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*A Mist that Rises from the Sea*

PhD in Creative Writing, Lancaster University

January 2016

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### Declaration

I hereby declare that this creative project and thesis are both my own work, and have not been submitted in substantially the same form for the award of a higher degree elsewhere.

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### Abstract

In my research through practice I am writing a creative memoir about memory and loss. It focuses on the life and death of my brother, and is set over a single month after his funeral. Each of the twenty-four chapters, mirroring the 24 years of my brother's life, explore a particular theme that sheds light on our relationship. I draw on my own childhood as well as local myths, texts, stories, history, beliefs and traditions to show how identity and experience are complicated by context and surroundings. My aim is to use both the form and content of the work to create a working demonstration of the theory that the past is never lost, that it does not disappear and that, whatever we might forget, something always remains.

I am focusing upon the following research questions:

- How can the process and perspective of the grieving mind, suspended between past and future, be represented in a narrative?
- How much is a person's identity contained within the history of the places they lived in and the objects they treasured?
- How can biography be brought to life using the tools and techniques characteristic of literary fiction?
- What responsibilities do we have in bringing the dead back to life in writing?

My original contribution to knowledge is to create new insights on how we come to measure or understand a life, as well as to explore the process of how the

grieving mind comes to terms with the death of someone close. In addition to my creative project, I have created an annotated index that explores the theory and practice behind the creation of a personal history within a literary text.

## **A Mist that Rises from the Sea**

### *1. Goblin Woods*

Almost directly behind my parents' house lie the Goblin Woods – so called because where the light manages to pick a way through the interlinking weave of branches that make up the dense canopy shadows are thrown that resemble the twisted forms of imps, spirits and demons. The stretch of woods at the back of the garden is tangled and uninviting, and so it is almost always via the footpath further up the road that I enter, despite the thickset spray of nettles that have grown up across the path as if to disguise its purpose. The nettles cleave together and stings spread across my ankles as I attempt to make my way further in. I am reminded of my brother at about three years of age, listening with an earnest face to our mum's instructions to use the crayons we had been given on the paper placed in front of us and then, as soon as her back was turned, scribbling great looping swirls of green and orange across the pale wallpaper and skirting board. It is as though the nettles too know they shouldn't, but cannot resist.

Yet despite their best efforts, there is no mistaking the fact that the sting caused by the nettles is only a slight itch and not the throbbing, burning pain it had seemed when I was a child, a pain so insistent that it invariably sent my brother and I searching frantically for dock leaves to rub against the reddening patches of irritated skin. The sky too is different. It is not the usual sweep of cloud-blown blue that can often be seen towards the start of July, but is instead a subdued and mottled grey, just as the day might seem if seen through the gauze-like haze of cataracts.

I am taking this more overgrown route because I need to retrace the steps we have taken a hundred times before. I will make the same journey we used to take together, though as always I am torn between the desire to lay claim to the past, and the thought that it all lies just beyond my reach. For memory warps everything, just as rain warps timber. I have met people who have endured wars or long stretches in prison only to find that in later years something of them yearns for those times, no matter how terrible their experiences – what was once fear is transformed into a heightened sense of vitality; unbearable confinement becomes intimate camaraderie. Memory repaints the past, again and again, until the present is pale and colourless.

I push on regardless. The further the path follows the slope down towards the muddy track at the bottom the closer the trees huddle together. Save for the sound, somewhere in the distance, of deer crunching leaves beneath their tread, the whole woods are so silent that it is hard to imagine that the trees have ever heard anything louder than a whisper. When we were children even my brother would stop running and shouting, if only for the briefest of respites, as soon as the darkness of the woods enveloped us; and we would often be careful to speak to each other in voices low enough to ensure that we were not overheard by the goblins lurking behind the beeches.

In the folktales families told to one another many hundreds of years ago, forests are, almost without exception, presented as places of gloom and danger. In Hansel and Gretel, the narrative is set in motion by the abandonment of two children in a forest. Of their parents we learn little, save that they are said to be starving. Indeed, of the world beyond the forest, almost nothing is said. Nevertheless, the beginning of the tale, if not the further discovery of a gingerbread house, is rooted in historical truth. You see, the decades of Black Death, the Peasants' Revolts, the never-

ending battles between the House of Valois and the Plantagenets, all brought with them years of famine and desperation and, when it was no longer possible for families to support their children, forests made for ideal places in which to desert them. Even the smallest of forests can induce disorientation and make it impossible for a child to find his or her way back home.

The Goblin Woods are home to rabbits, deer and voles; and any number of warblers, pheasants, wood pigeons or finches might be glimpsed among the low-slung branches. The beeches are occasionally joined by ash or yew and, in the empty stretches between them, bluebells, wood anemone, twayblade, butcher's broom and dog's mercury have made their home. These open glades, strewn like bald patches across the bristling hide of the woods, mark where trees were felled by the great storm of 1987, England's worst since 1703. This earlier tempest, popularly regarded as the scourge of a wrathful and unappeasable deity, was a hurricane that crushed ