is clearly visible beyond the mouth of the estuary; never darkening, always in lighter shades of green or grey, not blue as you had imagined it. Even its storms are a pale bluster, bloodless and without meaning, another drama, played out beyond the dunes. There are many places out there which he has yet to explore on foot, although in the notes he finds descriptions which lead him there all the same. He reads, and concurs with what he reads, that while the skies are vast, and of limitless depth, the land itself, everything about this landscape in fact, is on a smaller scale here, amplifying anything human, or placed by human hand. The cliffs are only a few feet high, making of any figures that ambled along their tops giants; the flint-locked church tower still perfect and inexplicably massive rising out of its own ruins seems miles away when it is only a short walk. The trees which are stunted by the wind and whose canopies form dark elongated leaning dollops appear on the low skyline as stands of a larger species when in fact they are no more than the remnants of hedgerows, the fields they once contained long since been abandoned to the sea. The sea that buckles under the weight of itself, contained by a near horizon strung with waiting ships, where the land that it

gnaws at is never far off or far below. A soupy sea, thick with shredded weed and blooming remorseless cloud.

And in the lion month the sea on those August nights is a sheet of fluorescence, as if the radiant energy and the algae that produced it was naturally attracted to the radioactivity now contained once again within the plant – or a memory of it, a trace, a hologram from a quantum world.

The building in which he is starting to spend so much time resembles a lookout station, raised as it is on stilts, but with the proportions of a small warehouse, its ceiling extending up to the gables with large storage bays along the two walls that are without windows. And now that the light has been allowed back in, the room has lost its earlier dankness.

It might seem strange perhaps that with such a panorama before him he should use this space to become lost in the minutest detail just inches from his eyes.

And you start to wonder: as he glances up from his work and looks out over the marsh, what does he see? Does he make out its features, or are these encountered in his thoughts as already remembered events? How, in fact, do the eyes see, how do the hands touch? On his frequent walks, what takes place in real time and what in memory – what does he see out there?

He stares at the buoy. It is larger than himself, wedged into a crack in the low mud cliffs, still eggshell black and crisscrossed by lines of bolts and

rivets like a mine, trailing its weed-covered chain like a single awful tentacle. He taps it with his knuckle but the steel is so thick it produces barely a sound. From the window, it is a single black punctuating speck amidst the paler graded tones of the marsh. It is there always, each time he looks.

A brief window of sunlight.

The rising beach, the plumped up dunes make a suitable pillow, eyes scraped open against the prising light, head upon a numb arm, face inches from the sand, powdered bone or powdered shell flecked with iron or copper or gritty tempered glass, the pearly sperm grey grit spat from oysters, the bivalve, the twin-hearted clasp, not yet powder, not quite dust, the dry powder that feathers the shore, magnesium, still combustible, left by the unknown storms, gathering the footprints about them garlands of shadow paper strung into chains that hang from the lanterns night falling already thinking of a place you might stay a fire-lit well, comfort against the coming darkness an anemone of firelight against the wall. The bone-bleached branches burning, the hydra of upturned roots torn from the cliff burning, the salt popping and sparking, the joints cracking, domed umbrae of nerve endings melting flashing. All this in the still sun, the numb arm turning the blood tide returning.

Today he has uncovered a large desk from beneath stacks of spars and rods, boxes of iron and brass. Closely he examines its surface, which is as pale as sand, and notice the contours that stand out above the denser grain, which itself appears as the granular patterning left by sweeping winds. These contours, now that he looks at them more carefully, form the aerial profiles of ridges, gullies, and appear to link the scattered tumuli of knots which dot the landscape at intervals: dark thumbprints of seasonal concentric growth, focusing back to the seed.

He tries to read the topography with his fingers but the surface has been planed and sanded beyond smoothness, although here and there a faintly roughened zone indicates remnants of hillside brush, the low gnarled fragrant scrub of the sort favoured by sun-bleached limestone. The softly moulded forms of the valleys suggest the influence of once abundant water, which now hides like the cool promise of a jewelled hoard beneath the fractured mantle of overlying rock. However, it is the circular knots which hold his attention now, wide-eyed against the tightened grain.

The desk he determines to use to lay out his plans and sketches. It remains as yet unpolished, the surface still susceptible to knocks and scratches, stains from oil, ink or wine, its edges prone to fray into splinters that might catch your hand as you wrote, piercing the skin still as soft and vulnerable as itself. But to apply polish would be to render the timber suddenly

inert, to close it down beneath a film of glossy shellac that would freeze the grain in that very moment that it appeared to begin to live.

Still fascinated by the frowning circles he wets his finger, applying the spittle to the dense grain of the knot, and immediately it starts to flow with detail and colour. Quickly the moisture fades, absorbed into the bone-dry fibres as rapidly as a cup of water tipped into the midst of burning sand.

Yet, as he becomes lost in these things – which involve such close scrutiny that the space between his eye and the page might resemble a dense prism-like block, sealed totally from anything beyond it – it is somehow this landscape that surrounds him now and invades his working – the shapes and patterns he is creating, its shades and contours – have become inscribed in everything he does, a cipher with which to interpret other places he visits and revisits in the texts.

In the evenings, stiff and hungry, he creeps back down the steps and crosses the rear lawn overgrown with dock and bramble, passing the old well crowned by its rusting dilapidated gear, the heavy oak lid propped up against the side. He times his departure from the outhouse with the moment the generators kick in, so that as he approaches the house the whole place suddenly lights up before him. It is in that moment that the house, and its contents, seems to move from one world into another, or that the passage of many years, of a lifetime even, seems condensed into the blink of an eye.

And you tell yourself that this light emitted by the naked bulbs – tense, febrile – is preferable to the windows’ dark daylight gaze, whose answers you both seek and wish to avoid. You long to be awoken by their human voices, but know for the time being at least you must defer that moment, in favour of this stark artificial re-animated brightness.

Sleep comes quickly, the lights still burning, your dreams eager to seek out their own shadows.

He (Pinkman) carefully placed the cap back on his silver *Cross*, noting, with a touch of pride, as he often did, the engraved inscription on top *I, P.* With equal deliberation, he clipped the pen into the top pocket of his jacket where it sat like a gleaming pampered thing swathed in the silk of his kerchief.

At least, that was how he pictured the scene. But the cap of this specific pen, his favourite and most cherished pen, was missing. And he could not give up using it – the nib was worn to exactly the right pitch of his hand as he wrote, so that the ink flowed at precisely the right rate without the slightest hint of resistance as it touched the page. It was the only pen which made his handwriting legible, the only pen in fact which allowed him to be able to read back what he himself had written. In order to carry on using it he was thus obliged to wrap the nib in a small cloth to keep it moist, the kind used for cleaning spectacles – now black with all the ink that had bled out. Who would have thought the thing had so much *Quink* in it? Inevitably his fingers became stained each time he picked it up, as did the porous fibres of the improvised desk on which it sat, his own muddied prints soaking into the grain.

Had the pen retained its cap, his writing might have been more punctuated by pauses, short breaks amidst the writing, time away from the desk, more time to take a step outside, test the air, time to smoke an imaginary cigar perhaps. But whether it was though some vague superstition, that without its cap the ink would all bleed away, into the cloth, the desk, and all words cease; or whether it was due to the effort required to rewrap the nib each time, his writing sessions tended to be more drawn out than they would otherwise be, and it was not uncommon for him to come to at some ungodly hour, face smeared across the page, the pen still stabbing into the paper beside his nose, its smooth calcined surface now crazed with thick varicose lines.

June 7th

They wanted me to include a section on that wretched painting, so I thought I'd better go along and see it in situ. Must have been there a dozen times but never really thought about seeing it – there's so much else. But then the crowds! Do you remember the time we spent a whole day climbing that peak in the Sierra not seeing a soul, and when we got to the top busloads of tourists seem to have been parachuted in? Although heaven knows why they would bother with a parachute if they had a bus.

In this vast amalgam of palaces where pictures now sit in for kings, the galleries' carefully folded linear plan is useless. Instead, you walk through silent forgotten rooms, drawn despite yourself by a faint commotion ahead, the hum of life. Somewhere within this petrified hive of comfortless, garish marble there must be a swarming core. You mount flights of unworn steps, your path deflected at corners by huge gilt mirrors, by diagrams of waiting cities, of the grand unrealised schema of imagined battles, the intricate tinted detail of dissected impossible fruit. Turning through a broad doorway you enter at last the first thinly peopled room to find angels tumbling out of the sky, like buffeted troops parachuted in through the exploding air on their first outing, they are already losing that newfound sense of themselves, as the hot quick earth beckons, their limbs arcing out to claw at clouds, scrabbling for the shouting sun.

Was just thinking about the other day. You remember I was mumbling something about attempting to both put one's foot down and pull one's socks up at the same time – while nevertheless approaching the matter in hand on bended knee. Thus, I do not so much as mix my metaphors but smear them ordure-like across the floor or (holds the page vertically) wall of the page. I do not recall the matter in hand nor indeed the issue upon which the foot must be so forcibly put. Dog poo, by the sound of it. No, that would be putting one's foot *in it* – something one might inadvertently achieve if one weren't watchin' while pulling one's socks up. I think I've got it – it all depends really on whether I wished to approach the matter of putting one's foot down while simultaneously pulling one's socks up, or whether I was after a two-stage process, the latter course of action obviously inviting potential back problems, the former however requiring a degree of heron-like dexterity.

Enough. I sent you the second part of your story. You haven't responded yet. Don't ask me to explain it. It is presented here with a rather weak grin.

*

It was some weeks after my visit to the optician that I found myself, one bright September morning, at the small fish market that is held on Tuesdays on a piece of rough ground at the bottom of Nere Hill. My thoughts lately had been ranging over chalk escarpments, ancient forest, the glittering incisions of rivers – some quiet unspoken theme

had been woven amidst the hills, the twisting branches, the endlessly descending leaf stained waters, whose meaning meandered at will it seemed through my own attempts to express them. And I had yet to turn towards the sea...

I had just purchased a kilo of plaice and was loitering at another stall examining some scallops, which were on offer, when I felt a light tap on the shoulder. I turned and was surprised to discover the same neat rather portly salesman, the one who had furnished me with the telescope, smiling back at me. Behind the counter of the shop he had seemed in his element, a figure of trust, of a benign and insightful goodwill. But standing here now, in a rather overly chic, tightly buttoned raincoat in spite of the warm sunshine, he gave out a disturbingly incongruous air, as if wrongly projected into a scene belonging to another genre, one which at any moment he might inadvertently cause to come crashing down around him.

I saw that he too he was clutching a white carrier bag, clammy looking, the top of which was wound tightly around the plump fingers of his right hand.

—Haddock, he confessed, noticing my glance... Trevor's favourite...

...my cat, he explained after a slightly pregnant pause.

—Plaice. I displayed my own bag, eager to create a moment's camaraderie. He frowned, as if realising something for the first time.

—We seem to be a little landlocked this morning, sir, standing here clutching our fish!

He spoke these last words with an unexpected venom, and I was quite taken aback, finding myself temporarily unable to speak.

—But I...

—Listen, my friend. You spend your time scrambling through forests, panting up the sloping ground towards the clouds, but moving always deeper into the interior. The air is becoming thick and heavy and soon you will be unable to breathe. Head for the shore, my friend, head for the shore.

—But if I...

—Look, I do know, you know, about the ship you have constructed in your head – rather an odd looking craft, I'll admit – but nonetheless, fit for purpose I think – given that shipwreck is somewhat inevitable.

—Shipwreck...!

—You see, as I'm sure you're aware, her island possesses a subtle and delicate ecology. It simply wouldn't do to come blundering onto the beach – at least not intentionally...

—Not sure I follow...

—You'd have to wait out beyond the reefs. Ha! I can picture you now, out there night after night, little light bobbing in the swell. Trouble is, unsafe place to be. Sooner or later, you're going to end up on the beach – most likely clinging to a barrel and spouting seawater.

—Oh, I get it – then follows the next sequence: the footprint in the sand, the lone windswept figure waiting on the promontory, the haphazard improvised shack...

—With respect, I think you've been letting your reading go to your head a little. And speaking of reading, have you at least sent her the 2nd chapter?

I passed him the hastily scrawled sheet which he grabbed I thought somewhat too eagerly.

He began hungrily scanning the lines.

—You sent her this?

—Yes, I mumbled, well, about to...

—*Hmm. An initial reading would indicate a rather flippant approach to the matter in hand. And yet, and yet...*

He became lost in some private reverie of his own, allowing the sheet of paper to dangle limply from his hand where it fluttered in the breeze like a large wounded moth.

—*I detect an attempt towards a truth beyond the page, a movement towards an asymmetry, one in which the answer never quite fits the question – a wish to break with the empiricist’s illusion that language matches reality...*

He continued in this vein for some time, during which my mind I have to say did start to wander, and I was once again skimming, not for the first time I realised, over a pale polysemic sea that whispered and foamed. And in the distance, approaching at incredible speed, a line of gentle hills ringed by surf...

I cannot recall how our meeting ended on that bright September day at the fish market. But I remember thinking that this was all getting rather absurd, that today’s performance was starting to get a little too pompous for my liking.

Without further ceremony, I said my goodbyes and wandered off, back up the hill.

If I could just tell you.

She had watched the news reports with the same incredulity as everyone else, later running the footage back in her mind: the bedraggled figure that shuffled down the gangplank – the grey blanket drawn tightly around him like a protective cloak – as if that alone might protect him from... from further elemental persecution? Perhaps...

A mad prophet's cowl – yes, that's it. That was it.

Then, for a short time, he had worn what appeared a nervous grin through the Crusoe beard, and the news crews had grinned back: they, at the thought of their story; he at the squinting sun, and this new perplexing sea of voices that waited for him excitedly at the quayside.

But she wondered about the blank look in his eyes, and thought about the rolling ocean that could be made out in the distance over his shoulder, beyond the harbour and the breakwaters – its depths, its dancing roving crests that seemed to clutch out at the sky. The rolling ocean, she thought – which he had so narrowly, so audaciously cheated.

She had watched, turned wide-eyed to her wide-eyed colleagues. Events from the outside world did not often impact them in their small

isolated community. They were unaccustomed to the spectacle and fuss, which seemed only to occur in far off places. But now the cameras had turned to their own shores to record this bizarre event. All the world's commotion had reached them from beyond the hard blue wall of the horizon.

She shrugged, and got up to begin her shift.

And the next day there he was again. Propped up this time amidst cotton pillows, their starched coolness an impossible dream. His bare arms hung limply at his sides, his bandaged hands resting upturned on his lap as if in supplication. This room felt familiar, he had been here a hundred times in films. The sunlight, filtered by the blinds, no longer threatened. The tube in his wrist nourished him with peace. The hum of the machine at his side modulated and subdued the awful washing rhythms in his head.

Discreetly, she peered around the door so as not to disturb his rest, noting the stable readings on the small screen beside him. She noted too the eyes, which had changed again, from that earlier blankness, to the choppy pleading incoherence of the evening before – the shock of a beginning realisation, eyes hung with a mosaic of burning cloud – to something now that she could not quite fathom.

The bird the only stable pivot against the endlessly tilting floor of the sky where it met the sea.

He had needed fuel a beacon a means of making smoke. Thus he had put to fire, piece by piece, using an old galvanized tub for the purpose, the decking and superstructure of his tiny craft, so that towards the end the thing appeared to have been gnawed from above by some great beast. Torn to the very gunnels. The rib ends splintered and exposed.

The colour of the sea appalled him – this animal unfamiliar green, its phantom foaming races.

The heavy reel as it span whirring through his hopelessly chaffed and damaged hands became his one source of comfort, as he cast further and further out, the line, humming with life, the whipping wind, sang through the vigour of the catch just as before, as he laboured night and day, aware of the fickle nature of shoals such as these, ankle deep in writhing mirrors.

That, and the relentless buffeted bird, fixed in space just above him, slightly to port, the plumage of its pristine breast poked at by prying invisible fingers. But immovable as stone at the centre of his spinning world.

He had not needed to cast so far off, but dared not drop the line down into the shadows beside the boat, into that dark rippling mackerel light, for fear of meeting the face of his companion staring up at him from beneath. And when those fears became too great he would busy himself with the scrap of paper that he kept pinned to the inside of his shirt.

Slowly, however, as his broken fingers had succumbed, become useless, he could do little more than scabble around in the bilges, to scoop up and attempt to gut the remains of the previous bounty, and then to smoke it somehow, above the smouldering dismembered painted timbers that somehow he had managed to keep alight.

He had clung to her arm and spoken in a soft Spanish – they had agreed that it was Spanish – a language she did not anyway understand. His grip, his agitated state, belied the flow of words that rose and fell gently and uninterrupted from his mouth, his breath sweet with salt. These were not

imploring demands, or frantic questions, but rather gave the impression of a quietly though insistently recounted tale whose telling had begun long before the appropriate cue; and to her ears, this unknown tongue took on the sound of an extended chant, a mantra – for although she could not make out the meaning, she was aware of the manner in which he would pause and continue, pause and continue – the formation of a pattern, rendered without thought, without reflection.

A teacher from the local primary school was called for. Along with French, she gave some instruction in elementary Spanish, but when she arrived, all a flutter, pulled from her afternoon lesson, she was unable to decipher much of what he said; indeed, felt herself a little at sea without her recent wedding tweeds, which such an occasion with cameras surely warranted, and would have neatly defined for them her small sparrow-like frame.

A fisherman, he was a fisherman, little else. With her help, they asked him to write his name, his address, next of kin. But he looked at them blankly. Probably illiterate, they had decided. A simple fisherman.

It was afterwards, when the teacher and the reporters had left, that he had pressed the note into her hand, and later during her break she had unfolded the small slip of paper and sat quietly mouthing to herself the incomprehensible syllables:

Nos bordean las regiones inmensas de la muerte en vida – el océano, el desierto. Sabemos que de vida ocultada rebosan, pero a menos de que uno sea el elegido, el nómada iniciado, no rebosan para nosotros.

Compared to the torrent of words that had flowed from his mouth, this dry slip of paper with its few scribbled phrases felt incongruous, misplaced somehow. A colleague, overhearing her strange incantation, came over to see what she was reading:

Nos bord e-an las re Hee-on-es
in-men-sas de la mu-er-te en vi-da
- el os-e-ano, el des-i-er-to.
Sab-e-mos kay day vi-da oc-ul-ta-da re-bos-an,
day vi-da oc-ul-ta-da re-bos-an, (he turned this phrase over again
slowly in his mouth)
pero a men-os day kay u-no say-a
el el-e-Hee-do, el no-ma-do in-is-i-a-do
no re-bos-an para nos-o-tros...

A former student of the sparrow, he made a better job of the pronunciation, softening and extending the vowels as he remembered, breaking open the diphthongs – but corrugating the Gs to become gurgling peninsular Hs, instead of the gentler Js of the castaway. As for the meaning, however, he could spread little light. Something about life and death, he said, oceans, a desert perhaps. A love note, a poem? Nothing urgent, or that can help anything, at least. He gave it to you. I'd keep it.

He had left after the third class, he explained, but could see now how the constant drilling – the sounds, the syllables – had helped, had sunk in. But anyway he had left, impatient for meanings – yes, that was it: definitions, that's what he had really wanted.

On the second day, he awoke to the sound of a voice that he knew [could only be] to be his own, needle-pale and fluffed with static, [coming he suspected] from a radio in a distant ward. In his dreams [He imagined that] he had heard a name that resembled his [own] but supposed that this could not be the case.

He stared out into the room, its whiteness an immensity of space, and a silence falling upon him suddenly like a great wave that had begun as a mere murmur in another distant ocean how many thousands of miles from here.

When she next looked in she found the bed carefully made. The oscilloscope flickered like an old projector might, emitting the plaintive ribboning trail of an already distant, receding figure; an angular stick-man with faintly clicking toe-pinched steps. And already she had the words from the note imprinted on her memory. The evening before she had toiled to translate them, had finally managed to isolate the verbs, establish the tone, settled on a version which she could believe in, was almost there, as she pictured her own hand, its looping tracery gently unravelling the already fading scrawl beneath: *We are bordered by vast regions of living death, she wrote, the ocean, the desert. We know that they [teem] with hidden life, but unless we are the chosen, initiated nomad, they do not [teem] for us.*

She saw herself then, standing there, the room, its narrow cell-like confines. She braced herself, for the great thunder, the green familiar impacting mass. As constant, as unyielding, as stone.

Somewhere, before, in the middle of all this, an image had come to her: Look at me, he said, I'm all in (he sat slumped on an exposed transom that he now used as a bench, head down, addressing the heaving floor of the boat). I am torn, I am *clutter-worn*. And as he said these words he somehow sensed, just above him, slightly to port, the dark eye of the great bird soften.

They were leaving the demarcation zone and it felt to him as if he were returning to a forbidden land, as a fugitive might return to the scene of a crime for which he had been falsely accused, as a means of verifying to himself an innocence he himself had started to doubt.

They had bounced around the maze of poorly maintained minor roads that lead up from the coast for what seemed like hours, through the undulating wooded country, and emerging finally on to the flat featureless plain that extended to the nearest large town. Once on the empty dual carriageway they had soon passed the now unmanned checkpoint, barrier raised. An information kiosk beside it displaying to would-be visitors maps and the necessary precautionary advice.

As they had driven up from the house, a couple of miles inland, they had entered a belt of ancient woodland sparsely populated with giant irregular shaped conifers – scots pines perhaps – whose branches began high up their scaly trunks. The ground here was more uneven, consisting of haphazard steep sided mounds and ridges to which the trees clung. Here and there a tree had been toppled in a storm exposing a broad but shallow canopy of roots and a

sandy ragged depression in the soil beneath – a white sand hardly tainted by the thin layer of black humus that formed a layer above it.

L sat at the wheel in silence beside him. He wondered about the sand, its sable whiteness, about what kind of landscape this had been before the trees grew there. L would be able to tell him for sure, tell him also the names of the trees. L who knew everything about this place. Its geology, its history, its fauna and flora. But today he preferred the silence and the not knowing, to immerse himself in the moment and the near past – subjects for which, he reflected, L had shown rather less aptitude. He wound down the window a little to check whether the scent of the forest registered with his expectations, and found that indeed it did: the cloying smell of the black earth, the suggestion maybe of pine. What surprised him was the sudden cacophony of birdsong – and it was a true cacophony, a wall of striated notes so densely woven together from multiple invisible sources that it was impossible to distinguish one call from the next. He wound the window up again, plunging them back into silence, glancing for response at L who remained impassive as ever.

In time, they approached the outer suburbs, the regularised monotony of ditch and hedgerow giving way first to the open plan free-for-all

of desolate abandoned lots and opportunistic low-level commerce, its handmade signage flapping on fences ragged with litter.

He had somewhat surreptitiously removed the notebook from his bag and had begun jotting a few things down, things that had occurred to him along the way, trying to give out the air of one writing down nothing more than a to-do list or some such. Somewhat ashamed of himself he had tried to make his handwriting as undecipherable as possible, on the off chance that L might bother to look. A scrawl he could barely read himself, and abbreviating the name of his fellow passenger to a smaller L.

I have been thinking of a landscaped park in Ipswich that borrows its topography from the south facing chalk escarpment to the north of the town before it sweeps down towards the old docks and unmodified clays of the Orwell basin, in which can still be found shark's teeth and fragments of turtle shell, remnants of a tropical sea. The park is dotted with ancient oaks, impossibly gnarled and tortured by age, old enough to have belonged to the original forest that once covered these slopes. I was brought here often as a child and have returned often since. The contours of the place have marked various stages in life. The town of Ipswich intersects the river valley, the point at which the Gipping becomes the Orwell, the river itself confined by low hills

– fluvial mounds deposited during the last ice age when the Orwell valley for a time marked the southern-most limit of the ice sheet. Suffolk therefore is the youngest of landscapes, and in contrast to its restless endlessly morphing coast, its troubled other, it is one of drift and gentle consolidation rather than attrition and atrophy. The Orwell itself has had little time for meander and soon broadens to the sea.

The park, then, to which we constantly return, with its twisted broken oaks, its balding open hillsides and voices, appears older than the landscape in which it sits. I knew someone, fond of storms, whose garden backed onto the old arboretum that flanks the upper section of the park. He was wont to enter at night when the park was locked, squeezing his imposing frame through a low private doorway in the back wall, drawn there especially during periods of bad weather, and would wander Lear-like in an agitated state upon the open hill. What became of him I cannot say, but between the thick florescent clouds that race beyond the estuary below and the lights of the docks, I see a hand, a fist, that still punches at the low moon.

Leifden drops him at the bottom of the hill. He had been surprised at the offer of the lift – Leifden’s visits had been becoming less frequent as he

seemed to become increasingly bemused at his endeavours in the outhouse. Initially interested in the remains of the ship, it appeared Leifden now want to avoid mentioning the subject at all.

He stalks about the town, undecided about the provisions he should buy. He feels nervous and on edge in this other world. People seem to frown at him, or push past as if he does not exist. When he needs them the words do not come. He realises, and is shocked to realise, that he has no image of himself in this suddenly unfamiliar setting, cannot imagine himself *as he is seen*. Leifden picks him up at the hardware shop in Upper Orwell Street as arranged, eyeing with suspicion his purchases as he helps him load them into the pickup. But soon it seems, they are heading back into the demarcation zone, plunging back through the lanes that wound their way down to the coast between the ancient furze covered dunes, down towards the world he had made his own, and was preparing to leave.

Look, Jons – the thing is this. Foales and myself have taken a few days off – from each other as much as anything. The constant bickering and one-up-man-ship takes its toll you know. And the truth is our nerves were a little frayed after the last board meeting. Foales has been looking particularly seedy of late. The rings around his eyes would have made a fascinating exercise in dendrochronology – ha-ha... We try to avoid convening these meetings, but after six years eyebrows will start to rise up in query if we don't offer something.

So at this last one there they all were, about eight of them, you know the types – amateur enthusiasts mostly, people who judge your moral standards based solely on your choice of font. Anyway, as I say, there they all were sitting in a circle, sheaves of papers on laps, bespectacled each and every in his or her own fashion, by degrees eager or reluctant to begin, each separated by a small desk. Nervously, or in genuine reflection they toy with their glasses taking them on and off, the conversation measured and cautious as they proceed deeper into the discussion; glasses are placed on the intervening desks while comments are made, opinions voiced, put back on again to re-examine the material in front of them. They start to confuse which table is theirs, start picking up the wrong glasses, either embarrassed as they realise, or just absent-mindedly not noticing, they start placing them back on the wrong tables, where in turn they are picked up by somebody else. The confusion increases exponentially, people now misquoting from the texts they are unable to read properly. The discussion becomes knotted,

torn, a melee of voices, of broken phrases. A pair of glasses is flung irritably across at someone opposite, tempers flare, a scuffle breaks out, which quickly escalates into a general scrummage in the middle of the circle. The scene becomes a rugby field, the same bundle of characters. A referee blows his whistle for a foul. Reluctantly, the characters reassemble for line out. The ball is thrown, fumbled, dropped, the trainee amongst them lunges down and forward landing, hugging the ball to his face. A large suede Jesus boot looms full frame at terrifying speed. The booming slap, the rubber smash. Blackout.

Afterwards, in the aftermath as it were, as the two of us sat in the bar at *Gaddafi's Last* assessing the damage, I happened to remark that I had never expected the meeting to go so badly, even taking into account my previous reservations.

Oh, how *jejune* of you, Foales almost yelped over his gin, before snuffling greedily back into it, partly through genuine thirst, partly to stifle his quaffed-up laughter. He said nothing more.

But once again I am guilty of becoming overly warmed by my theme. I wanted to speak to you of your father.

In brief, what we think we have established is that your father undertook a journey that propelled him, on the cusp of some personal crisis, through Spain, North Africa, and from there popping up again in Italy and other places, until suddenly appearing in the Far East, where his whereabouts become lost, hazy – his accounts far less precise, and as if written by another hand or translated from his own. The first part

of that journey is well documented – he was by then quite well known; the latter part remains more of an enigma. Throughout he appears he be carrying on an imaginary conversation, fragments of which are transmitted in these notes – snatches of conversation, to which we respond when we are able, in the manner in which we are able. Various other figures are speaking too: myself, Foales – when he can be bothered; you too – most eloquently at times... And somewhere in the background is your mother. We cannot tell whether she is listening, or to whom she is listening.

But is there in all this, Jons, anything that is still left for you to consider? He who does not speak, who merely observes.

You looked across to the other island where the power plant sat sunk in behind its dykes, beneath its lights of a near-bright chlorine novae of quicklime – and could hear not its base note, that murderous neutron ever-sustaining hum that belonged in some absurd way to that other primordial hum, but instead the murmur of crowded bars coming across the water, that sound of voices modulated against the pressing sky: a low-level radiation puffed out across the water *by the same pressing sky*. The night is locked down by frost as you turn and pad scrunching over the crystallised grass towards the central tree. Pinkman is moving with long exaggerated steps, knees bending forward as if on a bicycle. Glancing sideways at him his face appears horribly

contorted by some overstated anguish, a slanting gash, a grimace between heavy jowls that hang pendulous, turkey-like over the collar of his greatcoat, eyes red and ablaze guide us like lamps. Beside the tree Foales is speaking. Addressing the night air, he seems oblivious to our approach. Foales the slender figure, leaning back to face the moon. A little more earnest than he needed to be, somewhat unacknowledged.

*

Tomorrow will be a spring tide, the highest of the year apparently. According to Leifden the water will easily reach the base of the outbuilding, flooding the channel that gives access to the estuary, its distant lights. The boat is almost ready, loaded with fuel, the ramps in place.

Just outside Granada, late Autumn

The orchard of persimmon trees is flooded. We stomp out ankle deep into the muddy freezing water to salvage the sickly fruit, overripe and bursting. *¿Dónde está este lugar que me suena tanto?* – where is this place that bugs me so? The trees are tall and straight and evenly spaced, more like a grove of poplars planted for timber than a fruit orchard, yet piles of broken fruit surround each tree emerging out of the mud and debris. I pause and again refer to the sky to get my bearings. We are in a wide valley below Granada, somewhere between the city and the coast. And that too is where the persimmons are grown with their strange unfamiliar sweetness. It is clearly winter – all this mess the result of one of those deluges of winter rain, vital for sustaining the aquifers during the long dry summers, yet causing great destruction in a landscape whose arid soils are not bound and protected by thick coverings of plants, but often lay bare and subjected to the elements. But I wonder about the ripened fruit – would that be happening now? Do I again pause, or do I move on?

In the field beyond, down by the stony reaches of the stream that now runs clear and subdued, as if in denial of the havoc it had wreaked maybe just a day before, someone has lit a fire made out of the driftwood from the washed out field. It has already reached a fierce charcoal glow, the dampness in the

timber quickly shrugged off as the remembered sun is soon unlocked from its fibres.

I try to recall the heat from the fire on my face, and the cold at my back – that startling desert cold that arises out of nowhere. But I am greeted only with a thousand generic fires, a thousand icy drafts. I have only the visuals to go on; and no smells: no notes of smoke, nothing from the huge pan of goat *estofado* which has been placed to cook on the embers at the edge of the fire, into which people will sporadically tip their bottled beer to help things along. Smells, which so easily trigger the sensation of memory do not it seems dwell so easily within them – senses are cauterised in time. Somewhere in the background you are chatting easily with the others, laughing.

Then someone urges us to go and place our hands in the stream that burbles along a few paces beyond the fire. *Venga! Probarlo!*

I am astonished to find that my hand has disappeared in the water – with my eyes closed it is simply no longer there. Because it is warm the water. A blood heat.

PART II
SUNNY LAND

For days – weeks now, he had been troubled by a kind of vertigo. Ever since that afternoon when he had gone down to the beach.

He had lain down on the shingle staring into the sky, trying to clear his mind of the tangle of conflicting stories and accounts that confronted him at the house. Looking up at the wisps of developing cloud, he had willed himself to imagine that he was looking *down* at their reflection as if upon a mirror, rather than up. After a while, concentrating in this manner, he found that he could indeed maintain the illusion of looking down, and started to wonder what lay beneath this new glassy surface – was he really staring into a deep translucent pool? He realised that he must be suspended above it. Why then could he not see himself reflected against the backdrop of clouds?

It was then that the vertigo had struck. His whole being seemed to be hurtling backwards at terrific speed. Not so much a sense of falling, but of being reduced to an irreducibly small point beyond which lay obliteration, nothingness. He could feel the sensation in the back of his skull, as he desperately tried to press his frame back into the cold damp shingle, clawing

at it with his hands, clinging on for dear life in order to stop himself from tumbling into the sky.

He lay there panic stricken for a moment, until slowly, aided by the breeze that chilled the sweat on his skin, a kind of normality re-established itself.

Unsteadily he got to his feet, but the ground beneath them did not feel as solid as before, and the sky seemed to pivot more loosely about its axis.

With an effort, he had made his way back to the house, taking without realising the longer route back along the old sea wall, following the path blindly and without purpose, his only thought to keep the flattened hedgerow always to his right, so that he ended up approaching the rear kitchen door finally from the opposite direction to the one he had earlier taken. He entered, failing to notice that it was unlocked and ajar, as he had left it hours before.

That night, he sat before the great bay windows – curtainless, uncompromising oblongs of black, which at that hour registered nothing except the crowded room bulging out behind him, and gave no inkling of the marshes that stretched out beyond. He had the impression that he was piloting some slow moving deep-ocean craft along a seabed in the darkness.

Once again, he found himself surrounded by his father's papers. And although, even after several hours of intermittent, restless toil, they felt now

as inconclusive and bewildering as before, they had already taken on a reality he knew he could not relinquish. Losing himself in the stories, he nevertheless felt calmer, the dizziness abated, his mind absorbed in the endless blind alleys, the countless false beginnings.

But this was surely a temporary respite. For vertigo is not a problem so easily put aside. It is not simply a fear of the void – it is the shock, the sudden hyperawareness of the body, of its corporeal presence, that the void accentuates.

And this is why he needed a way to mediate between the distant unreal mountains, the empty unpeopled cities that he found mentioned there, the silence of the room in which he now sat, and the beating oppressive presence of his own body. It seemed to him that he had been here many times before, and that the chain of images stretching back into the past surely held the key to his awareness of this present moment: the mountains, the stillness, his own steadily thickening pulse – because as he sat there he was conscious of a kind of sickening materiality that grew, a visceral awareness which he had never noticed before, but whose dim familiarity appalled him.

Suddenly realized yesterday that the contour patterns created within the grain of the desktop's surface have changed. There is now the impression of a deep gulley extending across the work area, a really quite noticeable discolouration, punctuated by the same scattered tumuli of knots, that must now rise out of the gulley floor, whereas before they existed in an open gently undulating plain. A new map presenting itself, a further clue, another hint to indicate the direction of travel?

What can be read into this random mark on the grain (discounting any possibility of psychokinetic activity) I don't know. The pale dun colour of the wood still suggests true or semi desert, what once would have been a distant, exotic setting in which the pen might wander in delimited space. But now—?

And anyway, still seem stuck with the medium of water. Water everywhere.

Cooler today, but still at last. High cirrus encroaching – from west. Thumb still sore. Unfamiliar birdsong from the dead yew outside – a kind of scratchy scit-scit-scit but with a melodious liquid trailing off that ends abruptly in a faint rusty creak, almost as a kind of afterthought. This sequence is repeated, but as intervals of three and then two. Must remember to look it up.

Jons is about to disappear – or at least relinquish his privileged role within the narrative. It is possible, in what one might call his increasingly textualised and psychotic state – as he becomes what he describes – that he has jumped or fallen down the very well that he seemed so intent on drawing attention to in the early stages of the novel. What was on his mind at that moment is anyone's guess – that he had become obsessed with the resurrection of the dismantled, castaway's driftwood ship hardly seems to tally with the logic of the situation – for that would be to try and fit an extremely large and ungainly peg into a very round, deep and confining hole. It would have been black fun indeed to watch him try.

No, the key to understanding Jons' demise lies in the rapid approach of what Pinkman or Foales would have described as the *perplexing ontological turn* that will soon allow him to disappear. What might be understood from this is again anybody's guess, but let's assume that what Pinkman is referring to is the movement from one state of being to another – the obvious conclusion in this case would be from life to death. But why not from death to life, or better said, from a kind of death to a kind of life? Is not the well, after all, merely a vertical bridge in the increasingly vertiginous birl of the landscape

that Jons, the protagonist who inhabits it, has played his part in constructing?
Is it not that he has simply stepped off its edge?

But anyway, Jons has not reached that point in the story just yet. For the moment he remains at the still centre of things. Voices gyrate around him boisterous or solemn, probing, or with a reluctant curiosity – or quietly waiting, yet to speak.

Each voice is possessed of its own degree of gravity, subtle or insistent, pulling him this way or that. So it is that somewhere hidden deep within this itinerant mind a silent mechanism must endlessly recalibrate its bearings.

No wonder then, that its owner feels such a need for sleep – not the brief naps stolen, often quite spontaneously, between the bouts of boatbuilding, the journals, the wanderings across the marsh – respites all too brief which always find him awakening with a start, already half propelled by some trigger in his dreams towards the next task. What he longs for is a soundproof chamber and a truly *orphic* slumber (Pinkman again), one to which he somehow instinctively knows he should not succumb.

A head bursts through the silent surface of the lake. As I watch, somewhat startled, the green water swells, blisters, the head emerges and immediately makes for the rocky shore to my right, covering the distance of a furlong or more at some speed.

The light flickers as before, frames are missing or have been removed, so that the wake created by the moving head seems to oscillate backwards and forwards out of sync with the movement towards the shore. A figure, stick-like at middle distance, emerges and steps backwards onto the low platform of rock before disappearing, with the deliberate angular gait of the stick-man, into a fringe of pine.

I ponder the surface of the lake at the point where the head had emerged, at its greenest, at its surely deepest. The surface I want to call a mirror – except that it bears no reflection, registering neither sky nor hillside nor fringe of pine.

You turn back, walk quietly back, to where you know the arc lamps have started burning, your shoulders hunched silhouette against the white –

—Go on— she says.

—I can't. It ends there.

—Your problem is that you live in the past – from where you stand everything you tell me will always be a projection – of the future, a future in which you never get to the ending – it rather pulls the rug from under the present moment, does it not?

—But it ends there.

—No, it just fails to continue. You're living in the past.

—All right, but if I do continue I need to change things. The lake, it's actually a sheltered bay. There are no hills, a sandy, muddy shore. The pines we could keep – but then the tangle of fallen oak, partially covered at high tide, seaweed and other flotsam dangling from the branches that remain in leaf – I feel more at home with that – and that would suffice to provide a screen for an exit stage right. Or an entrance...

—So, the swimming figure?

You know, he would swim across the bay in all seasons – the water was always cold, anyway. But the surface would not have been so calm, never so silent. When I first remember seeing that bay I was quite surprised by the waves – how they would slop about. Rather than providing shelter, all the energy of the open sea seemed concentrated into one confined space. But hardly deep enough to drown in. In fact, the deeper troughs between the waves sometimes revealed patches of sand or shingle, which always reminded me of chaffed skin glimpsed through frayed burlap cloth – and that in itself was a little unsettling.

I remember one day bright and very blustery, trying to follow his progress as he thrashed across the bay, and losing sight of him amongst the waves. Suddenly in the middle a distant figure stood right up out of the water, I could barely make him out in the glare, amidst all that commotion, the spray whipping off the wave tops – the intensity of the light shining off the water seemed to eat away at his outline as it trembled against the sun. He was stooped forward, one arm resting on his side as if catching breath. Then he stepped off back into the water and was gone again. Never does he look back towards the shore, seem aware even of its existence, of the possibility for any witness.

I was always reluctant to swim there even on quieter days for fear of scraping my stomach on the various weed-covered posts that were hidden at high tide – the remains I was told of makeshift wharves, where broad ark-like barges, sprit-sailed and thus able to navigate the broad meanders of the estuaries, would drift in to load their cargos of grain straight from the adjoining fields that sloped down to the water. The days at their longest, the incessant clatter and throb of threshing machines would roll out across the bay from first light until nightfall, while the smoke and vapour clung to the land in a smog that made phantoms of the gangs of weary labourers that fed them.

For a time, in the unmoderated thrust for progress of that period, it was reasoned that the fuel that powered these machines could be found beneath the very boots of those that stamped the cold fields at dawn; that the coalfields of the Somme, like the beds of shale and glacial clays, must extend across to this side of The Channel.

To that end, emerging from the their own fug, the derricks of drilling machines could be seen dotted along the shore. Boring down to nearly a mile deep they found nothing, except for large deposits of coprolite or “dung stone” – nodules of Jurassic excrement – which although useless for powering agricultural engines or any other dreamt of industry that might follow, could

be used instead as fertilizer on those same fields, can still be found today in places littering the coastal paths, easily mistaken for fragments of comet, or depleted uranium in the form of rounded fusible bolts.

And all the while the great barges would drift in and out, brown sails luffing soundless on approach, manoeuvring themselves independently it seemed of their quietly chatting two-man crews.

I did go down to swim there once, but when I arrived there was just this expanse of mud, clucking at me gently in the heat – and a thin silver line denoting the sea way off in the distance. That’s when I noticed all those random rotting posts, wrapped in great clumps of bladderwrack, each reminding me of some Dickensian spinster in her beaded shawl.

—So, then what? I’m still stuck with the figure in the bay or the lake or whatever you wish to call it.

—Well, I suppose we could return to the diary. But that might seem more like beginning again rather than moving towards a resolution – and I see here that this cheap ink has degraded – look at these clouds of specks – like they’re buzzing around the phrases. Like the very stuff of which they’re formed has turned against them.

—Oh... is that so...? Gosh, how you do procrastinate so, my dear!

—Well, anyway – let’s begin again.

We drove up through the frowning hills, densely wooded – temperate forest grown to thicket with no sign of trail or path or clearing. To me the whole place seemed at odds with itself in the tropical heat of summer – both the heat and the species of trees seemed wrong for this altitude; inhospitable-looking even during daylight – and now as darkness began to fall, forming an impenetrable wall that hemmed us in as we continued on up the flawless ribboning road.

But eventually the trees started to give way to open moorland, a lush acid green emerging from the shadows behind us. Below, we saw the brown valley slowly disappearing beneath a sticky-looking floss of cloud, the suffocating prelude to evening. Here and there remote dwellings dotted the hillside, their lights shining out, the houses themselves resembling paper lanterns in the gathering dusk.

We reached the lodging house, a three-storey affair with the typical steeply sloping roof curved upwards at the eaves. I was sorry we had not had time to see the falls during daylight. I thought I could hear their roar in the distance. And I felt unsettled, having been unable to visually associate that sound to its source, existing now and for the rest of the night as an all-pervasive geotic rumble that bleeds into a general atmosphere of foreboding beyond the invisible crickets and this thick mountain heat. A white noise, you said.

The air-conditioned, double-glazed room is sealed against the night – life support to withstand the alien landscape outside, whose surface has become lunar – unable to sustain us. This spinning pressurised cell untethered drifts across the restless forest, across the higher basalt screes, its gaping maws and clogging iridescent moss. Below us somewhere in our dreams, a mist-smothered town where the dawn came later, masked behind its ether of forgetting, by the churning grey river in which we sinking writhe – in a white noise.

This morning the lake sparkles in a seemingly afternoon sun. Cannot tell whether the effect is caused by merely having overslept, in which case a simple confusion on the part of this diarist can easily be amended; or whether in memory the quality of the light becomes altered to suit the mood of the person at the point that he starts to remember.

The Oversleeper wakes with the dull sense of remorse over the fact that the morning has been lost, ruefully images how the morning light might have played on the water of the lake, on the slow cool mouth of the worming river that feeds it. How the mists hanging in its gardens might have surprised us. How coffee (robust, with bitter cinnamon notes) might have been taken on the still chilly veranda while sleep gently lifted and the

mind cleared, to focus on a day ahead still rich in potential – on this now unregistered and unnoted morning that might have been the first in the world.

All The Oversleeper can do is access as best he might from a distance the day that is already well under way, its crosscurrents, its shifts and trends; attempt somehow to gather up together with his scattered clothes what remains. Or just leave it till tomorrow.

But does light adjust itself to the timbre of the thoughts within which the act of memory takes place, or is it such a subjective thing that it becomes locked to the observing eye at that one specific moment, so that the later self can never access properly that privileged original event?

It's not that I don't remember – it's just that everything takes place on the same plane, without depth, a frozen tableau...

And the more I write the more I can think of how I could do things differently, take a different path, in this proliferation, as the ink flowers beneath the pen in ever increasing permutations of meaning, too many expanding patterns for the nib to chase, so that in the end what does get written fades into insignificance under the weight of everything which does not. The extant copy emerges, and somehow survives – as the token – as the thing left behind, the residue, a dim reminder of that which is elsewhere. A sanctuary once. A home. But the more that is written the more the desert extends into a sparse uniformity of contingent endlessly repeating symbols.

—I don't recall you mentioning your room having any kind of balcony?

—My room? Ah yes... with the lake crisscrossed by the scudding launches the mirrored lake the hunched mountains in the mirror-lake the silhouette in the mirror the fug the throb throb drifting in upon the white...

—I think we need to go back.

—Yes. You see, it's the only way.

You said that looking up from below, faces could be made out in the billowing tracteries of foam, in the water as it fell, that it was part of a tradition, to see faces in the falling foam, those that have perished.

The surrounding roar, the encasing hypnotic thunder. *See* the roar as it billows out from the black concave wall of rock, its glistening animal veins marbled bronchial patterns of mica – a cliff higher than the vapid pressing sky – clusters of tiny bulbous trees above.

—Why here? Why choose here? At that moment did you become the thunder, become what you have always feared – was it no more than a cancelling out of the two sides of an equation?

The water falling over the lip the smooth green lip edged with pearl
its beard of weed strung flat before the current's gale. The water smooth and
thick bulges at the lip its surface a pocked membrane sheathes a torso of
twisting crystal the indomitable trunk of the hero as he turns frozen beneath
the lamp's cone in the serious roomlight atomised to falling cloud.

You are calling across the water the fast conveyor the images of near-
shadow hurry past thick upon its etched printed slab of silica.

Farouche, had been the term Pinkman used to describe my father, increasingly *farouche* – a kind of trailing off. It was not that he didn't speak, on the contrary... but it was that when he did speak... or the more that he spoke... the more he seemed to withdraw into himself, his own words seeming to lead him deeper into somewhere else. And even as you sensed he wanted to talk, to tell you, you could feel his need to reach out becoming somehow diminished.

This is not the image I have of him from his writings. Contrary to that sense described by Pinkman of a falling away, of a slow recession of will, I find quite the opposite – that the writing, however disjointed or random, is always moving towards something, *someone* – that often, what starts as a disinterested doodle becomes energised by a sudden memory, a remembered event that the writing always wants to try and place.

Pinkman fidgets at the mantelpiece, his hand groping distractedly over its assembled ornaments as he half leans against it at an exaggerated angle, head resting on a forearm, his back to me as he speaks in a muffled tone:

—Your father, quite early on, once said, *you are everything that I am not.*

At the time it struck as rather odd, given his tone, that he had not said,
I am everything that you are not...
...but of course, on reflection...

He is looking up, staring at the wall,

—one realises that of these two sentences, one is not the converse of
the other.

Pinkman has detached himself from the mantelpiece and is roving
about the room, restless, excitable. He seems younger than I remembered him
from the previous encounter – a distant yet more vigorous incarnation of
himself: the Pinkman I had imagined in conversation with my father, or the
Pinkman as he had portrayed himself back then.

Or are we thinking of Foales? [Why is Pinkman suddenly dominating
the text] But then, I was sure it was Foales who rarely spoke, who merely
threw Pinkman's presence into sharper relief, an *accentuatin'* shadow, a foil to
the other's ceaseless aphoristic babble.

True, Foales had come across as the younger of the two at our first
meeting, and at that stage his silence had not yet established itself as a trait –
but on that first occasion there had been something in Foales' manner that
also conveyed a kind of vigour, a presence that belied any sense that he might
act later as second fiddle.

I watch carefully this figure who now fills me with doubt – does my confusion lay in memory alone or does this new recounting detect something that was missed before – a previously undetected echo of one presence that exists within another – and if so, which one is flesh?

Whoever he is, this character – now moving quickly across from one side of the room to the other – has suddenly taken on a reality in my mind which is impossible to reconcile with my former impression of him. I realise his presence up till now has existed only in my imagination as a set of limited composites, though I had met and spoken with him on several occasions. I try to study his features as he strides up and down but know that as soon as he has gone I will remember nothing but those same composite patterns. But the atmosphere of the room is different, suddenly weighted with the presence of the past, and I am reminded of that same sensation on entering the boathouse for the first time, that smell of damp iron, the peculiar density of the air.

He is returning from a table at the far end of the room strewn with papers, crouching low, addressing his large hands, as if his current thoughts are held precariously between them. As he approaches his form expands alarmingly as if he is the projection of some exaggerated scheme of perspective drawn between the point where I stand and the far wall from which he now looms. Between two fingers of one hand flaps a scrap of paper, which he has just snatched up from the pile on the table seemingly at random. He starts to

Speak again, this time apparently quoting from the scrap of paper without pause or punctuation, although by this stage I barely hear him:

The slight ship sailing straight upon the laying tide forewarns of things later dreamt porcelain secrets a smile at dusk reasons for leaving a tempered shout against the velvet trappings of falling night something akin to a thirst that is never quenched an electrogram registering doubt.

— This, Jons, what is this!?

He appears to shout, his face in mine.

—Symbols bubble up from the unconsciousness, Jons. They rise unbidden, pop open on contact with the air – no more than a kind of mental respiration – meaningless in itself, but indicative of a complex ticking being. Nonetheless a consciousness momentarily reduced to rhythmic machine. For sure this *writer* feels guilty about something, frustrated that he should feel that guilt, anxious about where in turn that frustration might lead. But it is, in the end, Jons, *where* he takes himself with that baggage, where he subsequently places his *feet*, that is important.

He has returned to the far end of the room again, to the French windows which I note throw a wildly irregular rhomboid of moonlight across the table, the papers. Turning abruptly, he begins tiptoeing back in Chaplinesque fashion the way he has just come, as if now physically manoeuvring himself along a tightrope between the two points in his argument, continuing his diatribe as he does so in a sing-song voice that mimics the effort of balance.

—But don't imagine, Jons, that these geographies that we find – that develop before our eyes – can be mined like an actual landscape – the topography of the soul was never so substantive – nor can the who or the why be extracted as just mere commodities. We might content ourselves with making maps, Jons – but that is all – the next stage eludes us. Think of a life, Jons, think of it without the benefit of a single *dinkus*!

He reaches the end of his imaginary rope, and of his routine. I clap slowly into the ensuing silence.

*

* *

It struck me yesterday as I sifted through yet more papers, that I might draw a map. At last I might draw a map. I begin with a single point – but the stabbing mark left by an over sharpened pencil punctures the paper and begins etching a line that too quickly reaches the edge. I begin again, starting in a bottom corner this time. The lead has already sheared slightly leaving a scratchy trail of graphite accompanied by its own faint echo. The pencil seems almost to guide itself, creating an awkwardly meandering contour that soon arrives in the middle of nowhere on the page, and I cannot tell whether I intended to plot a road, a coast, the edge of a forest, a region's border. But as I stare at it, the line does indeed become a road, a silken, ribbon black highway down upon which I now swoop, moving at ever increasing speed.

*And across which season's country this highway passes, is really up to you alone,
because I am too wrapped up in the event of my own passing through it, cannot for the
moment decide.*

It makes me die that look you give me, a look that says: whatever story it is that gets told, there is nothing that cannot be taken for granted, nothing that cannot be taken as read. It kills me, it really does. I can ask for nothing more. But it puts you too at risk.

This image that I have of you standing at the window, for example – what does this describe? Is this the moment that you step into the endless loop, the moment at which you become lost in words you will never read or images you will never see?

—So – do I step out onto the veranda, the veranda overlooking the lake, the lake with the invisible shore lost in the whiteness?

—No, no, not that at all. The image I have defines you differently – to protect you maybe – to place you outside of yourself. For the moment we must keep moving.

*

She knew that if she could take that road and drive, or if it were just keep on walking and walking, skirting the inland seas for a time, she would arrive back in this same room, looking out of the same window at the way she had once gone.

We think we understand her thoughts as she approaches the window and stands before it as if inviting definition once again, and her own line of vision we sense is drawn by the flow of traffic, edged by an empty bus lane, receding into the distance towards a vanishing point that lies somewhere beyond the city's brimming tessellated skyline. Perhaps we are being asked to imagine her eye plotting some remembered distance between the room in which she now stands frozen, suspended, behind the cold clammy glass, and that other place that became the locus of everything that followed, that place whose flickering warmth still seemed to radiate out towards her, the breeze, restless, that pulses against the skin, the throat, the bare arms.

Flannery had often remarked that she was the perfect sitter, that she became lost in her own stillness, too easily perhaps, that he had to retrieve somehow her anima, as if wresting it from stone. There were times, he said, when you had scared him, when the absence was so complete. As often as when you sat for him, as when you lay beside him.

And he would always recall the monochrome shore where the three of them had sat, the landscape taking on "the ghastly pallor" of some gothic mezzotint as it rolled away from the farther banks at that moment before dawn. He remembered watching her fingers absent-mindedly roving through the shingle beside her, searching blindly by touch alone, sifting the pebbles for

some piece of treasure or other – an amber charm, a hidden key perhaps. In her other hand she held a long slender cheroot which she would extract from a tin box in her top pocket, something he always found rather slick, rather endearing. Later he imagined in the darkness its tiny glowing disk of ash, how it would be the only means of telling she was still there.

Amber is common along this coast – fossilised droplets bleeding from the trees of primeval forests. His mother had kept such a specimen in a drawer in her desk, a large-tear shaped lozenge that sat cool in the palm of your hand – a mosquito-like insect with twin pairs of mottled wings trapped within – little whorls in the resin surrounding it mimicking the air currents caused by the act of flight.

When he came to know her more, he would often wonder if that was not what she searched for – a tiny seraphic thing locked in a stone.

The wind is up, blowing your light scarf about your face as you speak, obstructing your eyes, your mouth.

—So much for my freeway eyes, then.

—I don't follow.

—Take that road and just drive...?

—But why not stay here for a while – soak things up?

—This island – we need to get off...

—Not yet, I...

—make for the city.

...but when I imagine you speak, your voice contains traces of lumpy cobalt, powdered silver. Or – or your voice a well, a bright well...

—the city it is then! Something a little more, say – geometric at least – angles, lines, that kind of thing. Allow me, just for a moment, *to consist only of lines* – you know, those thin bars of shadow thrown by telegraph poles, street lamps, overhead cables, as we speed beneath them in the Buick, hood down...?

—I get it – the striated rhythm of our thoughts – registered back to us on big bright advertising boards and dusty empty corners!

—Something like that... You know, I could have gotten used to all this enthusiasm, this innocent self that you were – think probably I already had. Hang a right into Austin Street. Pull in over there outside *Curiosities and Other Selected Debris* – you see where that old fella is just going in. Let's follow. See what's up.

Ipswich, winter, 1979

A single pin in the map.

The old man from the islands sits on the small precarious chair and laughs into the cold room. Every day he hobbles past on his stick and sometimes I come in to find him there sharing a Hamlet cigar with my father, always laughing into the cold front room of the shop.

At the end of the street a ship is unloading, tea chests strapped together in tight cubes of twenty-seven (as I had once gleefully worked out), flipped up and swung casually ashore from its decks by two squatting cranes, along by the brick brewery and the sweep of trees that fringe the municipal festival park with its unwalked promenades and unkempt gardens that rise up over the improbably steep hill towards the little town that clung to it. The little town that is miles inland but receives ships from distant places, where Soulboys and Rastas and Socialist Workers pale as any amphetamine dawn and Beer Swilling Bumpkin Blues Hounds who hang turnips round their necks as ironic badges and furtive diminutive dealers who always find you amidst the sweating crowds that squeeze into the bars between shifts, and the dock workers one of whom stares up at the stage transfixed, awaiting his call at the

last number, and carries his “harps”, each in a different key, in a special belt, like an ammo belt, of which he is very proud.

All this packed into the little town miles inland that clings to the hills with its docks and its foundries, its silos of sugar and malt.

Midday, and men in overalls are starting to fill the street, queuing at the chip shop, jostling at the bar of *The Defiance*. The old man’s laughter fills the bare room, and since I have nothing that will fit his big bold words that ring with life, of being in this world, I escape blushing through a door out the back.

And the moment the door shuts behind me I am at home amidst the dank jumble of timber. I squeeze past the old harmonium (rescued from a roofless nearby chapel and which you could peddle like a bike), past the ladder-backs, the braces of cabrioles bound with string, the desk-leather scrolls, freshly embossed and ready; and hessian trunks filled with sheaves of faded incomprehensible scrawl and halfpenny thrillers, the stacked foxed mirrors, the tubs of brass escutcheons and locks. I can still sense the weight of each of these things in my mind, test the resistance of their materiality against these floating words.

And safe within the furthest recesses of the shop, with handfuls of sawdust in the corner I feed a stove, squat before its tropic warmth, think of evening islands cooling.

The old man holds a battered bible in his hand that he has rescued from the bookshelf that leans beneath a window, stocked half-heartedly with almanacs that faithfully record the local tides from a decade past, *Universal Reference Encyclopaedias* that elaborate further on the already intricate rules of sports that were no longer played, or provided exhaustive details of the preferred soil conditions of hedgerow plants that no longer grew, along with the unknown species of birds that no longer liked to feed on them. He holds the bible close to his ear, gives it a little shake, as if he were checking a broken clock. His laughter still reaches me now. Softer this time as I realise the object of his gentle mockery was in fact himself – the picture of himself in the cold room in the little town that clung to the hill.

Back then I had fled, hidden myself in a room of familiar forgotten junk – a room whose elements I could reassemble in my mind as I pleased, safe amidst the solidarity of touch and smell – of memories I was yet to have.

Now, sitting back at the house, every time I sit down to write I feel I have to start from scratch, reinvent the wheel. There is an initial phase – a kind of panic of forgetting – which clears slowly to reveal a dispersal of lumbering spinning loosely converging objects. You sense that they have form and apparent purpose, that their bare geometry was once indicative of

something. And they come to rest in a great piled up litter, if not in the cold room then the unending beach through which you clamber endlessly in your dreams, like no beach you had ever seen before, a shattered cliff, its mangled coiling strata barbed with splintered fence posts, its runs of gravel poured into the combing sea, its jointed grime-like strands stamped with great deep oblong pools, the ancient uncovered baths lifted from a drowned city. And wedged amongst the foaming roots of boulders find rusted shafts, wheel rims, pistons, a detritus of endings from films hoarded by the tide from the nearby point where it has become customary to jump into the sky, and out of Albion.

This dream...

Until you realise that this was the beach we first walked, that the brake drum from an old scooter – that you keep as an ashtray on your desk, heavy and smooth, a chunk of meteorite worn by the tides of perhaps decades past – you retrieved from that beach; where we saw priests in jeans and with walkie-talkies patrol the cliff tops, with time on their hands perhaps to ponder the role they were playing at the edge of this kingdom, along this apparently innocuous margin between worlds; where we saw how they would spread their arms prematurely at the approach of an oncoming car, whose occupants had simply pulled in to admire the view of the chalk, skull-white beneath the clipped luxuriant greensward.

But to us, as we begin the long winding descend through the bracken and gorse following the jumbled gulley, the breach where the cliff had long since collapsed, to us they give not a glance as we pass between them flicking at the clumps of thistle and columbine with our sticks as we go.

Always passing through. But on each occasion, there is an act of observation and of recognition, and although each encounter is divorced from the last in the manner not of the dweller but the traveller, what accumulates in the imagination over time is a form of unity, call it a home, a dwelling of sorts constructed of found objects. Think of your painter friend again, my brother's other muse, those endless repeated renderings of the mountain whose name I forget, at every point of light and shade.

And as we approach our own bend in the lane the air is thick with memory, as I pause breathless at the long walk back.

A lone rook sits upright in the tree outside. Tomorrow it will be something else. So how to live outside tomorrow? How to reach out?

I search for your photo in an old drawer whose runners are swollen and frayed so that it jerks open only with an effort, propelling all its sorted contents to a jumble at the back. Amidst old train tickets, concert fliers, keys to locks that have long been replaced, I rummage for that photo never taken.

If I told you I had chosen you for your melancholic air, you would laugh, your eyes a-twinkle, breaking that spell of yourself, showing me up as the poor fool I was who thought he could subsume that element of himself in another, not realising I was taking on something akin to antimatter.

How much light is left? How much leftover light is kept locked up in diodes and capacitors, or imprisoned in all the photographs in the world, all its paintings – light stolen from elsewhere, taken home, poured over later? All that borrowed sunlight never given back. Hang on to yours. Keep it safe. Don't let anybody steal it. Not just anybody.

We are really motoring now, the mountains falling away. Hear the blood-thick paddling clug of the Buick's valves quicken. I glance over to you smiling into the image of you smiling back, but find you instead talking soundlessly into the wind. The movement of your hands indicates a story.

Eager to learn its content I steal further frequent glances between you, and the road, you, and the road, you and those slender gesticulating hands, the road its punctuated white lines coming at us like flak.

The country is opening out at last into an expanse of garrigue, of dry thorny scrub and occasional stunted trees that glide past us lost within a temporal ambit of their own. In places sand has feathered out onto the bleached-out tarmac but never obscuring the unremitting fresh white lines, broken between regular split-second pauses, streaming in from somewhere beyond the refracted blur of the double skyline – and that thread together surprise, laughter, sympathy, remorse even – all that your hands reveal of the tale; so evocative in their movements that I start to imagine the floating world that they describe, now more real, less dreamlike than before in the face of the leaden uncertain pools, the multiple drifts and rises, half-existing in the mirage ahead.

I imagine the muffled tap on the glass, the wizened street scorched face – only such case-hardened definition as this could penetrate the misted plate glass – a deity speaking from another world then, only the face managing to penetrate through to the now, the coal black eyes the unextinguished hatred of everything that seemingly lived or breathed, the misted tiled hall, everything softened by warm cloying vapours, the voice, made distant by the half inch thick glass, coming to her from the end of a long passage of time that represented many years outside under the sunless afternoon sky itself a roof a shield the perpetual sepia the unhurried movement of people cars against a blurred crenelated outline of low three, four, five story businesses – they see

the back of the bag lady stooped at the window tapping and shouting – and how, like the others, you turn to the face to see to the scaled knuckle replaced by something sharper harder a nail a claw the tapping now more precise and insistent – you turn like the others and half to the others half to yourself you say: How – how did she spot me in here?

We pull in. Your voice is suddenly clear against the soft blue notes of the evening desert. The soft blue notes of your voice rising against the desert's evening light.

You have been describing a white-haired woman, elegant slender aloof. Good posture still, you are saying, a woman respected for her independence, who speaks gently, but only when spoken to by the regular visitors to the spa which she frequents on a weekly basis.

You are telling how, at the strange sound, you turn like the others in the room. Somewhat befuddled by the damp blanket of heat, the moment of recognition is slow in coming. And then when it does come, is it shock or embarrassment that you feel? For the face, the unchanged face despite everything you now realise, is now calling quite distinctly your name.

You have no choice but to approach the yelling visage caught behind the fogged window, trapped for eternity like the hologram within its block of quartz. Glancing nervously behind you, you are aware that everybody in the room is now staring, alternatively at you, at the other face.

—Hara-san! Hara-san! It's me, it's me you fool! Look, it's me!

Shu-chan! Gingerly you kneel down level with the frantic features separated by the thick glass, by 30 years. Again, you mouth her name, Shu-chan...

When you began to tell me this story later I couldn't help but see it in those terms. That's how the images reassembled themselves in my head. You were laughing: Ah, Shu-chan, you said, almost wistfully, in a tone suggesting, even though this woman was unknown to me, that I should share those same feelings of wistfulness, understand instinctively from whence those feelings came. I know it's tragic, you continue, but there's always something comic with her.

'Tis unknown strange, I thought, speaking. It's strange. You can describe how others see you, yet I get no sense of how you see yourself, or is it that you are simply content to see yourself as others see you?

—Anyway, in the spa – what did you do? Weren't you embarrassed?

—A little, she shrugs. I gestured that I would meet her in the lobby.

And there she was with all her bags. Apparently, she uses the place sometimes herself, though we had never coincided. She gets in for free just as I do. The neighborhood's awash with all these characters from my generation who've fallen on hard times – café and club owners, former mamas – but they can survive – since we get all these services for free – lunch and a nap at the community centre. Back to the tents on the edge of the park by dusk, where a neighbour will surely be brewing up a nice cup of tea on a neat polished stove.

I had often asked her about that earlier time, when she and the other children of her generation had returned to the obliterated city, to mile upon mile of ash, vast areas where barely an imprint remained, often only the tracings of buildings and streets left as precisely as on any draughtsman's plan, the ground itself the colour of old vellum, so that these children must have found themselves wandering into a great unscaled map of the past, two dimensional, yet laid with infinite care upon the rolling sweep of the landscape, smoothed across its gullies and rises; a proposal for a dreamt city of wood and paper that now seems as if it never was.

And often perhaps, in a corner neglected by the roving crews, or by the splintered concrete bank of a canal choked with soot and debris, with a stinking unspeakable ooze, a darker imprint, a crouching supplicant's shadow.

But when I ask her about these things her memory does not correspond to the footage. Well... she says slowly, casting her mind back, and she tells me a tale about her grandfather's mislaid umbrella recovered under miraculous circumstances, or her aunt's departure for New York, or the creepy sweet potato seller who always asked after her mother. The backgrounds to these events and encounters that fill the frame, exist in another unconscious register, or are etched perhaps into her bearing, into the substance of her flesh; or again exist only in the collective consciousness of the observer. No, if I want impressions of a time and a place I must ask her about that other time afterwards, when those elements of ash and shattered brick had been reconstituted into the reeling sensual neon world that already existed a mere decade later.

The light pouring through the window beckons me outside. I stretch in my chair, reaching for the ceiling letting joints crack, resisting the urge to simply get up and amble

out the door. Pitting sinew against the calling light. But instead I settle back, stare out across the iron grass where the dew has formed like sweat.

We have pulled in, attracted by one of those itinerant markets that spring up out of nowhere in this part of the world. Leaping from the Buick we step quickly towards the tented enclosure of stalls – consisting in fact of two long canvas corridors one intersecting the other at a general meeting area in the middle where cups clink and the chatter intensifies. The place is thronged with characters [that] have condensed out of the empty landscape with its lengthening evening shadows, and as we enter under the brightly coloured canopies that have been thrown up for shade we are delighted to see, a few pitches down, the Optician, impeccably dressed as before, manning his own neatly decorated stall, busy engaging a small audience with a demonstration of his wares. Laid out on the bench in front of him upon a luxuriant expensive-looking cloth is an assortment of vintage items pertaining to his profession, mostly lenses of various tints and sizes, few of which had survived the passage of time intact. While neighbouring stallholders attempt to catch the attention of passers-by with the customary banter or with oblique truncated vendors' cries that cut each object they sell in half, the Optician has attracted his would-be punters by dumbly holding up fragments of coloured glass to his eye, which

magnify it in comical fashion, and which throw broken, errant patterns of light about him.

He has started speaking. Mindful of our previous encounter I move forward with caution, for the moment wishing to remain anonymous in the crowd. He spreads his hands with rather unconvincing theatricality over the objects arrayed upon the bench, as a conjurer might, and then his tone becomes solemn, as it had done before.

—Baubles and trinkets – friends – each represented an unspoken sentiment – the materiality of words that had to be solidified yet further into actual objects that could be touched, weighed in the hand; each object in fact becoming a paragraph, a phrase, a word, in the unspoken book of one's own life, a book that must embody the very senses used to perceive those objects in the first place...

I watch the spectacle with growing unease, because there is something not quite right about his slightly hunched posture, his large hands. But at that moment looking up he sees me through the crowd, and I know at once he will call me over, call out my name.

Spotting a gap in the market's canvas I trip fleeing through a maze of guy ropes and yet more canvas, curtains of endless resisting cloth flung aside only to reveal more layers of the same, but ever heavier, more unyielding.

At last I stumble out into a clearing amidst the scrub, strewn with beer tins and carrier bags and patches of crude fibrous tilth. It has grown quite

dark by now and I find myself at the flank of a ridge of sharply rising hills that I can make out only in profile. To my surprise the well-lit highway is some distance from where I have just emerged. I make for it, only to discover that the Buick is nowhere in sight – although miles off I think I see the twin glow of tail lights, just two tiny reddish points, each a long pull on a cigar in the purple dark, disappearing over the now stable horizon.

I could not help but glimpse him through his study window as I pottered about the garden on the other side of the low fence that divided us. Half obscured by the liquid play of shadow and light upon the glass, it was nonetheless clear that he was engaged in the act of writing. And as I came and went, he remained, the latent images of the ever-changing sky altering his form from one moment to the next chameleon-like as he sat immobile at his desk quietly shapeshifting before me.

But that was years ago and I'm sure my imagination has grown even more fanciful in its dotage.

And as I look out of my own window, scratching away after my fashion, the sun which is somewhere beyond my field of vision always appears to be lodged at some fixed point in the sky, although the shadows ebb and flow across the course of the day, so that I imagine the whole house spinning about its own axis.

What should one envisage at its turning circumference, I wonder: a baffled image blur, a spongy interzone, or a harsh tectonic margin of grinding contrapuntal realities? Or perhaps a vast balanced mechanism of perfectly enmeshed gearing? I think not, not that. Nothing like that. Of a blur surely, not on the margins, as the

edges might fade and blend beyond the limits of a sharply defined space, but of a blur that occurs within, that burgeons and swells from within.

Walking down from the house today at high tide it seemed, even to me, that those brown waters could never be other than as they appeared today – a tepid mineral soup raising barely a ripple, creating just the slightest agitation along the shoreline, the exposed gangling roots of those great ungainly pines protruding from the low mud cliffs at the end of the beach, dipping here and there into a sluggish treacly ooze.

But I thought that *he* might image the whole mass of water – if you could call it that – raised say a hundred feet off its bed, retaining its underwater profile so that he could examine its contours from beneath, a great irregular prism through which he could observe brackish distorted clouds, their forms made tenuous and imprecise, the vision of some trapped subterranean sky.

A smell of burst blackcurrants amidst dry end of summer grass. Sudden mottled sun emerging from behind low cloud. High nimbus above. Shadows moving at will. Multiple shadows – the well, the garden again. Wind estimated 12 knots steady.

And ship finished and ready at last! How she gleams!

*And, oh – the Ortolan Bunting – *Emberiza hortulana*. First ever sighting since the big one. Perhaps the first in the world.*

PART III

A DARK REFLECTIVE SURFACE

There was some doubt concerning the exact whereabouts of her birth – the cupboard in Stoke Street now appeared apocryphal, while Seven Lane was emerging as a more likely, more respectable address further to the north of the town, an aspirational suburb all ‘30s mock Tudor and pebbledash that bore little relation to the bustling Victorian and actual Tudor fleshpots (their stooping upper floors) of the dock area – although Scotland had been mooted as a possibility, this by my mother herself who suddenly seemed to be wavering on the subject, vacillating, when quizzed, between this place or that, so that I began to wonder if she was not confusing conception with birth or either of those things with her earliest memories which were surely neither of the above.

Or perhaps, given that her own mother was a midwife and spent those war years flitting about the county and possibly beyond, scrambling, I often imagined, over the ruins of the harbour towns and ports to enable life sprouting oblivious amidst the mayhem, or heading out into the clear unreal air of the surrounding countryside in the lurching Morris, the faux leather bag with the broken clasp in the back that years later came into my possession containing nothing but a few old cigarettes cards she had perhaps kept for her

sons of forgotten footballers, and the faintest tang of swimming pools, perhaps given all this my mother had become confused with her own birth and that of dozens of other hasty improvised deliveries, the details of which trickled out over the years that followed so that somewhere in that tangle of stories her own got lost. I think this is what happened.

My grandmother, years later, framed in her now empty high-backed chair, rarely spoke of him, as she gazed later across the open rising fields. But towards the end he had visited her it seems. Forbidden to use the narrow precipitous staircase of her small cottage for fear of a fall, she had been obliged to set up shop on the ground floor. But recently she had started to venture upstairs again, sleepless, rummaging nightly in the two upstairs rooms – disturbing the almost untouched shrine to the past that had been carefully laid out there. Daily, the fruits of these nocturnal labours would appear in the spotless living room below – a photograph, a diary, some other forgotten object, as events from decades past glittered amidst the artful arrangement of debris that constituted her waking thoughts.

Letting myself in through the back door as was the custom, key unearthed from amongst the roots of the old forsythia and inserted into the

already dirt laden lock, I was greeted one day by a pair of motorcycle gloves, patent leather, flaring out at the wrist, impossibly worn, sitting on the kitchen table. “Geoff’s”, she whispered, entering, as if she might be overheard from the next room. In the last year of the war he had been stationed in Scotland, invalided out from active service though the blessing of what turned out to be a minor injury. “Just keep this held as tight as you can until I get back”, the young medic had said. But he had seen the fear in the man’s eyes as he spoke and knew then that he would not be back, not through wont of trying or cowardice, but because he had already seen his own future. A calmness had descended then as he lay listening amongst the silent ruins, and it had never left him. It had brought him back.

Now he sat in a small hut on high ground overlooking the coastal approaches, surrounded by oscilloscopes, flickering dials, eyes always returning to the small dark screens above his desk, monitoring the last fading pulse, as little by little the monster succumbed, crumpled, under the ceaseless storm of fire pouring out from the western sky. One by one, the vague, pixelated geometries in front of him were winking out. Outside, the seasonal winds blew the low heather flat against the hollow fibrous earth: a tail wind for France, summoned to hasten the inevitable.

The Enfield stands in the lee of the low, white-bricked building. From a neighbouring brick hut, as square and utilitarian as the rest, smoke hurries

from a chimney, driven east across the falling ground. “No activity to report, Sir. All quiet again this evening, Sir”. The motorcycle waiting. Three days it would take, locked in a howling cocoon of rushing air, bleating oil. He would cross through the borders unseen at dawn, stealing sleep beneath a hedgerow before the dew had set, mist lingering like ether, such a sleep of the weary, of the months that had become years. The blankness of the pit, an endless falling – the soft waiting bed of light. And on half-waking, colours – spliced into the endless clicking footage. At that moment did you wonder about love, or had there been another’s voice, needle-thin, as if by proxy, drifting amongst the dimly present hills, revolving over and over, veiled in static like a fine rain? In a strangely lit room crowded with objects you feel that you could pick up each one, weigh it in your hands, and in that weight alone discover its name. You melt with the joy and the sorrow of it, yet you know you long for familiar unnamed things, the small daily pleasures of being. As the gramophone warbles on in the corner, its pristine disc a black pool of deliquescing tar, you resemble a ghost that dreams of death.

*Seems like I
Heard that lonesome Sunnyland blow
Seems like I
Heard that lonesome Sunnyland blow
Now it blowing just like it won't be back no more
Well I feel bad this morning, feel just like I want to cry
Feel bad this morning, feel just like I want to cry
Well my baby rode that Sunnyland this mornin',
She didn't even once say goodbye*

He rises, stamps himself awake, oblivious to the late clamour of birds, and decides, after wetting his hands in the soaking grass and rubbing his face with the moisture, that he feels somewhat refreshed, relieved to find that the damp had not penetrated the inner layers. He has no idea where he is, and the landscape offers no precise clue. Only the sky tells him somehow that he might have crossed the border, but he can't say why. Shouldering his way back through the blackthorn hedge he stumbles out onto the road again, almost surprised by the sight of the Enfield, cold and inert, waiting where he had left it in the lay-by. Stone walls hang like webbing on the surrounding hillsides, and ahead the road runs in a straight line into middle distance before becoming lost in the mist, rising and falling against the undulations of the landscape. The straightest route between then and now.

I dreamt or perhaps read, or dreamt that I had read, can't tell if in this life or another one, but there is the strong possibility or put another way, that it is strongly possible that I read it and it was in this life, of a boy who strode over moons, small ones, with a little gravity of their own, and jumped from one to the next. It sounds like St. Exupéry, I know, and in my mind the image is as close as it can be to something that was actually read – I have the strong

impression of being hunched down over a thick-paged book, yet there is lingering doubt. If the book exists, then this paragraph must evaporate in a puff of its own inutility, if it doesn't exist then these words win themselves a kind of right to become embedded on the page, to soak into the paper and be held fast there. This paragraph only works if I am genuinely in doubt as to the book's existence – if, for the sake of certain dramatic or narrative effects, I am merely staging my ignorance, then these words must surely sink beneath the waves of their own artifice.

But I can't remember anything more – no further embellishment of plot or setting – that's if the book is real that is. If it isn't, then it is simply the case that I cannot create further detail myself, that the ability to make it live is beyond me. So, I am caught between memory and imagination. But there is of course a third possibility: that the book exists but I have never read it, in which case I have created something in my imagination out of thin air which has its correlative in reality, or a fictional reality, so that one might ask: which is the simulacra of which? Or again, that the book that I have never read exists but I falsely remember having read it.

The moons are close enough to the Earth for the boy to be able to jump onto that too. Their gravities are not sufficiently strong to cause any real

disruption, although they can produce a barely perceptible bulging of the sea as they pass over it. One of these revolving moons, over which he strides, this boy, who is young enough not to be old, but old enough not to be young, approaches at low altitude a rocky coast with high crumbling cliffs and steep-sided inlets. The incoming waves are a purplish blue, edged with short crescents of foam, the cliffs a mottled yellowish green. My memory, or creation, of the scene has rendered it with a [softened] airbrushed appearance, the colours too vivid, the whole too hyper real – strange that if it is me who has created the scene, that I should render something that doesn't feel right. I hold therefore that I have in fact misremembered the scene, the book.

This book in my head that I remember or imagine, and now, either way, I have inscribed onto the page so that it will haunt me perhaps forever, not knowing at which level of reality it is lodged. Or until that day when, browsing the shelves of some library I see a title that is suggestive of something, grab the book from the shelf, anxiously thumb through its pages until, until there on page ... I come across the phrase “the moon was close enough to touch, close enough to risk clambering onto its surface if you dared” – and the author of this newly discovered text will be or myself. I have left a gap here so that if the reader happens to know the author's name, he or she can fill it in. I expect this will elicit a moment of satisfaction in the

reader who is able to fill in this gap – he may even feel that he has got one over on the author, maybe even harbour a feeling of superiority – with his one or two words (amongst many thousands); or she may feel a certain undeserved empathy with this stranger who she has helped a little, supported, with his task.

Ah... Something has occurred: this page has evolved over the course of an hour or more, an hour spread over a day or more, a day spread over a week. And although the words have spread outwards, as they are doing now like mold across the skin of a fruit, or frost across a slow motion pane, they are also following an inevitable line that conditions and then signals their own destruction. The existence of this text depends on the non existence of the other, but the other was always going to be found, wasn't it – it was only going to be a matter of time – and there was always the risk that you would view my earlier ignorance of it as feigned. Because I have suddenly remembered the story in question, remembered it towards the end of this passage, just here at this point in fact. And it is now clear that I had misremembered it before: there is not a boy but a group of adults of which the narrator is one, there are not several small moons but one, as large as our own, and any jumping is between this world and that single large prescient moon. I cannot mention the name of that story here, because it would burn through the fragile surface of this text

like vinegar poured onto limestone – produce an effect indeed like the pock marked and corroded surface of the moon itself. Needless to say, that story is sad, sublime, full of laughter, and effortlessly, and succinctly in its symbolism describes all the unrequited desires that make up the human condition, and how it is those desires, in their unrequited state, that in the end bind us to the Earth. The story's colours are of course more muted, but glow when they need to – no airbrushing or spray cans vigorously shaken, just bold but precise strokes.

This present text, my text, if it is to survive at all, must survive as a parasite upon the first – let's hope for a symbiotic relationship, at least. But don't worry, if you are still curious you will find clues further on – it's just that it is too rich to be dropped into this text undiluted, it must be split apart, broken up, fed back in, in pieces. I notice that this process has already begun, because when I wrote that *the moon was close enough to touch, close enough to risk clambering onto its surface if you dared*, this was based on a line I had misremembered, and to be frank, didn't at that stage know if even existed:

la luna era molto vicina alla terra, furono le maree che essa evoca nelle acque terrestri a farla allontanare. Qfwfq racconta di quando nelle notti di plenilunio, la luna quasi toccasse la terra ed era possibile avventurarsi su di essa.

I read these lines to myself, sounding the strangely familiar syllables trippingly as if moving across the pitted surface of the moon itself, one that

has been painstakingly eroded by long forgotten phantom rains to form its runnels and pans, its *karrens of every type*.

The Enfield brakes. As sharply as it is able – more like slides to a halt. A figure alone in the total darkness. A totem, returning. A blackness unfathomable. Hardly a totem though, hardly that – he is a small man made smaller by the unwieldy machine on which he sits, the oversized greatcoat, the great clowns' issue boots. He peers forward into the night. This is madness he thinks. Where the hell am I? The thin slit of the taped-up headlight useless in this. Had it been a dog perhaps crossing at the junction, a cow? A bison, a leopard for all I know, he thinks. For the night offers up no clue to the landscape that surrounds him, and the humid air has an unseasonal warmth to it, is without latitude. Objects loom around him. Houses, mounds, walls? Will the road be clear of debris? He eases the throttle, the Enfield slides forward again. It's a slider, this thing, he thinks, it slides you on your way, slides you between here and there, slides you home, as if your appearance should always be made quietly, slipping in unnoticed, slipping away again as quickly, with the least resistance from the air, the stuff around you, like travelling in the mind only. Never quite having gotten used to this machine

that seems to have a will of its own, he secretly likes the fact that it tends to make decisions for him. He keeps his boots hovering above the ground for safety.

He thinks this journey is proving endless, and pauses at this. I am half way between there and now. Halfway home, less than that. The Borders probably. He regrets now not bringing a map. The war is ending. You can almost feel it on your skin. There is a laxity in the air – you sense it emerging through the weariness of the people. Even the spies have fled. He has nine day's leave, carefully amassed from months of extended duty. A soldier returning, a little prematurely, the first of many soon to come. He thinks of home and a sudden emptiness opens in his stomach, a pit, a fear. There is no image he has of himself that will fit. Who is this stranger, this home-comer? He does not feel up to the welcome he will receive. Only this damp air, this darkness of absolution that cloaks the hills and villages around him in this border country seems real. And when he thinks about the journey back in nine days' time, all those miles back to the self he left behind there, then too he feels unimaginable despair. Nine days.

He thinks. He moves off down the road, barely fast enough to keep the bike upright. There are enough pilfered tins in his pack to last him a week. He could supplement this. He has his ration book. If he moved slowly between

the villages he could still give the impression that he was returning south, avoid suspicion. What then? Desertion? His mind is running away with itself. He would find a patch of woodland up in the hills, skirted by a stone wall, he could build a lean-to, a hovel, he would be dry, the wall would shield the fire at night, there would be a stream, game – he had his pistol.

He doesn't think this: that every event has its precedent, every crime has already been committed, every story its provenance, every judgement weighed against all judgements past, in every motive the same song of contingent desire.

And the song comes back to him

I got a letter from my baby, and she said she was coming home
Got a letter from my baby, and she said she was coming home
Well sat around waiting, baby, and I hope it won't be long
She said, cool down papa, now you better change your way
She said, cool down papa, and you better change your way
Yeah, it's true, you know I love you baby,
and you gonna need my help someday.

Now she sits at a low jet-black Formica table, the letter unwritten in front of her, just his name. She looks down at the shiny reflective surface of the table and down into the sky, had not imagined that such a surface could render with so intense a purity the cobalt blue, the perfectly indeterminate whites of boiling chasing clouds, the sharpened edges of the street's contours plunging down their vanishing points – surface planes studded by jeweled glinting windows arrayed in differing sequences, as each building had grown through time, and had somehow, inadvertently, captured all the precision of repeating organic structure: the mathematics of bone, skin, hair, in hidden, unexpected binding patterns. She looked down into the sky and saw that the jeweled sequence of windows had been broken by a figure, a boy somewhat younger than herself who stared out, elbows upon the sill, the sash thrown up to reveal the scooped-out grey of the room behind him. She found that she was as equally disturbed by the interruption of the sequence of glinting windows as by the sudden human element that had caused it. The boy was maybe thirty feet from where she sat, appeared to be staring down at her from his vantage point on the third floor, but she could not be sure whether he could indeed see her at all, or whether he was merely observing his own building's reflection in the sleek sun dazed glass frontage of the café in which she sat. She remembered as she had stridden past catching her own image in

the glass, and then as her eyes adjusted making out the figures within, a few well turned out Sunday morning customers of assorted ages amongst whom waiting-staff dressed in red and black moved, mingling with the interior of polished chrome, cream calf-skin settees and frosted glass. Not the kind of place she would normally have frequented, but somehow on this quiet Sunday morning the place seemed more accessible, and there was something about the montage of colours and shapes that appeared to be taking place behind the glass which seemed to invite her inclusion within it, something that had nothing to do with the normal life of being in a city. And so she had crossed the threshold without trepidation, sat down by the window as bidden by the waitress dressed in red and black, at the low jet black Formica table, and looked down into the cobalt sky. And there again was the boy's image looking up towards her.

A young sparrow flits unexpectedly onto the sill, feet clicking delicately upon the thick, layered paintwork as it hops skittishly across my vision from left to right. Fooled by my apparent absence as I sit in a low armchair behind the half open sash window, its pearl black pinhead eye, level with my own, now assembles the image – that of a human head amidst the dim blocky contours of the room. A wing blur, suddenly lighter than itself, it is gone – tugging free a thread of memory as if drawn through skin.

Tripping back from school I brought one home once. A fledgling, helpless from the nest, gutter-tame, its thinning life force briefly defined within my small fist as I scurried back, eager to burst the news of my rescue, to find out what happened next. But as I rounded the corner of the terraced street, there was my grandfather, small, neat, straight-backed, lingering outside the brown front door with a smoke, half at ease, as if awaiting orders. Just back from an afternoon at The Defiance, where he would have kept up a solitary vigil at the bar, never quite in, never quite out of the conversations that came and went around him. Standing there on the pavement, I always see him now as a Montgomery without a tank. He grimly examines my catch: “Good as killed it”, he says, “You know you shouldn’t meddle with nature’s way, you know that”. Gently, he takes the small feathered trophy into his own hands and disappears forever around the back.

This episode forms the only image I have of him, and although by that time it would have been at least 25 years since he had been demobbed, I still associated him with war – not its violence, but with a sparse unspoken presence that emanated from the aftermath. He died relatively young, a day marked in my mind by a bevelled mantelpiece mirror in a front room, dark as liquid, brimming with silently gathered people, shapes.

Foales had told me he had to admit to suppressing a snigger when, in all earnestness, I had said that rockets made me tearful, their stoic determination to overcome the reluctance of gravity – until that moment, seconds later when they are suddenly gripped by that abandonment, that surge of destructive mindless freedom. And all to the ticking of a clock. He sighed, looking upwards without hardly moving his head as a priest might.

I remember years before, him sweeping me up – little else – neither a face or a voice, only that swooping sensation as I hurtled up through space, swam kicking up into the sky, an earthly being become putto. But, in truth, whether it was him or one of my many towering uncles I cannot say.

She picked up her diary and allowed it to fall open at the point dictated by the carefully placed ribbon. The pages were divided into three, allowing seven narrow lines for each day. She glanced at the boldly written entries: Thursday. Bernard 3 p.m., Doctor Stevens 3.45 p.m., and wondered when they had been written, and by whom. Was today Thursday? The sun was high in the sky. She felt that she had already eaten, and imaged that it must already be the afternoon. Was she supposed to be somewhere? Was she late? She closed her eyes in order to attend to this new flutter of anxiety. But against the foreground glow of the sunlight on her skin and the more distant rustle of the beckoning breeze her thoughts again lost their definition. Ought she to write this down in the diary perhaps – that today there was not a cloud in the sky? But to do that she had to be sure it was Thursday. It troubled her greatly that she should record the wrong weather for the wrong day. Or would it be the right weather but on the wrong day? She opened her eyes, looked down again at the page whose powder white surface swam with newly intensified light, expecting to see the sky reflected there, its cobalt blue. She noticed a pair of enormous dark glasses, ludicrously oversized, on the table beside her, reflecting in perfect detail a double image of the garden, [rows of windows of the house behind] put them on hesitantly as if for the first time, and re-examined the cramped, mean spacing between the prim too delicate bronze-coloured lines which would never contain the words she wanted to write. The

bold entries that had already been written in covered three whole lines each. Never by her! To do the same would be unthinkable. As she sat pondering this, the wind flipped deftly through the coming weeks and months, pushing finally against the diary's rigid inside back cover, adjacent to which was a blank page, thicker and with a more absorbent texture than the rest. Carefully she smoothed the paper down along its spine. Had it not been for the layered whispers of the surrounding garden, the wind now pressing with more insistence the folds of her blouse against her sternum, you could perhaps, had you been standing awkwardly unnoticed behind her, have heard the whisper of her own skin as she slid her diminutive palm over the fibrous surface of the paper. Holding the diary open with the flat of her hand she groped for the nub of the slender pen that she instinctively knew slept within the leather spine, withdrawing it with great care in order not to drop it, and steadying her fingers against the page, she began to write, the ink flowering instantly as it touched the paper's thick porous surface. Flowing too easily into the veined fibres of the paper.

*

Approaching, his steps change with the light as he steps outside and enters.

—How is it with you, mum? he says.

—How is it with *me*... ?

She toys with this concept for a while. She mouths words to herself, barely audible: *greetings, stranger, how goes it with you?* She lets the words turn behind half-closed lids, spinning in their own space. The suggestion of a joke plays about the corner of her mouth. And at that point she is both her younger self and her older self. The light again granular as long before. Again, he is reduced to a shyness by the joke that played about the corner of her mouth, the world in all its wonder reduced to a point still shrinking within.

—Listen, she says, listen.

And they listen.

II

Critical commentary

After the Event

Formal decisions and contemporary context: a self-reflective commentary on the writing of *Sunnyland*.

Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing. . .

Roland Barthes, *The Death of the Author*

You could have sworn that things were thoughts which stopped half way, which forgot themselves, which forgot what they had wanted to think, and which stayed like that, swaying to and fro, with a funny little meaning which went beyond them.

Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*

We've noted that allegorical interpretation is frequently spurred by a lack of specificity or some other peculiarity in a work's temporal and geographical locatedness, rendering the literal interpretation problematic.

Derek Attridge, *Against Allegory*

Everything in the Universe is an echo. If the birds, in the opinion of certain dreaming linguists, are the first creators of sound who inspired men, they themselves imitated nature's voices.

Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams*

They are memories, memories of my waking hours, broken and mingled and altered.

J. M. Coetzee, *Foe*

A reflective self-commentary is offered on the main formal and experimental decisions made in the writing of my novel Sunnyland. These will be set within the context of a range of innovative contemporary fiction, considering in particular the authors W. G. Sebald, Tom McCarthy, Ali Smith, David Shields, Deborah Levy and Gabriel Josipovici.

Introduction

Fin-de-siècle lateness or postmillennial avant-gardism?

For Pieter Vermeulen, the contemporary novel as it emerges into the twenty-first century may be seen as “genre dying into form”. This, he suggests, can be presented as a positive revisioning of the novel’s function away from a role in which it has been assumed to have “inculcated and sustained a particular distribution of interiority, individuality, domesticity and community – a constellation that has defined modern life”, towards a deliberately staged dissolution of its own power – a paradoxically productive stance, says Vermeulen, that exploits the novel’s innate flexibility as form rather than genre in order to explore affective states beyond its traditional “emotive scenarios”.⁹

⁹ Pieter Vermeulen, *Contemporary Literature and the End of the Novel: Creature, Affect, Form* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 5.

A sense, then, of re-evaluation, of an introspection that follows a period of “aggrandisement” or hiatus, – perhaps part of what Robert Eaglestone sees as “a retreat from the extreme playfulness of postmodernism”; an afterwards, expressed in the continuing desire to attach the suffix of post- to movements which are seen to have passed; a sense of aftermath even, now that the twentieth century has attained the distance of other that allows it to come properly into view, and here one thinks of Eaglestone’s *Broken Voice* – his assessment of the broken voice of art as part of a kind of continuing aftermath from the Holocaust, which, following Kertész, he claims will “remain through culture, which is really the vessel of memory”.¹⁰

But establishing a time frame that might constitute the contemporary is a fraught exercise: already, to proffer readings of fiction defined as written after the turn of the century begins to suggest a degree of determinism – a persistent tendency, suggests Daniel Lea, “to understand literature as a function of history”, as linear, progressive, such that “in the wake of 9/11” becomes a constant refrain.¹¹ To make such connections is not my purpose here. But neither is it to avoid the appreciation of literary histories, or trajectories, which must inevitably and productively emerge in the evocation of proper names associated with the creative writer’s personal canon.

Indeed, it would be difficult to discuss writers who see themselves as part of an Avant-Garde, such as Tom McCarthy considered below, without taking into account some sense of progression and the anticipation of change. In fact,

¹⁰ Robert Eaglestone, "Contemporary Fiction in the Academy: Towards a Manifesto", vol. 27, 7, 2013, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2013.840113>.

¹¹ Daniel Lea, *Twenty-First-Century Fiction: Contemporary British Voices* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), 22.

McCarthy's inclusion here reflects a legacy of postmodern/post-structural thought which can be generally described as "antihumanist" in its approach to the representation of subjectivity and the challenge this presents to psychological realism; but also in a preoccupation with what Geoff Dyer calls "the temporal expressed in the spatial" – a situation manifest in McCarthy's novel *Remainder* (2005), in which the newly acquired wealth of its central protagonist – the result of corporate compensation after a head injury – is used to physically reconstruct the spaces (incidents/scenes) of his former life, as part of a series of "enactments" in all their geometric details, based on surviving fragments from his damaged memory – a scenario that recalls Borges' geometries of purpose, delivering the affectless quality associated with McCarthy's antihumanist designation, and with Ballard's "death of affect" found in early works such as *The Atrocity Exhibition* and *Crash*.

Although a primary focus in this study is on writers whose work covers the first two decades of the twenty-first century, their invocation here potentially reflects a spirit of both fin-de-siècle "lateness", and a postmillennial avant-gardism: the former perhaps a reaction to Frederick Jameson's conception of globalised "late capitalism" and its requirement of homogeneity and "frictionless transformation" in the pursuit of ever-increasing production, which Peter Boxall describes as the postmodernism experience of "the collaboration of constant change with a kind of homogenous stasis".¹² Accordingly, Boxall posits the notion of a "late style"

¹² Peter Boxall, *Twenty-First-Century Fiction: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 29.

developing in the wake of postmodernism as the latter's "explanatory power wanes", evidence of a kind of narrative fatigue, a withdrawal from the sweeping vistas of narrative possibility that postmodernism envisioned, and in its aftermath a sense of "untimeliness" – a register that responds to the state of "expired narratives with which we have made time readable".¹³ Boxall cites Roth, DeLillo, Ballard, amongst many others in representing what comes close to Jameson's "nostalgia mode" – not a psychological yearning for the past, but what Mark Fisher recognises as "a *formal* attachment to the techniques and formulas of the past" in order to understand what appears, in Boxall's words, as "the thin, unbound chronology of a new century, in which narrative itself is uncertain of its co-ordinates, and in which the technological and political forces which govern the passing of time become strange, new and unreadable."¹⁴

Boxall's preoccupation with the configuration of the temporal is itself perhaps an expression of the nostalgia mode in its elicitation of "chronology" as a dominant mode of reflection, in which disorientation is merely the result of variations in the velocity of the experience of time passing, or the manner in which time is contained or channelled through different conduits. Literary postmodernism here appears more closely associated with what, James Wood, writing in 2000, felt in a position to identify as "the big, ambitious novel", a work operating under a kind of new sub-genre he pejoratively terms "hysterical realism":

¹³ Boxall, 30.

¹⁴ Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2014), 17.

The big contemporary novel is a perpetual-motion machine that appears to have been embarrassed into velocity. It seems to want to abolish stillness, as if ashamed of silence—as it were, a criminal running endless charity marathons. Stories and sub-stories sprout on every page, as these novels continually flourish their glamorous congestion. Inseparable from this culture of permanent storytelling is the pursuit of vitality at all costs. Indeed, vitality is storytelling, as far as these books are concerned.¹⁵

Although it might be said that Woods appears to have invented a form of criticism that is well suited to this supposed new sub-genre, the above comments do highlight certain aspects of the novel as it emerged from the last decade of the twentieth century. It is characterised, according to Woods, by writers amongst whom might be numbered Salman Rushdie, Zadie Smith, David Foster Wallace, and Thomas Pynchon: terms such as “velocity”, “glamorous congestion”, “vitality at all costs” signalling a kind of delight in fictiveness, in which, for this type of novel, “storytelling has become a kind of grammar ... ; it is how they structure and drive themselves on.”

On the face of it, *Sunnyland*'s presentation of ever-changing conditions of diegesis, time period, and locale might align it with the kind of congestion and velocity that Woods refers to. I think my novel *is* motivated to a significant degree by the urge to unmoor itself from the “plausible” chronotope that configures time and space in the realist novel, or indeed in standard autobiographical accounts, that, for example, bind character to place and event. Vermeulen, following Massumi, finds this a condition in which “emotion is a subjective content ... intensity owned and

¹⁵ James Woods, “Human, All Too Inhuman” *The New Republic* July 2000
<https://newrepublic.com/article/61361/human-inhuman> [accessed 23/9/18]

recognised.”¹⁶ In the work that Woods mentions, place itself becomes highly representational as a cipher for *space* – the freedom of the spatial. The subject remains largely unsituated, no longer emotionally conditioned by a stable environment and is unchained from the restraints of temporal narrative logic. The following passage from *Sunnyland* indicates this will towards the spatial freedom of story – even as something embodied (the car’s engine like a quickening pulse) – and away from a grounding in place, locale:

We are really motoring now, the mountains falling away. Hear the blood-thick paddling clug of the Buick’s valves quicken. I glance over to you smiling into the image of you smiling back, but find you instead talking soundlessly into the wind. The movement of your hands indicates a story.¹⁷

Here the landscape falls away to become a mere backdrop; the language becomes self-consciously rhythmical, aware of its own aesthetic construction; the two characters exchange glances yet see only the “image” of each other. Already they are caught in the story’s self-referential sphere.

But in *Sunnyland*, this move to story, although expressing its own urge to proliferation, is usually quickly truncated. My aim here was to try to reinstate an awareness of place over space along the lines of Edward Casey’s concern for the status of place mentioned above.

What characterizes Casey’s work – with particular relation to my own, and to the writers cited in this study, is a dedication to what Bachelard terms: “time ... absorbed into psychic spatiality.” Indeed, Casey states that “the more we attend to

¹⁶ Vermeulen, 22.

¹⁷ *Sunnyland*, 299.

the topoi of psychic life, the more we realize that this life – contrary to what Kant and Bergson, James and Husserl contend – is not merely a function of its durational flow. Space, rather than time, is the form of “inner sense.” Casey’s main concern, however, is more specific: that the demotion of space in Western culture has caused place to become associated with “site”, that is, something geometrically configured.

Casey’s overriding thesis is that place has been usurped by space (expressed geometrically as site), has been usurped by time. Bachelard’s work challenges this Bergsonian view.

Casey’s reflections on memory tie it, *ipso facto*, to place, claiming that memory has come to be considered predominantly as a function of temporality, when in fact, for the ancients, embodied existence “opens onto place” – which is “to occupy a portion of space from out of which we both undergo given experiences and remember them”.

Through use of montage, *Sunnyland* exploits the relationship between memory and place, drawing upon Casey’s premise that space has become progressively supplanted in mainstream western culture by time, a view that might give credence to Boxall’s assessment of “untimeliness”, and that, as a consequence of the “devaluation” of the spatial, a more resonant interactive awareness of place has become reduced to the geometric configuration of “site” as a withered second order stand-in.¹⁸ For Casey, place functions as an overriding imperative within memory – yet its role is often overlooked as the result of an emphasis on narrative

¹⁸ Edward S. Casey, *The Fate of Place* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1997).

sequencing. By using a narrative arrangement of cutting and montage, *Sunnyland* juxtaposes various representations of ways in which place can be approached: through memory (often denoted by its more lyrical tone), by “omniscient” account in which the narrator gives no sense of being embedded in the scene, and through a more phenomenological, situated description. One aspect of the treatment of these different conditions in *Sunnyland* is not necessarily to blend them but to introduce a degree of formal “slippage” or drift – perhaps in order to subtly undermine the authority of the narrative account, but more importantly to suggest a dispersal of subjectivity. In fact, both tense and grammatical person are quite fluid in the novel. Much of the narrative *intends* towards the present tense – I envisaged this effect as a kind of gravity towards a situatedness in place. But I also wanted to suggest that in narrative, as in reality, the present is a highly contingent state, subject, amongst other things, to the constant interpellation of memory. In *Sunnyland*, the present is eroded by memory, and its function is a constant source of tension with the narrative’s present and becomes a constant preoccupation of the narrator. In the following passage, for example, it is as if the narrator struggles not with memory as such, but with the means by which he will construct his tale from its structures:

When, years ago... No let me begin again: Just recently, I walked into The Champanyet again, a bar ran by a family that made its own cava. The last time I had walked through that door, many years ago, was on my way out, and I had banged my head sharply on the metal shutter, which was partially lowered to indicate closing time. The air outside, I remember, was thick with the prospect of dawn¹⁹

¹⁹ *Sunnyland*, 120.

A few paragraphs later, having recounted the rest of the tale in the present tense, the man's entry into the bar is repeated. He is in the present tense again, but it is clear that this is a different moment in time.

It should be noted that a thorough ongoing analysis of memory and its temporal functioning is beyond this present study's focus, but the loss of memory, and the subsequent act of its re-remembering and reconstruction is an abiding trope in contemporary fiction, and here becomes a means of reconfiguring place, of releasing it from former subjective modes. The loss of memory is also the major conceit of McCarthy's *Remainder*. This also occurs in *Sunnyland*'s references to "dysnarratavia" in the "Big Data" chapter – a recognised clinical condition often associated with Alzheimer's disease that particularly attacks narrative sequencing of past events. Memory in *Sunnyland* is inimical, in the end, to Jons' own self-understanding, and becomes associated with the construction of unreliable narrative.

Topomnesia and Chora

Casey claims that, "To know a region is also to be able to *remember* it" [Casey's italics].²⁰ He uses the term topomnesia to describe, "The remembrance of place, especially that which informs a painter's rendition of a place or region he or she has once experienced in first person; in such memory, the place or topos constitutes the

²⁰ Edward S. Casey, *Representing Place: Landscape Painting and Maps* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 76.

major theme or primary concern, though not necessarily in an explicitly topographical manner".

Consider this passage from *Sunnyland*, in which the narrator's relationship to "a longed-for topography" starts to become clear:

But for now, I am going to indulge myself further, pursue my earlier course, its manner of telling at least: to reveal that *in the event, he made his arrival from down the dipping winding lane that ducks beneath the maternal hill that always* (it seemed to him, not just to him) *could itself see, itself breathe. A rolling down through the taut velvet splines of rusted beech, a gentle, physical descent, a coming down through a longed-for topography, pre-mapped, waiting.*

A longed-for topography – yes, that's it.

As I sit in this concrete room.

The first approach that he makes suggests a to-be-realised potential, the second, a becoming. Either of those things I would be satisfied with, would centre him somewhere within that very map. Stop him falling off its edge.²¹

Here, I wanted to convey a kind of collusion between memory that is "pre-mapped" and the sense that what develops is also the result of rhetorical choice. In one sense I am trying to convey the novel's ambivalence towards these opposing positions. The use of italics dividing the sentence is intended to further suggest such a dialogic situation. But, of the many conflicting concepts of self, that which I feel resonates strongly with the writing of *Sunnyland* is perhaps best summed up by Julia Kristeva's notion of "chora" – that imaginary pre-linguistic space in which, under the protection of the mother, the self starts to find form through bodily rhythms and

²¹ *Sunnyland*, 24.

gestures. This sense is not lost when the subject enters the “symbolic order” of language. For Kristeva, this pre-linguistic condition is particularly prevalent in poetic language. Indeed, following Kristeva, Celia Hunt claims that such a state “has the power to disrupt our tendency to take on fixed identities in language and helps us to be subjects-in-process”.²²

Such moments in the narrative also serve to highlight a belief in the in-process of writing as form – a theme taken up by H  l  ne Cixous, who uses the term *  crivance* (unhappily translated as “writingness”), or “the course of the writing.”²³

The idea of chora, for me also suggests a connection between topography and the way in which it might be experienced through the body kinaesthetically as rhythm – in rising and falling, descent and ascent, as one moves across a particular terrain. Apart from the example given above, there are several examples in the novel where embodied sensation is used to connect the subject physically (in contrast to aesthetically) with the immediate environment, beginning with the young narrating “I” falling from the tree in the prologue:

At that age, it takes a long time to fall 25 feet, and when my body finally reached the ground it seemed to resonate with it as one. In the throb of impact I became aware of the massy stubbornness of the Earth, its dull muscular deeps extending to my very core through the loamy turf and hidden bands of tactile clay. Of course, at the time I would have been unaware of these last geological details, which could only be added later, but the impressions associated with that brief and endless moment as I fell have never left me, something I will never forget: amidst this tumble of events

²² Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language* (Columbia University Press, 1984). Cited in Hunt and Sampson, *Writing*.

²³ H  l  ne Cixous, *Rootprints; Memory and Life Writing* (London: Routledge, 1997), 11.

and visual images, at the silent eye of all that chaos, lies one single sensation: an act of falling.²⁴

The peri-autobiographical

Central to the writing of *Sunnyland* is an exploration of what James Olney has referred to as the “peri-autobiographical”: a concern with the articulation of self, or indeed of no-self, through the broadly defined category of autobiography.²⁵ In this regard, I acknowledge Vermeulen’s assessment of the postmillennial novel, in which “formal innovations shape a re-imagining of agency and subjectivity”, comments related to his own analysis of what he calls “post-human affect” – a dissolving of the “emotionally directed causalities” found in the realist novel.”²⁶ This sentiment is expressed perhaps more cogently by Blake Morrison, who finds in his reading of fiction shortlisted for the 2018 Goldsmiths Prize evidence of the search for “not the old stable ego”, but for “some other rhythmic form”. The representation of self in relation to environment and an exploration of the forms this might take within the “fictional” novel are at the heart of *Sunnyland*.

In his 2013 essay, “Contemporary fiction in the academy: towards a manifesto”, Eaglestone makes the assertion that Barthes’ “death of the author” needs

²⁴ *Sunnyland*, xiv.

²⁵ James Olney, ed., *Autobiography, Essays Theoretical and Critical* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1980).

²⁶ Pieter Vermeulen, *Contemporary Literature and the End of the Novel: Creature, Affect, Form* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

to be revisited and revised, that the “standard “author is dead” argument looks more and more hokey”.³⁵ Eaglestone is not simply making a point about the availability and exposure of the contemporary author as part of the media spectacle, in which the “temptation to stop trying to work out “what a book thinks” and instead turn to what an author says is very strong”.³⁶ He is perhaps alluding also to something more structural: that of the “autobiographical self”, a notion which takes into account Paul de Man’s qualified assertion that autobiography “is not a genre or a mode, but a figure of reading or of understanding that occurs, to some degree, in all texts”.³⁷ Fiction might be built, therefore, not simply from what Gérard Genette calls “concomitance”, those happy concordances between factual and fictional events, times and places (here, de Man cites Proust), but rather, autobiography seen as a fictional trope – or more importantly for de Man, that autobiography, like fiction, is fundamentally “tropological”.³⁸ And, as Celia Hunt points out, Barthes’ “theory of impersonality”, his authorial death, is more nuanced than simply removing the autobiographical element from fiction.³⁹ This study, asks, therefore, under what terms might the author-role be regarded in contemporary fiction, and how might *Sunnyland* be seen in relation to the possibility of reconciling impersonality with some form of situated subjectivity.

³⁵ Robert Eaglestone. “Contemporary fiction in the academy: towards a manifesto” *Textual Practice*, vol. 27, no. 7, pp. 1089-1101.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 1096.

³⁷ Paul de Man, "Autobiography as De-facement" *MLN*, Vol. 94, No. 5, *Comparative Literature*. (Dec., 1979), pp. 919-930, 921.

³⁸ de Man, *Ibid.*

³⁹ Celia Hunt and Fiona Sampson, *Writing: Self and Reflexivity*, 2005 edition (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire ; New York: Palgrave, 2005). 23.

The writers I consider here will therefore be considered in these terms; specifically, how various manifestations of the concept of self are given formal representation in relation to the experiential, that which is lived as “spatial event” of the text – what Angharad Saunders, following Sheila Hones, describes as a condition in which “text, self and social space exist in an iterative and reiterative relationship”.³²

Of the writers represented in this study: on one hand there is, Tom McCarthy’s clearly stated ethic of non-relatability – “the author as “waste product” of the work, the “post-Barthesian author, a ghost at the banquet, embarrassingly surplus to requirements”, somewhat at odds, perhaps, with the “author-as-Messiah” figure who stands on the conference platform; and on the other hand, there is Ali Smith, whose characters appear to inhabit a world that both author and reader might – if the latter submits to a few ontological reconfigurations – call home, may well call modern Britain – a place where Ali Smith the author, Ali Smith the critic, Ali Smith the public figure, and Ali Smith as the many implied others might exist as a single protagonist.³³ Amongst these writers, Deborah Levy is the exilic figure, her fiction occupying liminal, affective geographies. In her most recent work these become holiday destinations, coastlines – both modern consumer, and ancient mythologies vying with the quotidian in palimpsestic relation – places where the ontology of the visitor/traveller/outsider may or may never coincide with that of the dweller. Identity becomes a question of achieving some inner recognition in order to

³² Angharad Saunders, "The Spatial Event of Writing: John Galsworthy and the creation of *Fraternity*", *Cultural Geographies* 20(3), 18.06.2013, 285-298, 285.

³³ Dennis Duncan et al., *Tom McCarthy: Critical Essays*, 1st edition (Canterbury, UK: Gylphi Limited, 2016).

synthesise an exterior condition with which it appeared to be in conflict. In Levy's *Hot Milk*, as well as in her personal memoir, this involves recovering a memory of oneself, only so that self as ego be relinquished. The distinction between inner and outer has already dissolved in the reclamation of space through and in spite of language, a translation across borders and categories. It is this aspect of the translational relation as a form of connectivity that is central to the writing of *Sunnyland*.

If such dislocation in movement across borders is palpable in Sebald's *Rings of Saturn*, this is in part due to that novel's sometimes overlooked status as an interlingual translation, produced through a close collaboration between the author and his translator from German, Michael Hulse. Already, then, the English text possesses a kind of dissonance, the "spectrality" that gives the prose its curious appeal, as if an intervening layer has been placed between the subject and the object of its intention. Augustan, syntactical sentences of extended qualifying clauses are placed upon a landscape more usually associated with unassuming simplicity, to hold it within a grid of seemingly unfamiliar historical and geographical association. I use the term "placed upon" here, rather than "constructed", because the translation manages to imply a quality of surface, of mapping, while intending towards a deeper topography that occurs or is constructed *elsewhere*. It is this formal aesthetic – again, one might call it *extraterritorial* – that interested me as an instrument to explore the theme of homecoming in *Sunnyland*. What continues to emerge here is the theme of connectivity. Indeed, Daniel Lea, in his study of twenty-first century fiction identifies

connectivity, in relation to questions of materiality and authenticity (noting in the latter “a widespread sophistication in the reading of the simulacrum’s artificiality”), as a major concern of contemporary fiction.³⁴

The itinerant altermodern

In his 2009 work, *The Radicant*, the art curator, Nicolas Bourriaud presents a theory of relational aesthetics in which the organising trope is “the radicant”, a plant that, like ivy, puts out runners directed by chance “that root in haphazard, unpredictable, and often temporary ways” – an image that clearly echoes Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s image of the “rhizome” in its application as the perceived shift towards a “rhizomic” short-term memory: “in no way subject to a law of contiguity or immediacy to its object; it can act at a distance, come or return a long time after, but always under conditions of discontinuity, rupture, and multiplicity.”³⁵

Bourriaud describes the “nomadic altermodern” – a mode of wandering and translation which “sets in motion an object of thought by inserting in into a chain”.³⁶ *Sunnyland*’s use of different registers, its different “textual ontologies”, and its use of montage, might be conceived as a relational aesthetics – a form of exterior dialogics.

³⁴ Daniel Lea, *Twenty-First-Century Fiction*. Contemporary British Voices (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), 22.

³⁵ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: Continuum, 2004).

³⁶ Nicolas Bourriaud, *The Radicant* (New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2009), 51.

In this respect, if *Sunnyland* does possess an overarching chronotope that might connect its various realities, it might be described as that of itinerancy, as in this passage:

That place where everything stays. The shadows that soak back into the sand, the branches that fall already bone-dry from the trees; your passing, and mine. These paths etched like crayon on a dun-coloured page remain untouched by the wind or the rain, as if of other matter, oblivious to the drift of time or human season.

This present path you walked before. You find footprints often, maybe your own.³⁷
[italics in original]

The memories it describes are of transient states, of passing through – as such, they cannot be used to anchor identity to place as a grounding principle in historised *time* – as part of a causal narrative, for instance. A similar condition is expressed by Sebald: often the only way that such memories can be processed is through the atemporality of dream:

I gazed farther and farther out to sea, to where the darkness was thickest and where there extended a cloudbank of the most curious shape, which I could barely make out any longer, the rearward view, I presume, of the storm that had broken over Southwold in the late afternoon. For a while, the topmost summit regions of this massif, dark as ink, glistened like the icefields of the Caucasus, and as I watched the glare fade I remembered that years before, in a dream, I had once walked the entire length of a mountain range just as remote and just as unfamiliar. It must have been a distance of a thousand miles or more, through ravines, gorges and valleys, across ridges, slopes and drifts, along the edges of great forests, over wastes of rock, shale and snow. And I recalled that in my dream, once I had reached the end of my journey, I looked back, and that it was six o'clock in the evening.³⁸

³⁷ *Sunnyland*, 37.

³⁸ Sebald, 79.

Time seems compressed into space, incidental to it, trivialised to become the object of surrealist symbol. But the impression is of the self as mutable, changing.

Paradoxically, given his text's excavation of hidden historical trauma, Sebald's relationship with the landscape expresses itself initially as a kind of ease: "seldom have I felt so carefree as I did then, walking for hours in the day through the thinly populated countryside, which stretches inland from the coast."³⁹ It is the kind of ease, perhaps, that Barthes regarded as "an ethical force ... the deliberate loss of all heroism", a kind of submission of will as an act of immersion. It is only in retrospect that the "paralysing horror ... when confronted with the traces of destruction" make their full impact, as if only memory can initiate this process.⁴⁰ But in Sebald, "the loss of all heroism" equates to a muting of subjectivity that allows for transitional, affective states, which, in contrast to emotion seen as "subjective content", is, following Vermeulen, "an impersonal dynamic principle that cuts across personal feelings and experiences."

³⁹ Sebald, 3.

⁴⁰ Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 44.

Staging the Contemporary

Re-placing the self: J.G Ballard

In the introduction to the French edition of his novel, *Crash* (1973), J. G. Ballard speaks of the “death of affect” as the “most terrifying casualty of the twentieth century” – the second phrase, already expressing that characteristic Ballardian imprecision, indexes, perhaps, the underlying instability of mind that his novels seem to portray, while the first is more firmly off the mark, at least in our early twenty-first century understanding of the term “affect”.⁴¹ What Ballard is actually referring to is the death of the encoding of feeling and emotion experienced by character in response to external events. In fact, as explorations of the “diseases of the psyche” in which “we are still reminded of Freud’s profound pessimism in *Civilization and its Discontents*. Voyeurism, self-disgust, the infantile basis of our dreams and longings”, Ballard’s *Crash*, and its prototype, *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970), are in fact redolent in affect, at least as presage to what we might now term the post-human.

When one thinks of Ballard’s early prototype for later work, *The Atrocity Exhibition*, for example, we are already being presented with the image devoid of

⁴¹ J.G. Ballard, introduction to the French Edition of *Crash*, reprinted in Emma Whiting, "Disaffection and Abjection in J. G. Ballard's *The Atrocity Exhibition* and *Crash*." In: Baxter J., Wymer R. (eds) *J. G. Ballard: Visions and Revisions* (London Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 96.

feeling, of an unemotive sensory register, the novel's topography expressing at every turn an exteriority, of angles and surfaces upon which blown up images of the human body are projected to become non-human landscapes, what William Burroughs describes in his preface to the novel as "a psychopathology ... so lunar and abstract that people will become mere extensions of the geometries of situations."⁴²

This is a novel without apparent plot – its time is indeed "out of joint", continuity between short vignette-like passages provided only by the set of characters who inhabit the delimited but ever-mutating space of a psychiatric hospital and its immediate environs. And it is clear that for Ballard the machine age has given way to the age of the image, images already splintered as if by machine-destruction:

Dr Nathan limped along the drainage culvert, peering at the huge figure of a dark-haired woman painted on the sloping walls of the blockhouse. The magnification was enormous. The wall on his right, the size of a tennis court, contained little more than the right eye and cheekbone. He recognized the woman from the billboards he had seen near the hospital – the screen actress, Elizabeth Taylor. Yet these designs were more than enormous replicas. They were equations that embodied the relationship between the identity of the film actress and the audiences who were distant reflections of her. The planes of their lives interlocked at oblique angles, fragments of personal myths fusing with the commercial cosmologies. The presiding deity of their lives the film actress provided a set of operating formulae for their passage through consciousness.⁴³

The prescience of these vast blown up images, projected onto almost every surface, precludes memory and its associative emotions. The effect is disturbing. In

⁴² J. G. Ballard, *The Atrocity Exhibition* (London: Flamingo, 2002), 1.

⁴³ Ballard, 13.

the omnipresence of the image we have in fact lost our memory, and the desire on which memory feeds is blocked, or short-circuited.

Matt Smith describes a “psychic aetiology” to be found in Ballard’s work, consisting in a “fundamental tonal shift in the category of the emotions”.⁴⁴ The shock effected in the reader of Ballard’s scenarios is matched by “a mutation in emotional sensibility towards a certain dampening of affective response, or a shattering of subjectivity” in the narration.

Tom McCarthy's spatial unease

As we have seen, J. G. Ballard was already able to make claims regarding “the death of affect” in his early novel *The Atrocity Exhibition* – and the rejection of an “absolute authentic self” in favour of a perceiving subject whose reality is spatially determined through a preoccupation with surface and the projection of fractured, incomplete image. And it is these tropes of “spatial turn” that are so prominent and elaborated in McCarthy’s work. His “millennial” novel *Remainder* in many ways serving as a fictional incarnation of the author’s own critical pronouncements that express an essential anti-humanism, alongside his output of “manifestos” and installations produced in conjunction with his “semi-fictitious” organisation, The International Necronautical Society, co-founded with philosopher Simon Critchley. The attempt is to reframe a critical space, couched in the terms of a new beginning,

⁴⁴ Matt Smith, “The Work of Emotion: Ballard and the Death of Affect”, <https://www.scribd.com/document/162277262/> [accessed 12/10/18]

consciously reminiscent of other avant-garde movements of the earlier twentieth century such as Dada or Surrealism. Within this context, *Remainder* emerges very much as a “millennial” novel, McCarthy himself openly acknowledging his postmodern and poststructuralist roots, while at the same time looking forwards to something that could be built from such a heritage to carry into the twenty-first century.⁴⁵ In a strong parallel with Ballard’s remarks concerning subjectivity, he states:

you need to reject certain models of subjectivity – for example, the contemporary cult of the individual, the absolute authentic self who is measured through his or her absolutely authentic feeling⁴⁶

Indeed, Dennis Duncan claims that “novelistic character, in the form of an explicit and recognizable connection between situation and emotion has been McCarthy's principal *bête noir*.”⁴⁷ In this present study, Tom McCarthy can be seen both as a representative of an avant-garde as it exists in contemporary fiction over the last twenty years, and as an ambassador for an earlier era of experimental fiction that might be characterised by Ballard’s “spatial affects”, and representative of an attitude that sees the intervening “big narrative” of Salman Rushdie and other British “magical realist” authors of that period which James Woods identifies as a kind of aberration. McCarthy’s work can also be seen as an expression of the frustration that the spatial turn elaborated by Borges, Ballard, Pynchon, Calvino et al. had not been

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Dennis Duncan et al., Tom McCarthy. *Critical Essays* (Canterbury: Gylphi, 2016), 5.

⁴⁷ Dennis Duncan, 5.

followed up on. His overarching aesthetic is one of geometry: his characters possess a parodic geometry of purpose. Their subjective agency directed at their intended object with an uber-linearity, to become a means of exploding the realist novel's causal pact between character, emotion and place.⁴⁸

If, as Eaglestone suggests, contemporary literature plays out the creative collision between phenomenology and poststructuralism, *Remainder*, it seems to me starts to explore possible “lines of flight” from its own clear grounding in poststructuralist thought, through moments of what might be described as “phenomenological intensity” expressed in terms of a sense of embodiment that almost resembles epiphany. For example, our protagonist, having plotted every possible outcome of the bank raid with geometric precision in his mind – an exercise where all contingency appears to have been removed – is stopped in his tracks during the raid itself, not by the chaos about to ensue when one of his gang is accidentally shot, but by the wound caused by the gunshot, which he gazes at in fascination, as time appears to stop:

When I brought my eyes right up to it, I saw that it was riddled with tiny holes – natural, pin-prick holes, like breathing holes. Much bigger, irregular cracks had opened among these where bits of shot had entered him. I could see some way into the tunnels that the cracks' insides formed, but then they turned and narrowed as they disappeared deeper inside him. “Yes, really like a sponge,” I said.

Then I was walking from the bank. I walked quite calmly. No one tried to stop me. They all ran and screamed and bumped and fell – but I had a cylinder around me, an airlock. I was walking calmly through the bank's door, out into the daylight again. I was walking across the street, passing the yellow and white lines, the spot where the raised patch wasn't. Then I was in the car

⁴⁸ Although, Pieter Vermeulen suggests that, “*Remainder* conveys a range of affects that can neither be conflated with the traditional emotional repertoire of the novel nor with the studied affectlessness of McCarthy's high-minded programmatic declarations.” See Vermeulen, 21.

again and it was pulling out, cutting an arc across the middle of the street, pausing, then gliding on. The street was rotating slowly round: the mothers with pushchairs and the traffic and the traffic wardens and the people at the bus stops and the other windows full of their reflections – rotating around me. I was an astronaut suspended, slowly turning, among galaxies of coloured matter.⁵⁰

McCarthy's own critical pronouncements indicate an impatience to resume the programme of "studied affectlessness" that one might associate with Ballard. Yet, as Vermeulen notes, in *Remainder* this is not really achieved – instead, the novel succeeds only in "transmitting weak, dysphoric, and uneasy affects" while nonetheless managing to free itself from the "traditional emotional repertoire" of the realist novel. I would argue, moreover, that amidst this incomplete rehearsal for a new death of affect, the novel, in spite of itself, continually yearns for a transcendence beyond its narrative condition, in which space takes on a new intensity that delivers it far beyond the geometrical plotting of "sites" that takes up much of the novel's action – although given the schizoid nature of the protagonist, these privileged moments of insight appear as something more messianic than Joycean epiphany – a constant tension in the novel as the writing appears to seek to transcend its own meticulously rendered space, producing those "uneasy affects", perhaps, noted by Vermeulen.

The "site" of McCarthy's London is a highly recognisable one, in fact a characteristic feature of the cult novels of, for example, Noon, Sebald, Pynchon, Auster, is that they all bear a strong particularity in their relation to place, which sits at odds with any relatability – the lens of the grotesque is not turned towards

⁵⁰ Tom McCarthy, *Remainder* (London: Alma Books, 2007), 263.

character so much as to landscape: there are horrors that lurk and extend into places we recognise, whether they be in the geometrical configuration of space: suffocatingly linear in the London of McCarthy's *Remainder*, or circulatory, mirrored concatenation in Auster's *New York Trilogy* – both works *extruding* their respective protagonists' frustration in their failure to achieve a coherent sense of self from the places which they might otherwise have regarded as familiar, “homely”, to become something unsettling yet mobile – consciousness becoming unanchored yet possessing in its fluidity that same edgy potential for transcendence – it *extends*, and its effect is transformative. The *mould* of place is broken.

This image of flow and extension is key in the prologue to *Sunnyland*, where “the pyroclastic flow” of junk spilling out from the windows of the childhood home expresses a sense that meanings are as if “pressed out” from former constraints which can no longer be contained. The gothic trope of the old house, rooted in its own historical and (and therefore ultimately) alien time – its otherness produced by a history that only exists in material traces – is itself mutable and unfixed, its boundaries unmade, as walls and ceilings collapse or are “kicked in and smashed” and ghosts float “back pedalling in open space.”⁵¹

Such decoding is evident in more extreme form in Sebald's East Anglia, where a landscape richly enculturated into the “pastoral familiar” is delivered from its otherwise synchronic bliss: a flattened timeless dreamscape, neutralised into a lyrical aesthetic by artists like Constable – is darkened by the suggestion of nightmare, by a

⁵¹ *Sunnyland*, xi.

re-historicising connectivity, a reminder of Eaglestone's "broken voice" and its traces of the Holocaust.

In McCarthy's *Remainder*, the historicising potential of memory is thwarted – indeed, its disfunction in the narrator creates the immanent phenomenological environment which he inhabits, in which there is no prior experience upon which to establish norms of behaviour – simply fragments which he must piece back together – except that in doing so, the emotional bond to place that he longs to recover rings with a troubling inauthenticity. But in spite of its anti-humanist credentials, the novel demonstrates a renewed interest in the texture of experience as a means of understanding how the relationship between time and space be recalibrated through what McCarthy describes as his "formalism", a fascination with the patterning of circuits and visible communication channels as rhythmic forms.

Memory loss, of course, has been an enduring trope emerging from the later fiction of the last millennium. A notable example in terms of this present study and *Sunnyland's* staged levels of narrative uncertainty would be Martin Amis' *Other People* (1981), with its confessional first-person prologue which serves to conflate the author/narrator role, where author-as-murder-as-narrator become identified as one, serving, in Amis' case, as a reflexive comment on the author's own meta-narrative technique. In this case, Amis provides an uncomfortable twist to metafiction's urge for the reader's simultaneous immersion in and exteriority to the action: "I didn't want to have to do it to her ... That's life, as I say, and my most sacred duty is to

make it lifelike.”⁵² Such a device projects the writer back from the text as avatar, back into the real world.

Such conflation is not apparently evident in McCarthy, where any notion of an emergent writerly self is subsumed – on the face of it – by an ardent post-humanism, the author himself claiming that the contemporary novel concerns “not selves, but networks”.⁵³ In his own novel, *Remainder*, the reader is constantly reminded of this: its protagonist, in fact, confesses to a kind of “nausea” developing if he is unable to situate himself spatially via a network of connectivity:

Riding to Heathrow on the tube, I experienced echoes of the same uneasiness, the same nausea. I kept them at bay by thinking that the rails were linked to wires that linked to boxes and to other wires above the ground to wires that ran along the streets, connecting us to them and my flat to ground the airport and the phone box to Daubenay’s office.⁵⁴

Nick Lavery finds in passages such as this as evidence of the move towards an expression of a "distributed consciousness" within the novel form, claiming that *Remainder* "embodies the post-human in its understanding of consciousness", namely that McCarthy demonstrates an awareness of individual consciousness as it has been traditionally represented in literary narrative "as a product of material and technological processes flowing beyond the boundaries of the individual."⁵⁵ While Henderson Downing suggests that Tom McCarthy's fascination with pattern

⁵² Martin Amis, *Other People* (London: Penguin, 1982), 9.

⁵³ Nick Lavery, "Post-Humanism and the Distributed Consciousness in Tom McCarthy's *Remainder*." In Dennis Duncan (ed.) *Tom McCarthy: Critical Essays* (Canterbury: Glyphi Limited, 2016), 162.

⁵⁴ McCarthy, 16.

⁵⁵ Lavery, 162.

recognition and repetition – which McCarthy himself describes as a symptom of neurosis/psychosis – is echoed in Iain Sinclair’s “paranoid-critical register”, associated with what Sinclair himself terms “compulsive associatism”⁵⁶. In this there is a corollary with Tom McCarthy’s preoccupation with “re-routing” – Tom McCarthy specifically refers to the rerouting of neural pathways in *Remainder* as the narrator undergoes treatment for his head injury in order to regain articulation in his limbs. With Sinclair’s project a similar process is taking place with cultural memory, in which our attention is being rerouted through previously neglected or “unused” areas of our cultural history. And like Tom McCarthy’s protagonist, the absorption in this task is total, leading to a curious centring of the focaliser – and particularly in situating Sinclair’s own avatar, in its postmodern renegotiation of space. Lavery argues that McCarthy’s work wrestles with the novel form’s awareness of consciousness as “determined by a complexity it cannot express” – a move which attempts to relegate the individual to merely one component in a connective chain. Ultimately, however, it remains to be seen the extent to which writers such as Sinclair and McCarthy actually achieve any such dissolution of self, since their work bears so distinctly its own stamp of authorial control in the channelling of its own respective individual manifesto.

The insistence on pattern recognition and repetition mentioned above also occurs in *Sunnyland*, where the privileging of topography as a form of patterning is registered in the encounter with landscape – more particularly, how the different

⁵⁶ See Henderson Downing, “Crypt, Craft, Crackle The INS at the ICA. Two Times.” In Dennis Duncan (ed.) *Tom McCarthy: Critical Essays* (Canterbury: Gylphi Limited, 2016).

textures assigned to space in relation to self are configured through *Sunnyland's* attempt at different tonal register. One of the guiding principles of the novel, therefore, is to explore how "affect" might operate as "texture", and as an indicator of how self is conceived and constructed as a result of the novel's formal decisions, where the self is seen as an expression of a "reflexive mode or modes of presentation".⁵⁷ This theme of self-presentation is also pursued by Denise Riley, who takes the stance that "we are strangers in language", but whose work is suggestive of claims that autobiography, in apparent contrast to McCarthy's antihumanist stance, has become the dominant mode of the contemporary novel – from Sebald's "non-fictional" novels to Rachael Cusk's incursions into the real-world of personal events. Riley notes, however, that "the whole tendentious affair of self-presentation – partly because of its extraordinary overdetermination of linguistic with phenomenological peculiarities – is a site of strain."⁵⁸ Such strain emerges in *Remainder* as a kind of affective surplus which prevents the author's withdrawal from the text as a centralising force, in spite of its apparent move towards dispersal. In *Sunnyland*, one of my principle aims was to explore this tension as formal process, what Hélène Cixoux describes as "in-process", drawing upon this very linguistic "overdetermination" (my protagonist, like McCarthy's, suffering from a kind of psychosis) as it confronts the "phenomenological".

⁵⁷ See James David Velleman, *Self to Self: Selected Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 1.

⁵⁸ Denise Riley, *The Words of Selves: Identification, Solidarity, Irony* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 5.

McCarthy's entire oeuvre would seem to want to mitigate against the humanist notion of the isolated individual who writes in order to deliver a coherent means of self-expression. But for McCarthy, this does not result in a crisis of formal representation as it did for literary modernism (one thinks of Joyce's Bloom listening to a radio transmission, the content of its broadcast represented by a jumble of letters on the page). In this sense, McCarthy "lets language alone", and the formal linguistic structures of descriptive realism are left intact. Rather, the problem is seen as a Cartesian one – the persistent notion of consciousness' separation from matter. On hearing of a nearby gangland shooting, *Remainder's* protagonist decides to re-enact it as if in a scene from a film. Such enactments form the core of the novel's action, as its distinctively unreliable narrator, victim of brain injury that has involved partial memory loss, embarks on a programme of rehabilitation involving immaculately staged recreations of past events. The following scene, in which the narrator himself takes the role of the murdered gang member, is typical, and clearly demonstrates the author's urge to solve the Cartesian problem:

The truth is that, for me, this man had become a symbol of perfection ... dying beside the bollards on the tarmac he'd done what I wanted to do: merged with the space around him, sunk and flowed into it until there was no distance between it and him – and merged, too, with his actions, merged to the extent of having no more consciousness of them. He'd stopped being separate, removed, imperfect ... both mind and actions had resolved themselves into pure stasis. The spot that this had happened on was the ground zero of perfection – all perfection: the one he'd achieved, the one I wanted, the one everyone else wanted ... And so I had to re-enact his death: for myself, certainly, but for the world in general as well. No one who understands this could accuse me of not being generous.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ McCarthy, 177.

In McCarthy's *Remainder*, the central protagonist struggles constantly with the attempt to reduce the complexity of experience in a contemporary world to something he can grasp – even memory, scenes from which he tries to reproduce using actors and props as if in a film, is subjected to such a reduction. And it is clear in *Remainder*, that the conventions of realism that the novel employs itself represent this process.

But what may strike the reader of *Remainder* is not only the obsessive mimetic configuration of space, but the claustrophobic intensity of the novel's narrative time, which plods relentlessly towards a denouement whose lines are drawn up from the very beginning. We know early on in the novel that things are going to end badly – we sense a tension which we know, by convention, can only be resolved through a mounting escalation of violence, that somehow this most controlling of protagonists can only let control slip from his grasp; and we sense also that in this novel's evocation of what might seem a kind of hyper-realism, signalling the very artifice of the constructed world which realism presents, that disaster awaits here too. "Plotting" is returned to its geometric roots, allowing the protagonist an unemotive spatial freedom – having lost his memory he has lost any sense of ethical responsibility – the link between the sensory, the experiential, and what might once have been structured as "emotional response" has been realigned.

In the end, it is *Remainder*'s commitment to linear plotting which causes what Vermeulen terms "weak affects" to predominate. But the completeness of its autistic

vision might worry us, the slavery that it entails for the re-enactors, the people the protagonist employs to tirelessly repeat episodes from his previous life prior to his injury, points us towards its missing empathy and becomes a form of tyranny.

Sunnyland's protagonist is also torn between the urge to reduce the complexity of experience to language and its contingent association with memory, and a parallel desire to succumb to a kind of transcendent connectivity. In this struggle, he finds in language an insistence on a centred selfhood which he is unable to realise on one hand, with a dispersal of self on the other which continually tends towards his removal from the text as an identifiable presence. In attempting to explore this site of what Denise Riley might describe as "trouble", the novel deploys conventions of realism also, but in much more fragmented and oscillatory form. Paradoxically, McCarthy's relentlessly plotted determinism points always to a thwarted desire for an unobtainable transcendence also, in which the scenes of "material epiphany" that the author seems unable but to indulge in, provide evidence. In this sense, the novel bypasses reality – leaving it obscured somewhere between its highly staged representational form and this transcendental never-to-be realised urge. The book has an almost religious quality in this respect. *Sunnyland*, too, has its movements of heightened awareness in which the text, or the self that it represents, seems to want to point outside itself – the cliff scene (26), in which Jons appears to levitate upon the suggested realisation that he has the power to narrate the story he is in, I would offer as an example (the powers of levitation are also a routine, uncommented-upon

phenomenon, which convey an expression of delight, in Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*).

Here, as in McCarthy, such movements seem to combine an enhanced drive to aesthetic description with the sudden awareness of some form of pre-linguistic materiality that approaches Kristeva's "chora".

Sunnyland is conceived as an exploration of topographical writing that endeavours to explore creatively the interaction between physical space and the human mind, which to an extent must envisage landscape as in some way related to mental states as a humanist legacy, and which in other respects links to the spirit of connectivity embraced by psychogeography and its successor deep topography. My aim is to explore decentring strategies, that is, to eschew the idea of an individual self as the processing focal point. In its aesthetic of meander and *dérive*, and its sense of encounter with landscape *Sunnyland* shares some of the features associated with what Ali Smith describes as the "relentless connectivity" of Sebald and the psychogeography of, for example, Iain Sinclair, or the subsequent deep topography of Nick Papadimitriou. But my novel seeks a connectivity of a different nature. Rather than the observation of objects as interconnected phenomena, with an individual self as a locus, *Sunnyland* entertains a view of self that, as James Velleman suggests, "does not denote any one entity but rather expresses a *reflexive guise* under which parts or aspects of a person are presented to his own mind" [my emphasis]. Velleman claims that, "this view stands in opposition to the view currently prevailing

... that the self is a proper part of a person's psychology, comprising those characteristics and attitudes without which the person would no longer be himself."

Sunnyland seeks a connectivity of aesthetic or rhetorical performance through its different registers, in which exteriority and dispersal of self replaces interiority.

Memoir: re-collection as form

Sunnyland uses memoir as its containing form, so that the text operates under the aegis of memory and re-collection (the associated trope in the novel is the found object, the chanced-upon relic of some proper existence). Memoir as form also suggests a reflexive aspect to the writing's own organisation, that is, its own attitude towards self as an instrument of construction. Travelogue, and epistolary passages are also present – forms conventionally employing first-person narration, but the novel deals with other voicings and subjectivities relating to both named and unnamed characters.

Memoir may be distinguished from autobiography in that it is more a question of "self finding form" than a life seeking a shape. This is *Sunnyland's* main protagonist, Jons' quest – ostensibly as an activity directed towards his father – a simple act of biography. Yet ultimately, this is a task which relates to himself. Here, topological passages are inserted into the narrative as acts of reading which Jons undertakes, intended to convey a sense of a contemporary world that might resemble, perhaps, a psychogeographic text from Iain Sinclair or Will Self in a kind of neurosis of connectivity – except that here there is a wilful conflation of place, as one place

becomes translated by another so that their respective referential codes become mixed:

Already, as one approaches Peterborough, there is a sense that soon this must end, and soon, as if in confirmation, the low dark foothills of Nagano can be seen in the distance, backbone of the main island, hub of its seismic trance, with its lounging macaques, its small ill-tempered bears. And heading into Essex, an intermediate zone, the first temples pushing up between the tiled roofs towards Ito, glinting ditches amidst the concrete, snatches of bamboo and pine, uncertain areas of sea nudged up against the slip roads, the lorry parks. The light-gauge railways, their trains like fairground toys. The great stone Buddha, vast, immobile, implacable against the tsunamis that have at various points engulfed it, only its great head visible and still smiling above the swollen surface of the greater surrounding ocean.⁶⁰

As the passage continues, I wanted to provide an association with Jons' own dilemma, if what he seeks is to draw the exterior into an "inner" form:

Yes, a concentration of places within a space that had no form, and gave no sense of space as you travelled across it, negotiating its rubric of transport systems that seemed to bind this landscape, so riven with valleys and rivers, into an ever-tightening recurring loop.⁶¹

Such passages try to veer away from the "psychogeographic" – they suggest elements of liminal space, yet as boundary zones such places are also zones of crossover and exchange. The self is no longer the "embedded correspondent" delivering the reliable view from the ground – ostensibly situated, yet in fact situated within the exigencies of a received centring narrative. Instead, one is out there, in the terms of Bourriaud's nomadic "radicant", "fighting for the indeterminacy of the code".

⁶⁰ *Sunnyland*, 61.

⁶¹ *Sunnyland*, 61.

A Return from Space

Tom McCarthy has claimed that the writer or artist faces two choices in the construction of their work: “to extinguish matter and elevate it into form or to let matter matter by making form as formless as possible ... to let form touch absence, ellipsis and debris”.⁶²

Indeed, Sebastian Groes sees “*Remainder*’s amnesiac protagonist as representing a deliberate shift away from postmodernism’s idealistic, utopian faith in textuality towards a revaluation of materiality.”⁶³ A cause taken up by Ali Smith, and which will be examined below. Indeed, *Remainder* shows evidence of a fascination with materiality that sits alongside its formal statements of inauthenticity, in which the writing becomes charged with an energy that is otherwise absent in the novel’s slow and suffocating accrual of plotted consequence. It might be said that McCarthy’s work demonstrates a fascination with materiality in spite of itself – amidst its “inauthentic reconstructions” it describes a series of epiphanies on behalf of its protagonist which seem to aspire towards something beyond what language

⁶² McCarthy, 3.

⁶³ Duncan et al., 139.

can convey. These Sartrean moments of nausea-like revelation of an embodied material reality stand in stark contrast to the novel's painstaking parodic construction of the real. Duncan describes moments as "slippage" – apparent aberrations which run against the grain of the novel's intentionality, or in this case, the authors' professed self-critical stance. In the following writers, Ali Smith and Deborah Levi, I would argue that a greater synthesis is evident between those elements of their novels which address issues of materiality, embodiment, connectivity. And I would suggest that this takes place under the aegis of what might be described as the "autobiographical turn" in a revisioning of the author function as it operates within the text.

Connectivity, materiality, Ali Smith

So far, I have discussed connectivity in terms of the kind of translational and relational aesthetic outlined by Bourriaud. This can be related to the exilic qualities of Sebald's work, for example, and the trope of itinerancy and homelessness that is central to *Sunnyland*, above all, in its sense of "linguistic homelessness". The narrative moves between registers as if searching for a place to settle – or as Denise Riley would have it: "I am indeed a displaced person, yet my situation is not really so melancholic. It has released me into a democratic freedom to wander."⁶⁴

Here, connectivity is expressed as the potential generated by itinerancy and *dérive*, not as the finding of objects that themselves seek context within a centring

⁶⁴ Denise Riley, *The Words of Selves* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 3.

conception of self, but of seeking affective resonances that might exist beyond imposed historicised meaning – a poetics of Lacanian metonymic deferral rather than metaphoric displacement.

Connectivity might also be read as suggestive of the links that might be created between the world of the text and that of the author. Dominic Head finds, for example, in Ali Smith’s fiction a self-conscious critique of “the value we identify in a writer’s craft, and the value assigned to them in the marketplace” through an awareness of its own commercial and critical placement as part of the contemporary canon.⁶⁵ Obliquely, then, in Smith's case, the author is already embedded within the text as a presence, not as overt metafictional comment, but as part of its fabric.

One of the implications of Head’s reading of Smith cited above is a role for the author who is more implicated already in the real – a similar dynamic might be found in Rachael Cusk’s work, whose output oscillates between true autobiography, journal, and autofictional commentary – which collectively creates a body of work that serves as an allegorical examination of the role of the author in the contemporary world and of the act of fiction-making itself.

Smith’s work demonstrates a self-conscious interest in its own *literariness* as a historicised event – not only as Dominic Head points out, in relation to an ironic awareness of its positioning within a literary marketplace, but in its blend of registers.

⁶⁵ Dominic Head, “Idiosyncrasy and Currency: Ali Smith and the Contemporary Canon”. In Monica Germanà and Emily Horton, (eds.) *Ali Smith: contemporary critical perspectives* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 103.

Smith makes it clear that there is an unashamedly literary consciousness at work in her evocations of the everyday, whether it be in the speech patterns she employs, her literary allusions, or in her recognisable but “delocalised” settings in which her characters are emplaced. The opening to *Autumn* sets a characteristic tone:

It was the worst of times, it was the worst of times. Again. That’s the thing about things. They fall apart, always have, always will, it’s in their nature. So an old man washes up on a shore. He looks like a punctured football with its stitching split, the leather kind that people kicked a hundred years ago. The sea’s been rough. It has taken the shirt off his back; naked as the day I was born are the words in the head he moves on its neck, but it hurts to. So try not to move the head. What’s this in his mouth, grit? it’s sand, it’s under his tongue, he can feel it, he can hear it grinding when his teeth move against each other, singing its sand-song: I’m round so small, but in the end I’m all, I’m softer if I’m underneath you when you fall, in sun I glitter, wind heaps me over litter, put a message in a bottle, throw the bottle in the sea, the bottle’s made of me.⁶⁶

As the narrative tries to get under way, the effect is that it is almost deliberately being stalled in its attempt to establish character, setting, mood in the way one might expect. Its development is constantly arrested by Smith’s chimeric mix of bent literary references, conversational clichés, jumps from third to first person and back again, and finally song. The impression given is of the castaway actually fighting his way up onto the beach buffeted by language itself rather than depicted through visual description. The impression is as if the event were literally made of words that are themselves washed up flukes, bolted together to create some recycled object. The normal function of signifier-signified has changed, and the construction of the

⁶⁶ Ali Smith, *Autumn*. (London: Penguin, 2017), 3.

paragraph is reminiscent of a kind of craft or techē. We are reminded of the act of writing as making, but also of the maker – techē always suggesting bios, as human agency.

In *Sunnyland*, I also wanted to create this sense of “process” – it occurs as part of the novel’s narrative event in the building of the ship by Jons from found materials, and in descriptions of woodworking, to which I wanted to suggest the more prosaic tone of a chronicler, which connects to the more parodic scene of the ancient burial site that takes place later in the novel:

Come in, and see the struts upon the floor, the sections of dismembered frame, the prised out oak bolts that once held the whole structure in check, but only in check for whatever brevity of a lifetime was chosen for it – like the dots that punctuate and define this text, as easily removed and redeployed. Watch the curved back, the hunched shoulders, labour beside the looming hull, shavings and sawdust falling about the feet in fresh litter, and the finer older dust collected from who knows where that now released buzzes in the slanting light, before seeking refuge back amidst the leaning bevelled spars. See all this, the curved back on its stool like a brown grub labouring for hour after hour, lost within the grain of the wood, the steel feather sharp, chipping, honing, probing the grain for corky rot or bone-like resistance.⁶⁷

Found objects

For me, one of *Sunnyland*’s central tropes is that of the “found object”, beginning with a father’s texts – themselves memories encoding their own process of reflexivity – and then found throughout the text in the form of physical objects, from the components of Jons’ driftwood ship, to fragments of amber found on a beach: *her fingers absent-mindedly roving through the shingle beside her, searching blindly by touch*

⁶⁷ *Sunnyland*, 129.

alone, sifting the pebbles for some piece of treasure or other – an amber charm, a hidden key perhaps’.⁶⁸

What the character is in fact sifting through are memories. And it is the abstracted, circulatory operations of memory confronted with autobiography's tendency towards a linear notion of narrative which I wanted to explore in the novel.

My ambition, therefore, was not to write an autobiographical account in the strict sense but to explore the formal implications for an account of experience that is caught in the collision between the drive towards the “plausible narrative” of life writing and the circumlocutions of memory. And from there to further examine the inscription of memory as a psychoanalytical construct, drawing on a Lacanian notion of the unconscious structured as language – a key concept I would take from such a view would be to differentiate between a Freudian notion of displacement metaphor with Lacan’s emphasis on contiguity, deferment, metonymy. In *Sunnyland*, this notion is explored by means of the overarching trope of the found object – objects essentially disassociated from their original context, whether they be the disparate fragments of journal, or the spar from the ship on a deserted beach. The spar is a metonym: its role here is to *re-present* rather than represent – existing only as a fragment – and suggests further chains of meaning, further incarnations as object, that can never fully be realised in terms of the original. This process is enacted by Jons’ reading of the fragments of his father's diaries, readings which spin-off into

⁶⁸ *Sunnyland*, 292.

endless deferments of the truth he searches for, leading ultimately to madness and his disappearance from the novel both as protagonist and narrator.

The found object also suggests to me a particular aesthetic feel that the novel's writing might pursue: the piece of driftwood on the shore holds a fascination that is both material and temporal – it's weathered features encapsulate the process of time – one asks how and why it came to be there – one searches for a narrative – but its identity as part of the whole remains absent. Thus, denuded of its context, the fragment's materiality is enhanced, one places more emphasis on its physical texture, its weight in the hand – not in the recovery of any sense of a lost essence, but instead to focus on the subjective constitution which informs the relationship to the object in its materiality.

In Ali Smith's terms, also, form and language are highly mutable – they possess a materiality that is subject to the decay and entropy experienced by organic bodies. In her writing, we are made aware of the text as a *medium*, and the organic "composite" nature of her characters and tropes (as in the passage cited above) is derived from the sense that they spring from and consist of that medium. And Smith, as author, is at home amongst them.

This sense of being at home in a topsy-turvy world (a world nonetheless always subject to social and political critique) is generated, in part, by the connectivity experienced between an author figure who operates in the manner of an "implied author" that moves easily amongst the machinations of the text, but who connects to, and appears to inhabit, the real. Her characters are invariably victims in the

strictest sense, although often somewhat ennobled in their plight – gifted, perhaps, by the satirical register in which they are placed. But they tend neither to suffer from what Wayne Booth has referred to as the “anguished search” for the true self as the product of modernist individualism, or from a sense that they are the postmodern pawns in a metafictional structure that might be found in Martin Amis. Daniel Lea observes that Smith’s work stresses the “ethical dimension of intersubjective connection as a dominant purpose of the novel.”⁶⁹ The fact that so many of Smith’s characters are in a state of disconnection from each other makes the desire for communion in her work ever more forceful – whether lovers or, in the case of *Hotel World*, sisters separated by death, or indeed by a strange kind of ontological shift between Smith the real-author/unread-narrator and her deceased fictional author companion that we encounter in her self-reflective critical work, *Artful*.

Reality hunger

David Shields’ 2010 work, *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto*, suggests a new approach in the author role debate, and the function of the autobiographic, envisaging something different from just the blurring of fact and fiction, or autobiography and fiction. The work represents a more structural approach to framing of reality through the author within fiction, the “challenge to the very fictiveness of fiction” that Eaglestone notes in the contemporary novel.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Lea, 21.

⁷⁰ Eaglestone, 1099.

Daniel Lea claims that Shields' "manifesto" reacts to a "kleptomaniacal recombinant culture", heavily dependent on pastiche and only able to approach its subject through an ironic effacement of any sense of authenticity. An approach that leaves us "desperate for something real".⁷¹ In its place, Shields suggests the novelist turn to the autobiographical, combining a new kind of personal candour with the fictional.

In my preface, I referred to a to foraging for raw materials, a reference not only to the trope of found objects – driftwood, scattered extracts of journals, the components of the ship which Jons imagines he can reconstruct, and "his great canvas bag of treasures, his day's bits and bobs" – but also to Shields' notion of "unfiltered elements ... raw, unprocessed". Of course, my use of the found object is in a double-bind: it aims to represent objects which have been dislocated from their signifier, but also implies the very "recombinant" postmodern culture that Shields objects to.

Reality Hunger's formal structure of delivering several hundred short numbered sections alternating between unattributed quotation and personal confession, serves to subsume its literary fictional elements into Shields' own subjective sphere. *Sunnyland* also uses the technique of mixing sections of extant personal memoir with sections of fictional narrative. But its approach is perhaps different in that the fragments of the "real" are not regarded as moments of non-fictional "authenticity", but as examples of a centred realist representation of consciousness which in the end

⁷¹ David Shields, *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2010), 6.

becomes an “inadequate” means of representing experience, not only because it is mediated by language – as Shields himself concedes: “Anything processed by memory is fiction.” *Sunnyland*, however, is more interested in how representations of the real, for example, through memoir and travelogue might be used in a reflexive manner in which self is distributed within language and form, and where these latter aspects are seen as highly complex and diverse.

In *Sunnyland*, moreover, the careful evocation of place, of real-world setting, is offset by a certain ontological uncertainty – where different worlds appear to be contained within a single narrative account. Compare this with Smith’s *Hotel World*, where what initially might be regarded as different realities expressed by five different voices as well as an omniscient narrator (at their most extreme, the different narrative realities of the dead Sara Wilby and her living sister) appear, in the end to occupy the same circumscribed space, in which the boundaries between these realities are not as fixed as we might have thought.

My interpretation of Shields as it might relate to *Sunnyland* is that the self is not seen as an extant identity or even as a means of a representation of identity, but as a regulating mechanism that unifies objects within its own personal aesthetic – the self, seen as essentially performing a paradigmatic function in which attention becomes fixed upon what might be called an authorial “personal compass.”

Sunnyland's Prologue

In this vein, *Sunnyland's Prologue* sets up a narrative that appears to operate under the tenets of realism, the magical, or the lyrical, but wrapped up in the mode, at least, of autobiographic recollection.

I wanted to introduce aspects which will be encoded into the subsequent text – presented as “autobiographical” – a device which represents the novel’s overall motive of exploring how the experiential and the lived might be encoded into a fictional narrative without recourse to a narrative centralised conception of self, and relates to what Boxall identifies in contemporary literature as a renewed interest in “the real”, a new realism ‘a new set of formal mechanisms with which to capture the real’.⁷²

The Prologue is *la clef* to *le roman*, but not in conventional terms – it does not represent a causal conjunction between a proper name and an apparent fiction – it is no more that than Paul Auster's invocation of the name Paul Auster in his *City of Glass* (a mode of representation that is deconstructive rather than constructive in this sense); rather, my aim was to lay down codes that will later exist as disruptive traces in what followed.

The Prologue is written in such a way as to suggest a lyrical, even a magical realism – in the former, there is an excess of meaning (suggested by the pyroclastic flow of junk from the doorways), while the latter introduces the crossing of boundaries as a working principle – the historicised reality of the old house is

⁷² Boxall, 10.

traversed by “ghosts backpedalling in space” yet this is described in an affectless manner, as a plausible reality. Conversely, phrases such “wan extenuating light of the 1970s” is a nod to Nabokov, the attempt to convey a pure aesthetic space that ultimately can have no real-world bearing.⁷³

The sudden imposition of another voice at the end of the section “*Yes, they do say that*”, is intended to convey a sudden ironic distance, as if there is something at odds here with the representational apparatus and the underlying consciousness – any apparent integrity in the “autobiographical pact” is undermined. And of course, the vaguely sinister note that the phrase introduces foreshadows both narrative and formal events to come.

The Prologue can be seen as a “readerly” text, introducing said reader to the novel’s proceeding tropes in a manner that might anticipate (in a readerly text) a later denouement: the house as unstable referent to space and boundary; vertigo as indicator of spatial and psychological instability; event as a construct of memory that must conform to certain aesthetic values – what one might regard in this case as a subjectifying lyrical voice in which subjective experience is paramount. The house described in the Prologue becomes, therefore, a figure for a familiar type of lyrical representation. And it is this status which the proceeding novel seeks to undermine. The house is a *made* thing, both materially and aesthetically. *Sunnyland* asks, what is the subjective relationship to that which is made?

⁷³ *Sunnyland*, 1.

In much of *Sunnyland*, actions as causes, that lead to outcomes, are not recounted. We are left in a constant state of “aftermath”, the state of what comes after. In the protagonist, Jons, I wanted to convey the sense that he inhabits a realm that is indeed “after the event” – *ex post facto*. But within the narrative, Jons' task is to ask, after *what* fact? This state is one of suspension, in which prior events are freed momentarily from association, are semantically neutral, before understanding as part of, in Jons' case, what might be considered an act of mourning can begin. Here, I was interested in the manner in which the text might bear “affective” rather than “emotional” content. In Vermeulen’s terms, “Emotion is a ‘subjective content’ rather than a nonsubjective intensity; it is ‘intensity owned and recognized’.”⁷⁴ Affect, in contrast, is an impersonal dynamic principle that cuts across personal feelings and experiences. *Sunnyland* tries to explore the boundaries between emotion and affect in these terms, and in this sense, aftermath becomes a recurring theme:

grandfather, small, neat, straight-backed, lingering outside the brown front door with a smoke, half at ease, as if awaiting orders. Just back from an afternoon at The Defiance, where he would have kept up a solitary vigil at the bar, never quite in, never quite out of the conversations that came and went around him. Standing there on the pavement, I always see him now as a Montgomery without a tank. He grimly examines my catch: “Good as killed it”, he says, “You know you shouldn’t meddle with nature’s way, you know that”. Gently, he takes the small feathered trophy into his own hands and disappears forever around the back.

This episode forms the only image I have of him, and although by that time it would have been at least 25 years since he had been demobbed, I still associated him with war – not its violence, but with a sparse unspoken presence that emanated from the aftermath. He died relatively young, a day marked in my mind by a bevelled mantelpiece mirror in a front room, dark as liquid, brimming with silently gathered people, shapes.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Vermeulen, 28.

⁷⁵ *Sunnyland*, 330.

Raising the dead, or the return of intentionality

How, therefore, might the "autobiographical turn" sit within a dynamic of "nonsubjective intensity"? And can the above passage be considered in any way as "nonsubjective"? Certainly, the subjective "version" of events seen from a single perspective, which autobiography tends towards, is derailed to a certain extent in *Sunnyland* by the question of who is narrating who, amidst the murmur of circulating multiple voices.

If the autobiographic turn in fiction signals the return of the author, Kaye Michell, in her 2008 work, *Intention and Text*, begins to reframe the debate of intentionality which is once again under scrutiny.⁷⁶ As we have seen with Tom McCarthy, not only are authors eager to explain the meaning of their work, but following Ali Smith, they are minded to inhabit their own pages, make themselves at home between the covers of their fictions.

Of course, intentionality immediately suggests Wimsatt and Beardsley's "design and plan in the author's mind" is likely to be more of a tangible reality in an autobiographical approach.⁷⁸ The autobiographer will necessarily have a pre-formed "pattern of a life" in her mind to some degree, no matter how unstable or chimeric that life might appear – even if assumptions dependent on personal memory or independent witness may change. In autobiography, an existing life will always

⁷⁶ Kaye Mitchell, *Intention and Text* (London: Continuum, 2008).

⁷⁸ See Mitchell, 14.

present a mental blueprint of some kind to its creator prior to composition – but what gives autobiography its traction, or to quote David Shields, lends it its “frisson”, is the manner in which the blueprint, the “intention” dissolves to become the unmapped territory that constitutes the inner “unintentional” dynamics that the reader might associate with a novel. Mitchell states that it is “the direction of inference” from work to writer rather than writer to work which can allow intent to reside within the texts, pointing outwards towards the real-world, i.e. that the text may describe the consciousness of the writer, which does not of course compromise the autonomy of the text itself.

But is authorial intention, as Mitchell suggests, the text’s connection to the human, or at least resurrects some notion of an implied author as some kind of bridge to the living author? Mitchell also identifies an ethical humanism behind the traditional concept of intention, seen as a “mental state or authorial blueprint” which asserts the “right” of the author “to determine in advance and for always the core meaning of the work. The tendency here, claims Mitchell, is to view works as psychological expressions of particular subjects; the anti-intentionalist view, on the other hand, highlights the inaccessibility of such expression – while both views emphasise intention’s exteriority, and thus its surplus (picked up on by McCarthy). In contrast, *form* still retains an “explanatory notion”, which as such is situated within the text, possesses an interior function of intention.

The process of constructing a fiction emerges out of autobiographical concerns – how the rhythms and patterning of the author’s own life might provide

both a mode of writing and a rhythmical blueprint that is essentially divorced from the story's actual content or subject matter, so that one life might act as an oblique extended metaphor for another. Within such a paradigm, notions associated with realism and real-world veracity no longer apply as before. Indeed, the very notion of the implied author, as author's surrogate starts to lose its gravitational pull on the work - although Mitchell asks whether the implied author exists as "some stubborn trace of intention."

Autobiographical incursions into the unreal

Sunnyland also makes autobiographical incursions into a fictional world as a formal process, using montage and cut-up techniques, or rather "enfolds" autobiographical elements into a fictional narrative. However, as we have said, this is not intended to operate as autofiction: it does not use a contained quasi-autobiographical self as a platform for examining and pronouncing upon a real world.

Indeed, *Sunnyland's* protagonists, or its represented voices, are highly unreliable in that the worlds they describe often lack the locutory force associated with narrative: a fragment of diary discovered by the narrator, Jons, for example, is divorced from its contextualising "ethical intent", its direction of intention; its allegorical or symbolic significance is no longer determinate – it approaches the unreal (a term often characterised by John Barth's fiction). This is a situation that will prove problematic for Jons as he attempts to piece together a plausible narrative account of his father's life from diary fragments. In the opening chapters of *Sunnyland*, as the

nature of Jons' quest starts to unfold, the narrative is at its most explicatory – at the stage of exposition one might find in standard psychological realism: the components of the protagonist's "need for truth" are assembled, and potential courses of action start to suggest themselves. Yet, the emergence of plot is arrested by the specifics of place – or rather the experiential dynamics of being in space, which, in *Sunnyland*, is a constant source of tension:

But now you are moving fast – I don't know – walking, taking a bus, driving – but moving away from this place; or as it appears to us, the images behind you are moving, at least – in a soft focus, the reflecting windows, the trees, the cars, the blurred stick-like figures (who do not move), their silhouettes eaten away by background light. Other images enter the frame
...⁷⁹

Place does not operate as an organising principle in terms of plot in *Sunnyland*. Such passages contrast with the almost prudish register associated with the correspondence between Jons and the two characters presented as publishers in the novel, Pinkman and Foales, who are reminiscent of the Victorian gothic narrator – not so much unreliable as "inadequate". Jons' own narrative account is delivered in a similar vein, and in this there is something "out of kilter": his will to action always inflected by his will to reason – the result, a certain erotic naivete, a certain blindness to the potential of living, in which any *carpe diem* becomes the preserve of the unknown other. But this passage is characteristic in that it expresses physical movement to enact a change in tonal register, a loosening of subjectivity, and indeed

⁷⁹ *Sunnyland*, 12.

a loosening of “emplacement”. My aim here is to dislocate the subject to a more transient positioning to produce a decentring effect.

Special reality

James Olney speaks of the “ontology of autobiography – that is, the special order of reality that an autobiography can make claim to.”⁸⁰ The nature of my attempted synthesis of autobiographical forms (memoire, letters, recall, and the will to faithfully describe recollected events) owes a great deal to James Olney’s conception of *bios* as it is inscribed into the autobiographical act:

we can understand it as the vital impulse—the impulse of life—that is transformed by being lived through the unique medium of the individual and the individual’s special, peculiar psychic configuration; we can understand it as consciousness, pure and simple, consciousness referring to no objects outside itself, to no events, and to no other lives; we can understand it as participation in an absolute existence far transcending the shifting, changing unrealities of mundane life; we can understand it as moral tenor of the individual’s being. *Life in all these latter senses does not stretch back across time but extends down to the roots of individual being; it is atemporal, committed to a vertical thrust from consciousness down into the unconscious rather than to a horizontal thrust from the present into the past.* [my italics]

In these terms, life does not mean “the course of a life” but life as, in Olney’s words is, “a vital principle.”

Jons is caught within the interstices of the historical course of a life: his father’s diaries, the letters; and his own atemporal, vital experience. He is thwarted in his

⁸⁰ James Olney, “Some Versions of Memory/ Some Versions of Bios: The Ontology of Autobiography” in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*. Edited by James Olney (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 237.

attempt to reconcile the two versions of reality into one ontology – he cannot realise the act of recognition which will bring his father into his own realm of existence, cannot sense his father ever having “been.” Ultimately, Jons is unable to reside in language (his move from the “archive” of the house to the “observation platform” of the out-house that overlooks the marsh might suggest this) any more than his father, as a narrative object, can reside in Jons’ atemporal, dehistoricised world. Jons’ narrative seeks an ordering potential through place rather than time, but his attempts to give narrative order to his father’s life disrupt his own capacity to become situated in his environment.

For Olney, memory links events through significance – what we might call their resonance with each other – rather than through temporal order. Jons fails to do this in his attempt to “write” his father.

Furthermore, for Olney, the twin *bioi*, of a past life, and of a writer who reflects upon that life’s course, are substantively separate yet joined through memory – where memory is seen not as an expression of time belonging exclusively to the past, but as a malleable force of “inbetweenness” that “connect[s] meaningfully what happened once with what is happening now.”⁸¹ Here, he suggests “the double-referent ‘I’”, “the twofold bios—here and now, there and then, both the perpetual present and the historic past.”

With this in mind, any revision of *Sunnyland* might include a more persuasive treatment or signposting of Jons and the father as being in fact the double-referent

⁸¹ Olney, 244.

of the same person *within the narrative*. Currently, they exist only as the *implied author* of each other. This is a situation I would like to preserve – yet, for the reader, it might be comforting to have the above narrative alternative at least as a possibility. This would have implications in terms of Jons being seen to suffer from schizophrenia as a clinical condition – a causality would start to come into play that I wished to avoid.

Language as heimlich, materiality as spectre

Ali Smith suggests that in “the aesthetic act” “something comes to life” or is “brought to life.”⁸² She does not just mean this figuratively, but hints that this might have literal connotations. But in the aesthetic act of life writing, what exactly is brought to life? The author? Something inhuman? Is autobiography a resuscitation, re-animation, or perhaps a haunting? Is the life being registered, or the self seeking expression, already a recognisable form, dusted down and recovered from the debris of memory, or is it a constellation of remembered intensities from which patterns, forms – a figure – can be interpreted? Is autobiography the bringing to life of something that never was? Does the intensity reside in the moment it was lived or in the moment it is remembered?

And it might be argued that, for Ali Smith, ghosts are not spectral at all, but are the walking dead invested with some form of imagined spirit, materially determined yet in a state of decay, entropy, as if in the process of crumbling into the

⁸² See Ali Smith, *Artful* (London: Penguin, 2013), 83.

constituents of memory, their language too decaying, the symbol separating from its referent like flesh from bone.

Unlike Tom McCarthy or Deborah Levy, the evoked settings in Smith's work are a place one might well call home. A home resembling in many cases modern Britain. While in Tom McCarthy's *Remainder*, London is reduced to a Monopoly board upon which plotted movement can be performed – its relatability is carefully prised from our affective response – place becomes Casey's "site". In fact, the plot becomes like a chess problem – or even starts to resemble Simon Critchley's football game, in which awareness of the spatial becomes a kind of pangeometric state of transcendence. By contrast, Smith's oeuvre is about accommodation: the strange, that which wanders around outside and beyond the limits of familiarity, is normalised, given its place, becomes heimlich. Her writing proceeds by rehistoricising what might otherwise appear as the bizarre convolutions of a postmodern space where boundaries between different states of being have dissolved, where ghosts might sit down to watch TV, flit between imagination and memory, leave their material traces everywhere in the form of overpowering odours or rubble on the carpet. That these same ghosts have trouble with language, that language seemingly degrades at the same rate as their own material corpses – a striking feature of both *Hotel World* and *Artful* – suggests that language is not seen as other. In its materiality it is part of life. Experience: textual, remembered, lived, imagined – is reduced to single ontology. Yet the reader's experience is hardly reductive – this is no planar surface drained of affect. These are chains of events given dimensionality, a rich topography, possessing

their own histories. The sense of continuum is strong. And with Smith, as in the metaphysical poets with which she appears to have so much in common, there is always a love that binds. A commitment to that which connects.

Matter resolving

Ali Smith is sometimes presented as a kind of post-modern raconteur, or as some agent provocateur that takes realism by the scruff of the neck, in which her evocation of the marvellous is subsumed by the highly self-reflective act of its own *making* – the tale is indeed the thing, or at least the bolts and braces of its language: it is an awareness whereby the seemingly fantastic does not so much as bleed into the real – as in magical realism – but is a by-product of the real as expressed through language, careful, usually, to constitute nothing more than the sum of its parts, never in the end wishing to move beyond the socio-political milieu that the work articulates – Smith is as much a Dickens as a García Márquez – one departs her novels equally willing to give to the homeless as to believe in the agency of ghosts.

In Smith's work, overt evocation of the spectral acts as an enhanced dimensionality to the real, not as an alternative other – Smith's ghosts are only realised through their relationship to a recognisable world which they extend into fantasy – they do not enact the uncanny in the way that, for example, Nicholas Royle attempts to do in his novel, *Quilt*: there is no residue, no obvious signalling towards Derridean *différance* between what is expected and what is experienced. Smith's phantoms are a function of the satirical register in which she writes, and exist as field

distortions on the margins of the quotidian. Indeed, her ghosts often appear as avatars for the marginalised status of many of her characters, whether in economic terms or in their lack of empowerment in relation to others (take Anna in *There but for the*). And it is certainly the case that Smith's protagonists so often seem to drift untethered within the problematic social spaces they find themselves in, where there appears a causal gap between that reality and the events that befall them – their own agency in attempting to shape the course of such events constantly thwarted (compare this with Deborah Levy's characters, who tend to develop agency through re-evaluating identity, and in doing so, gain empowerment).

The trope of the spectre can function in a number of different ways: Stephen M. Levin sees it as a reminder of the Enlightenment “fantasy” of “the fully constituted and intentional self”, and following Derrida, “a figure that calls into question the boundaries of narrative form itself.”⁸³

And what is intriguing here in terms of the notion of the implied author referred to previously is that an *implied* presence suggests a spectrality *without* evoking the spectre as a figure within the narrative – it remains as something truly “without.” But I would argue that ghosts in Smith are not merely pale shadows of the self, they serve to augment reality, in fact they give reality flesh, offering a suggestion of a prospering materiality beyond the limits of a narrowly conceived conception of self.

⁸³ Stephen M. Levin, “Narrating Reminders: Spectral Presences in Ali Smith’s Fictions”. In Monica Germanà and Emily Horton, (eds.) *Ali Smith: contemporary critical perspectives* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 38.

Indeed, knowing "whom I haunt" – in that oscillation between self and other, flesh and spirit – may be a question that preoccupies writers of the contemporary novel, as André Breton pondered in his opening to *Nadja*. And perhaps we find renewed comfort in the spectral, the phantasmagorical, as the fascination with the virtual, once presaged by our postmodern past, is replaced with a "reality principle", a desire for what seems suddenly inaccessible: grounding, solidity, presence, now. And is the spectral just a reality or truth that is simply not accessible to us, made pale by distance in time and space? Such ghostly echoes resonate even in the starkly literalist autism of the protagonist's world in McCarthy's *Remainder*, in those "transcendental" moments considered previously, in which the linear flow of time seems to loosen. It is prevalent too in Ali Smith, as in this example from *There but for the*, where the present is haunted by the future:

The boy looked into the old man's eyes and saw something amazing all right. He didn't yet know it but he would spend the rest of his life looking back and looking forward in search of it, the still-unpolluted source that feeds the ruined river.⁸⁴

James Olney's insistence that behind the question "What is man?" (Tom McCarthy's endeavour), lies a more important one, "How shall I live?" But this latter question develops into a further dichotomy: how shall I live within a given society which both frames me and creates me? It is this "metamodern" question which Ali

⁸⁴ Ali Smith, *There but for the* (London: Penguin, 2012), 79.

Smith's work explores: the oscillation between representation and substance, materiality and simulacra, embodiment and spectrality.

For all its surface play, its tricks and slights, its alignment of the unreal with the real, Ali Smith's writing demonstrates a connectivity which is also diachronic in dimension: it is rooted in a self-consciously rehistoricised language, and in Smith's ghosts we are never far from the primordial prelinguistic image (notice how the ghostly companion to the narrator of *Artful* seems to revert back to such a state as her capacity for language disintegrates – a situation which Christopher Hawkes notes, in his analysis of the postmodern, is described by Carl Jung: "everywhere we find ourselves confronted with the history of language, with images and motifs that lead straight back to the primitive wonder-world."⁸⁶ As she delves into this wonder-world, Smith is able to evoke the visceral, the embodied, perhaps even something reminiscent of Merleau-Ponty's prepersonal being.⁸⁷

In the preceding section we have examined the notion of the author creating a sense of heimlich, an ability to inhabit the text, feel at home within the baroque accumulation of historicised language – in short, to make one's place in its world.

The theme of home is introduced in Smith's 2001 novel, *Hotel World*, and Daniel Lea suggests the novel is about "a desire for restitution and coherence" in the face of fragmentation. Indeed, it is clear that the corollary of dispersal lies at the heart

⁸⁶ Christopher Hauke, *Jung and the Postmodern: The Interpretation of Realities* (Hove: Routledge, 2000), 3. Quoting from C. G. Jung, *The Collected Works*, edited by Sir Herbert Read, Dr Michael Fordham and Dr Gerhard Adler, and translated in the main by R. F. C. Hull (London: Routledge, 1957), 67.

⁸⁷ See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, translated by Donald A. Landes (London: Routledge, 2012).

of the narrative, distributed amongst five voices, between first and third person – the “I” narrator who opens the novel already dead at its outset and manifesting not only the symptoms of material decay but also a kind of linguistic entropy as her ability to render the world in language appears to fade: “There is a word for heated-up bread. I know it. I knew it. No, it’s gone.”⁸⁸

The hotel at the centre of the novel represents the commodified version of “home”, access to which, in real as in symbolic terms is restricted in the contemporary world, as the homeless character of Else who sits begging on the pavement outside seems to suggest. Her language, too, is subject to the same entropy: “Spare me some change” has become in the text “Spr sm chn?” It is as if, in a capitalist, overly commodified world, as her economic status declines, so does her very existence in language. At the very heart of the hotel itself is a void – the narrow lift shaft that houses the hotel’s dumbwaiter, down which the novel’s opening narrator, Sara Wilby, has plunged to her death. So, as a representation of the home, the hotel is a troubled one. If refuge is sought, it needs to be sought elsewhere. And as we have seen, in Smith, both the mobility and rootedness of language might here offer comfort, a kind of aesthetic balm, an ultimate heimlich, an identity.

In Deborah Levy, however, the question mooted earlier, of “how shall I live?” appears more acutely existential, with an overriding sense of the subject as a stranger in language, a language that attempts to frame me, to fix me in place, yet which ultimately does not define or create me. If Smith is the home dweller, then Levy's

⁸⁸ Ali Smith, *Hotel World* (London: Penguin, 2001), 9

work explores the condition of the outsider, or she who dwells outside; and the presence of the implied author – a formal component, I would suggest, in all the writers considered here – points always to an implied presence that has stepped off the page.

Deborah Levy – Return of the stranger

Deborah Levy might well conform to Peter Boxall's entreaty "to find a poetic language with which to describe the shifted, estranged experience of embodied being in the new century." To say that her work is coloured by the estrangement of exile is perhaps to begin to indulge in a form of intentional fallacy in too obvious a manner. The facts of her life story: her father's absence through imprisonment for ANC activity in South Africa, the family's subsequent uprooting to England, and her childhood memories of that experience, are described in her volume of autobiography, *Things I Don't Want to Know. On Writing*, which contains all the ingredients of the writing life which is to follow – ingredients, Levy confesses towards the end of the book, that will emerge years later in novels such as *Swimming Home* (2011).⁸⁹ But in *Things I*, causal thematic relationships are detained, metaphors cannot hold, so that, for example, the memory of eating an orange in South Africa becomes the image of a window that she does not know how to open as she sits waiting to write at her desk in Mallorca.

⁸⁹ Deborah Levy, *Things I Don't Want to Know. On Writing* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

In *After Bakhtin*, David Lodge reminds us of Roman Jakobson's distinction between metaphor and metonymy, in which the author "metonymically digresses from the plot to atmosphere and from the characters to the setting in space and time. He is fond of synecdochic details."⁹⁰ Levy's work may be considered in the context of this latter mode, where, in a novel such as *Hot Milk* (2017), quotidian detail is interpolated with mythological and psychological tropes. This incorporation of symbol into connective chains of object, event, reference to myth, and the subject's own inner reflection that results (the very real pain the protagonist, Sofia, experiences as a result of being stung by a "medusa", the Spanish word for jellyfish, while on the tourist beach) gives Levy's novel an allegorical sheen, but one that always tends towards the experiential, that which is familiar as lived. There are echoes here of Derek Attridge's analysis of J. M. Coetzee, whose novels, he claims, "seem to half solicit, half to problematize" allegorical reading.⁹¹ But in *Things I Don't Want to Know*, as the memoir of a writer, who only refers to herself as such in passing, or as someone *waiting* to fulfil or become that role, and whose allusions to other literature are often made only indirectly, almost every line appears to intend towards an allegory of the act of its own process. The description of the author's tendency to misspell Sartre's name as "Jean Paul Stare", to cite one of many examples, seems to beg further interpretation, yet is casually noted without further elaboration. The narrative moves

⁹⁰ David Lodge, *After Bakhtin: essays on fiction and criticism* (London: Routledge, 1990), 142.

⁹¹ Derek Attridge, "Against Allegory: *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *Michael K*, and the Question of Literary Reading." *J.M. Coetzee and the Idea of the Public Intellectual*. ed. / Jane Poyner. (Athens, Ohio: University of Ohio Press, 2006). 63-82.

on, and in doing so links such events in a chain of relationships that seem as arbitrary as life itself. Symbol and life are fused, rather than one standing in for the other, and in Levy's case, form conspires to function.

Reading Levy's *Hot Milk*, one becomes aware of a subtle transition taking place, from popular realist fiction that already contains all the elements of a book to read on the beach, to a shift in the symbolic order. A kind of "slippage" is taking place, but not the kind Duncan recalls in Tom McCarthy – rather the transmission of a formal construct – the act of writing becoming spatial event, evoking what William Barrett has described as "a region of Being I inhabit."⁹² Here, the implied author feels very close to the surface of the text – Levy's skill may be in her ability to conjure this sense in a way we can never properly gauge – one world being placed in proximity to another, whether it be the tourist beach and its hinterland or the world of the writer writing and the her parallel autobiographic world – and it is the remainder or residue that always seems emergent in Levy's writing. David Lodge states that allegory does not merely suggest something beyond its literal meaning, but insists on being decoded in terms of another meaning.⁹³ In Levy, this creates a kind of holding zone, an exemption from the duty of causal realism – more flexible in its incorporation of symbol – enabling a space for manoeuvre within it. In the end, allegory is subverted, so that life itself – or at least that autobiographical pact contained in *Things I Don't Want to Know*, signed off by its subtitle, *On Writing* – is presented as allegory of the act and the process of writing. Realism, as a

⁹² William Barrett, *The Illusion of Technique* (New York: Doubleday, 1979), 173.

⁹³ See Lodge, 143.

representational form, is replaced by a new form of autobiographical relation, the expression of which is perhaps the most telling in the "autofiction" of Rachael Cusk, whose work responds to anxious complexity of modern life in the "mainstream" rather than on the periphery or within the marginal. But both Levy and Cusk, in addition to many contemporary writers, now inhabit their own personal ecology of novels, autobiography, critical essays, public lectures and media interviews; they often effect a remarkable concordance between these different modes of expression: works, or one body of work, which Olney might consider "consubstantial with [their] author."⁹⁴ Writers appear to be retreating into the real. One might wonder about the connection between Paul Auster, the author of *City of Glass*, and the character Paul Auster its protagonist; but is it now legitimate to wonder in the same manner about the pensive, haunted figure who may materialise in the university lecture theatre. For me, however, Levy's work differentiates itself in the delivery of its sense of *bios* – that experiential element suggested by Olney; the drive towards the subtle expression of embodiment within the material, found in phases such as "I am the place it's always raining," or even, "I am the "etc."" (*Swimming Home*) – both embodiment *in* and deferral *to* the external object. And if Levy's protagonist, Sofia, initially feels a stranger in language as she struggles with the sense of self that it seems to compel her to accept, a view of language expressed by Denise Riley as impersonal and alien, then it is only because language is as alien to us as the cells that make up our flesh, and as substantive.

⁹⁴ See James Olney, *Metaphors of Self. The Meaning of Autobiography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 327-8.

Identity and bios

In *Hot Milk*, it seems that Sofia's identity is a fragile if portable one – her whole life contained in a laptop computer, which when it falls to the floor and shatters, appears to have far reaching consequences:

Today I dropped my laptop on the concrete floor of a bar built on the beach. It was tucked under my arm and slid out of its black rubber sheath (designed like an envelope), landing screen side down. The digital page is now shattered but at least it still works. My laptop has all my life in it and knows more about me than anyone else. My laptop has all my life in it. So what I am saying is that if it is broken, so am I.¹⁰³

Deborah Levy's work contains none of the abrupt narrative breaks to be found in Ali Smith, nor its flights of fancy, none of its baroque accumulation of stylistic forms; her characters display none of McCarthy's symptoms of formal autism – indeed, they appear masters of what Pieter Vermeulen might call "auto-affect" in their "phenomenological attunement" with their immediate environment; they are both intuitive, and reflective.¹⁰⁴ On the face of it, the passage given above describes an unremarkable, even banal set of circumstances to which the narrator gives a familiar, almost clichéd response – her laptop has her whole life in it – if it breaks so does she, etc. Except that our own condition of modernity is displacing the metaphoric or ironic mode of language here. We might indeed suspect that soon the memories, the internally stored information that constitute our identities, could be exteriorised to the extent that they become our whole life. But this passage also indicates a consciousness emplaced within its own objective environment, and the

¹⁰³ Deborah Levy, *Hot Milk* (London: Penguin, 2017), 1.

¹⁰⁴ See Vermeulen, 11.

potential for a connectivity between the affective memory associated with her past identity that doesn't quite seem adequate, and her new transitional "holiday" environment of Almeria with all its pressing physicality – elements which, throughout the novel, the narrator attempts to resolve.

The world in which Sofia finds herself seems to reduce her initially to a two-dimensionality: she settles for short term “gratification” – which in itself provides an ongoing construction of self “presence”, a grounding in materiality free from abstractions that might otherwise define her in terms not her own:

‘Sofia,’ he says, ‘I know your age and I know your country of origin.
But I don’t know anything about your occupation.’
I like how he is not in love with me.
I like how I am not in love with him.
I like the yellow flesh of the two tiny wild pineapples he bought in
the market.¹⁰⁶

Is Sofia here the prototype for the contemporary subject, the planar consciousness, able to construct itself at will – both defined by yet strangely ungrounded by its surroundings? For much of the novel, myth seems the only stable recourse to meaning – offering a more redolent set of symbols between the narrator's sense of being, and a language that is as inadequate as it is consequential, material – and through which she undergoes a kind of individuation. Speaking initially of her feelings for the war-like Irene, the novel’s troublesome inverted goddess of peace whom she has befriended, she describes the process of a kind of becoming, in familiarly quotidian terms:

¹⁰⁶ Levy, 187.

Yes, some things are getting bigger, other things are getting smaller. Love is getting bigger and more dangerous. Technology is getting smaller, the human body is getting bigger, my low-rise jeans cutting into my hips which are round and brown and toned from a month of swimming every day but I am still spilling over the waistband of these jeans not made for hips. I am overflowing. like coffee leaking from a paper cup. I wonder, shall I make myself smaller?

Do I have enough space on Earth to make myself less?
The coil of black smoke had melted into the sky.¹⁰⁷

These sentiments, which our knowledge of the character so far in the novel leads us to believe are delivered without irony, resolve to a more mythic register that transposes the spatial logic of the sentence, as she connects back with the “Earth” and the “sky”. And as the ominous “black smoke” dissolves, we sense as readers, that a transition has taken place that involves above all the right of *self-representation*. A hiatus has taken place, as the bonds of language and its symbols start to loosen their patriarchal grip and she thinks of her Greek father, that forgetful Zeus, and his young wife:

By the time I had finally climbed down the mountain path that led to the beach, I had journeyed as far from myself as I have ever been, far, far away from any landmarks I recognized.

I was flesh thirst desire dust blood lips cracking feet blistered knees skinned hips bruised, but I was so happy not to be napping on a sofa under a blanket with an older man by my side and a baby on my lap.¹⁰⁸

With Levy, notions of identity seem inextricably tied to the “working through” of voice – a voice that needs to be “tried out”, tested for a fit with its “uncanny environment”, like the identities adopted by her characters. In *Hot Milk*, the “Greek

¹⁰⁷ Levy, 202.

¹⁰⁸ Levy, 202.

girl”, as Sofia is mistakenly referred to, possesses a composite identity that is not yet formed (alternately, she is also addressed by the people she encounters as Sophie, Zoffie, Sophia – do these names represent nuanced alternative versions of self?). Paradoxically, it is only the mother, subject to apparently "phantom" pains in her limbs, and Dr Gómez, her rather shadowy medical specialist, becoming a kind of surrogate father to Sofia, who possess any unflinching sense of their own existence. In *Sunnyland*, a parallel might be drawn between the character of Pinkman as a substitute father, a character who appears "grounded" in his own dubious rhetorical gifts, and the unindividuated and rather feckless Jons. As narrator, Jons is trying to write his real father, but is the opposite becoming true? – Or is the father slowly erasing Jons, like Sofia's real father appears to be doing here:

“How have you been written off?”
“He is trying to forget I exist.”
“Is he succeeding?”
“He is trying to exist by forgetting.”
“Is forgetting the opposite of memory?”
“No.”

Like Albert Camus’ Meursault in *L’Étranger*, Deborah Levy’s protagonist in *Hot Milk*, Sophie, spends a lot of time on the beach. Coastlines, says Foucault are liminal spaces. And indeed, the beach is where Sofia's reflective capacity as narrator of her own thoughts is at its most fluid. The perplexities of her encounters with her estranged parents, the peripatetic Irene, and the inscrutable Dr Gómez, which take place generally on "dry land" are replaced by a connectivity between myth (most cogently symbolised by the "medusas"), and the physical world where these things

actually sting and produce weals on the flesh. But myth is liberating, and becomes a repository for the free-play of memory and the experimental adoption of identities, where objects are freed from normal semantic restraints.

As in its predecessor, *Swimming Home*, the protagonists of *Hot Milk* are away from home, in a setting which possesses the generic familiarity that is the representative condition of the contemporary rootless subject: the foreign holiday. But Spain is depicted very much as the alien other: its residents are furtive or seemingly unhinged, threatening, its landscape inhabited by medusas, horseflies, savage dogs; there is a “massive” heat under which modern-day slaves toil unseen to provide the markets of Europe with fresh produce.

This is a kind of realism, portraying a landscape that has a certain familiar reality, yet is not fixed by the kind of prescient socio-political forces associated with “home”. Compare this with Ali Smith’s landscapes which, though constantly mutating, are still recognisably the product of historical forces that identify them as Britain. The Spanish costa in Levy’s novel is denied such presence: it can only exist as a “brochurised” entity for “holiday-making”, but even in this it is contaminated, its waters full of stinging “medusas”, the Spanish for jellyfish; while inland, its working inhabitants, themselves transient, are brutalised by geopolitical forces that render them all but invisible beneath the patina of cultural “mythologies” to which the land has been subject.

Yet, to the extent that Sofia represents the individualised subject, there is a suggestion here of the creative potential of exile, of the embodiment of strangeness,

and of incorporating into the self that sense of dislocation in order to create a new way of seeing, which echoes Edward Said's call to "see it from a point of view that looks at it as if it were something that is provisional and foreign to oneself."¹⁰⁹

Elizabeth Wright suggests, in Jungian terms, a concept of the Shadow or alter ego can be seen "as integral rather than conflicting within the individuation process."¹¹⁰

Writing within a psychoanalytical context, Mark Freeman takes a slightly different approach, suggesting how the self might be rewritten:

...only when memories are *appropriated* into the fabric of the self – which is to say, only when one commences to rewrite the self by incorporating one's memories within the context of a plausible narrative order – can they be coincident with a measure of psychic healing.¹¹¹

Freeman emphasises the need to construct a "plausible narrative" in the creation of self, and sees this as an ever-present process in autobiographical or life writing. But in recognising the Nietzschean "subject as multiplicity", he sees the fictive potential of self-narrative in the re-interpreting of past experience through memory: "the relationship between living and telling." The issue becomes one of representation, shifting perspective, and which particular narrative hold sway. Of great relevance to this present study, and to the motivations behind *Sunnyland*, Wright points to the "strong intertextual operations" of magical realism:

...alluding to other texts both diachronically – through history, and synchronically – at certain moments of history, ... is particularly receptive to

¹⁰⁹ Edward Said, "Reflections of an Exile" *Biblio: A Review of Books*, vol. 4, no. 11&12 (Nov-Dec 1999), 13.

¹¹⁰ See Elizabeth Wright, Wright, Elizabeth. *Psychoanalytic Criticism: A Reappraisal* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), 60.

¹¹¹ Mark Freeman, *Rewriting the Self: History, Memory, Narrative*, (London: Routledge, 1993), 171.

psychoanalytic inquiry because it explores and transgresses boundaries while at the same time playing with the fusion of a variety of worlds, staging both transformations and dissolutions, a constant challenge to representation.¹¹²

Of all the writers considered here, it might be argued that Levy achieves a synthesis which appears to bring her work back into the ambit of realism. Yet she also incorporates a retrieval of myth, not just as part of the novel's referential sphere (the references to Greek myth transported to a Spanish costa) but in that the causal makeup of characters' actions is disrupted and replaced by the simple act of "being". Events, as they occur, seem to happen outside the remit of the depicted society (the exilic condition perhaps) Another type of synthesis takes place too, relating again to the spectral – but here, unlike in Smith, there are no narrative depictions of ghosts, no shaded alternative dimensions in which such phenomena might exist – materiality remains extant and relatively fixed, while the language used to describe it is multifarious and contingent. Rather, the text resonates with that other spectrality, that of the author herself, registering itself as an absence that can only be indexed through her protagonist's insights, and her own perspicacity towards that very "mythic" sense of displacement which she confronts with a "troubled" credulity – not the immobile emotional blankness that manifests itself in the more two-dimensional depiction of character we have encountered in McCarthy, but as a vessel to be filled with potential meaning – from a source of knowledge that must lay outside the text, that can only, in the end, reside in memory.

¹¹² Wright, 67.

In *Things I Don't Want to Know*, Levy writes:

‘England’ was an exciting word to write. My mother had told me we were in exile and would one day return to the country of my birth. The idea that I was living in Exile and not in England terrified me. When I told my new friend Judy (who was born in Lewisham) that I didn’t really want to live in Exile, she said, ‘Yeah, I’d be scared shitless too.’¹¹³

What is being alluded to here, perhaps, is an engagement in which the past is always geographically somewhere else, and that place, ultimately, can only be approached through memory. Notions of identity and belonging, in the exilic writer, are bound fundamentally to a sense of locale and its translation from other places, other sources. Both the sense of the self, and the representation of it, are implicated. The mode of translation is memory itself, as the original journey out, into the unknown, is forgotten in the contemplation of the journey back to the now imagined landscape. The journey’s starting point is that other place where you already stand.

Gabriel Josipovici’s *The Cemetery in Barnes*

Given its occasional surreal dramatic flourishes, its mythological allusions, Levy presents a voice which comes across as surprisingly muted and introspective. Her language is tuned down to the register of everyday speech and addresses the private space of self-reflection – crossing boundaries between the fictive and lived

¹¹³ Deborah Levy, *Things I Don't Want to Know: On Writing* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014), 85.

experience, the personal and autobiographical stake that recombines narrative, voice, and memoir. The writer becomes an autonomous yet implicated being.

I began this study by considering Peter Boxall's positing of "a late style" – the possibility of a different voice emerging out of a sense of fatigue or aftermath, as the power of postmodernism's "big narratives" subsided. Deborah Levy's recent novels and autobiography might be seen as an affirmative expression of this situation. If such a voice can be seen as a kind of late modernist "quietism", then this perhaps finds its fullest articulation in the work of Gabriel Josipovici, whose fiction has been credited with "an awareness of last things."¹¹⁹

In Josipovici's 2018 novel, *The Cemetery in Barnes*, we return to the theme of translation. The novel's protagonist is a translator by profession and the narrative shifts between his account of his current life with a "second wife", and a former life with a partner who apparently drowned.

The translator describes the relationship with the texts he translates – he muses about the untranslatability of certain works of poetry, and how, as the day moves on his immersion in the world of the texts he labours over appears increasingly distant, until finally he leaves his desk to take a stroll through the streets of Paris. But all is not always well:

As he strolled through the city in the late afternoons, his day's work done, he would occasionally have fantasies of drowning ...

He knew such feelings were neurotic, dangerous even, but he was not unduly worried, sensing that it was better to indulge them than to try and eliminate them altogether. After all, everyone has fantasies. In the one life there are many lives. Alternative lives. Some are lived and others imagined.

¹¹⁹ Adam Mars-Jones, "Novel Senses of the New" in *The Guardian Newspaper*. 26 September 2018.

That is the absurdity of biographies, he would say, of novels. They never take account of the alternative lives casting their shadows over us as we move slowly, as though in a dream, from birth to maturity to death.¹²⁰

However, poetry is his life, in particular when combined with the music of Monteverdi:

A te ne vengo, Orfeo,
Messaggiera infelice,
Di caso più infelice e piu funesto:
La tua bella Euridice...

I come to you, Orpheus,
An ill-fated bearer of tidings
Still more ill-fated and more tragic:
Your lovely Eurydice...¹²¹

These snatches of lyric and their translations denote the separate worlds the translator inhabits, which in the story become the “remembered life” with his first wife”, and the narrated present with his second. Yet, Josipovici's text manages to convey an ontological confusion between the two while allowing them to retain their discrete reality. These are worlds that speak to each other from distinct places. Even in the translator's work, as above, the English renderings he produces of the Italian bear little trace of any Latinate linguistic structure of the original that might have been easily carried over into the English. Each life retains its boundaries and limits, existing in another layer of experience. What distinguishes the work is the way in which the narrative moves between distinct levels of experience – schizoid but not

¹²⁰ Gabriel Josipovici, *The Cemetery in Barnes* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2018), 13.

¹²¹ Josipovici, 11.

quite schizophrenic – the narrator’s accounts are woven together precariously in memory in a manner which makes it often difficult to establish the narrator’s subjective present. It is such “ontological insecurity” that I wanted to explore in *Sunnyland*. I quote an extended passage here which sums up this position in the novel:

Jons is about to disappear – or at least relinquish his privileged role within the narrative. It is possible, in what one might call his increasingly textualised and psychotic state – as he becomes what he describes – that he has jumped or fallen down the very well that he seemed so intent on drawing attention to in the early stages of the novel. What was on his mind at that moment is anyone’s guess – that he had become obsessed with the resurrection of the dismantled, castaway’s driftwood ship hardly seems to tally with the logic of the situation – for that would be to try and fit an extremely large and ungainly peg into a very round, deep and confining hole. It would have been black fun indeed to watch him try.

No, the key to understanding Jons’ demise lies in the rapid approach of what Pinkman or Foales would have described as the *perplexing ontological turn* that will soon allow him to disappear. What might be understood from this is again anybody’s guess, but let’s assume that what Pinkman is referring to is the movement from one state of being to another – the obvious conclusion in this case would be from life to death. But why not from death to life, or better said, from a kind of death to a kind of life? Is not the well, after all, merely a vertical bridge in the increasingly vertiginous birl of the landscape that Jons, the protagonist who inhabits it, has played his part in constructing? Is it not that he has simply stepped off its edge?¹²²

In Josipovici’s novel, the narrator describes the approach to the his flat behind the Pantheon:

To get to it you went through the dark, narrow rue Saint-Julien and climbed the steep flight of steps which brought you out directly opposite the building. There were, of course, other ways of getting there, but this was the one he regularly used. It was how, in his mind, his little flat was linked to the outside world.¹²³

¹²² *Sunnyland*, 277.

¹²³ Josipovici, 9.

Alternative channels, possibilities, to those chosen: there are echoes here of McCarthy's preoccupation with networks and routing, in which, in the contemporary consciousness the self is seen as a nexus of interdependent distributed connections rather than as a centralised unit. Throughout Josipovici's text, narrative seems to encounter a number of switching points where routing to alternative scenarios or realities might pertain, but where each has its own distinct rules and outcomes – a situation chillingly stressed in the novel's closing paragraph, as the protagonist addresses his second wife:

One sprouts so many lives, he would say, and look at her and smile.
One is a murderer. One an incendiary. One a suicide. One lives in London.
One in Paris. One in New York. One, one, one, she would echo, mocking
him.¹²⁴

Josipovici's novel resonates with a sense of unreliability throughout – but this is not produced amidst the conflicting versions of the protagonist's life that we might feel compelled to believe in, which in the end might only amount to the simple binary poles of truth-untruth – an already questionable premise. Rather, it is narrative itself that is wilfully delivered as “inadequate” for the task of expressing the plurality of existential life.

¹²⁴ Josipovici, 101.

Conclusion

In this study I have used considered a range of authors who I believe are particularly illuminating in their exploration of new emerging representations of subjectivity within the novel over the last two decades. The inclusion of their writing here is to acknowledge a view of self and subjectivity that sits within the humanist debate regarding the status of the individual, and the challenge to conventional notions of realism and selfhood which their work enacts.

I regard my own work, *Sunnyland* as a piece of topographical writing which pays particular attention to place and its aesthetic representation. It does so by exploring a notion of a distributed decentred self that through the act of the writing's construction produces its own formal structure. In this regard my work's concern with *situatedness* as an autobiographical rather than thematic issue differentiates it from these other writers. However, I have tried to show how a developing re-evaluation of the author role – the “autobiographic turn” is a common factor and its implications for representations of affective states within the novel form.

Sunnyland attempts to articulate a response to landscape using formal devices which seek to interrogate contemporary notions of affect in relation to still dominant discourses of realism – one such device is a reconfiguration of an autobiographic narrative model based on dispersal and interpersonal states rather than on coherence and standard individualising notions of self and other that follow R. D. Laing's influential model of these two states in equilibrium.

In the end, some sense of continuity must emerge, however decentring the writing strategy might be. In a sense, *Sunnyland* is a test bed to observe to what extent an implied consciousness might become evident to deliver such continuity amidst its highly variegated affective landscapes.

In many ways *Sunnyland* displays the “simultaneous exaltation and mistrust of language” that Sanja Bahun describes as “modernist melancholia”, using “formal inflection” rather than description”, characterised also by “a troublesome father-son relation ... a mourning for the mother”¹²⁵ My work undoubtedly possessed some of these traits in aspects of its narrative voice. But while recognising this, its aim is to exteriorise and seek out new affects through its formal structure of dispersal. From all the different texts’ apparent disconnectedness in *Sunnyland*, does a single consciousness emerge? If it does, is this a failure – proof of a centralising ego?

Possible revisions for publication

Sunnyland needs to frame its experiments, provide a guide to accompany its wanderings. Kevin Barry’s *Beetlebone*, (2015), a fictional account of John Lennon’s journey to visit an island he had purchased off the West Coast of Ireland, provides one solution.¹²⁶ The novel’s narration mixes dialogue, mostly between Lennon and his driver, and third-person narration, notable for its free indirect style. Towards the end of the novel there is a substantial section, discrete from the novel’s world, where

¹²⁵ Sanja Bahun, *Modernism and Melancholia: Writing as Countermourning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 11.

¹²⁶ Kevin Barry, *Beetlebone* (London: Canongate Books, 2016).

Barry himself emerges to deliver his own real-world account of his methods and motivations in writing the novel. Given *Sunnyland's* preoccupation with process as form, and autobiography, this might be an appropriate technique. The complexity of the narrative structure, however, would probably dictate that authorial interventions would need to be staged fairly evenly across the novel. Currently, the character of Pinkman stands in as the novel's spokesman. His unreliability in the role is intended as a source of humour and a deliberately unstable prop for the reader to cling to. Therefore, that particular dynamic would have to be rethought. But I think, as a narrative, it needs more urgent human interest – and might need to somehow foreground its autobiographical elements as something real rather than structural. Woven throughout the narrative are real lived events that have personal resonance with the author – effectively, to use Nabokov's phrase, these are the novel's "sublime coordinates" ("These are the nerves of the novel. These are the secret points of delight"). Some framing of these might be useful beyond a certain intensity that the reader may or may not notice.

Another possibility would be to have a single framing narrative woven between the various texts – the arrival of the absent father after Jons' disappearance, for example, who would then recount a coherent version of the story retrospectively. Such devices, however, introduce a degree of determinacy in terms of plotting, and may start to undermine the "unmoored" affective aesthetic that the novel strives for, so that narrative strictures might dissolve into something more effectively existential.

Amongst the writers considered in this study, Deborah Levy and Tom McCarthy might be regarded as opposing poles in the humanist/post-humanist debate, in which the latter's anti-humanist entreaty, where subjectivity in literature is attacked for its "relatability", is superseded by an approach of encouraging this very relatability in a connectivity under the rubric of autobiography as ultimately post-human subjectivity – a "life beyond the self" to use Rosi Braidotti's phrase, or at least an individualised contained self. Braidotti's post-humanism is here understood as a dismantling of the distinction between the given (nature) and the constructed (culture), in a stance which "rejects dualism, especially the opposition nature-culture and stresses instead the self-organising (or autopoietic) force of living matter".¹²⁷ In Levy, I would argue, a re-evaluation of the mechanism of self leads to an enhanced sense of identity – paradoxically, perhaps, by immersing the autobiographical self into the very *literariness* of its writing, seeing the text as part of a wider ecology which connects history, myth, and nature as self-organising (Braidotti uses the term "autopoietic").

The contemporary novel might be seen, on the one hand, as an expression of a re-emergent but reconsidered construction of selfhood, necessarily a formulation

¹²⁷ Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), 3.

of continuity, and indeed, of some kind of unifying structure of consciousness that both acknowledges a postmodern landscape, not just of fragmentation but “bordered” fragmentation of agenda and affiliation, seen as psychoanalytical “split”, while on the other hand seeking meaning in connectivity and synthesis.

As an experimental novel, the stance *Sunnyland* is taking, and wishing to evaluate, is one of co-existence and contiguity, rather than displacement in the face of ongoing change – although with regard to the latter, any assessment of influence, however configured, will necessarily imply a sense of lineage at some level. What might be suggested, therefore, is an emphasis, on “connectivity”, rather than breach – what Daniel Lea has claimed is “the ethical dimension of intersubjective connection”, which he identifies as an abiding purpose behind the novel.

The imperative of “relationality” which Elias points to, suggests we have come a long way from the spatial configuration of Ballard’s “glassy isolation” and would seem to indicate that the “spaces of the present” that we appear to occupy possess a somewhat grounded, homely feel in comparison. But is this in fact the case? That ancient tension between home and other, between host and stranger, the interpolation of one within the other, the substitutions of one with the other that takes place in *The Odyssey*, for example (and Jons’ “Telemachy” in *Sunnyland* as he searches for news of his father, enacting his own story in the process), are indicative of the shifting, “constructed” nature of home and the sense of self-identity it helps us assign – as Ulysses’ long migration back to a place he can call home has long demonstrated, and his vacillations along the way.

A view of the novel might be that the interiority customarily associated with it bespeaks an isolation that both seeks and resists resolution in a communion with the outside world. Modernism's double-blind might be that it values dissent while bemoaning the breakdown in connectivity that this entails. In contrast, Bourriaud's notion of relational aesthetics rejects the avant-garde spirit of confrontation or negation of a status: "the imaginary of modernism was based on conflict, the imaginary of our day and age is concerned with negotiations, bonds and co-existences."¹²⁸ But clearly there are potentially both aesthetic and political dangers in this position, as Claire Bishop has argued in *Antagonism and Regional Aesthetics*. And although Bourriaud's insists that his vision of an exterior dialogic aesthetic can also incorporate the historical and diachronic, there is perhaps ultimately a danger of a synchronic homogeneity.

Sebald's homelessness, because its emphasis is essentially historical, a homelessness in time, is more profound – it responds to our cultural obsession with time – in this regard, space and place, in the age of the citizen traveller, have become merely a form of escapism into the kind of liminal world or Foucauldian heterotopia that Levy describes on the Spanish Costa.

Levy's work is also of course a form of realism. It describes places and people we know, whose motivations are directed towards a search for identity and self-empowerment which are as familiar and prescient as never before. It also reminds us

¹²⁸ Nicholas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods (Paris: Les Presses du Reel, 2002), 31.

of realism's continuing role as social instrument – as Isabel Duncan suggests, standard autobiography and realism still has much to offer:

“The much trumpeted “death of the self” and “death of the author” are already a sign of the crisis of the Western world. Euro-American authors, so the argument goes, may be digging their own graves, but many authors who have never had the possibility of inscribing their names or those of their race and culture, are anxious to occupy the abandoned podium.”¹²⁹

¹²⁹ Duran, Isabel. "Autobiography". *The Literary Encyclopedia*. First published 01 April 2003 [https://www.litencyc.com/php/stopics.php?rec=true&UID=1232, accessed 08 December 2018.]

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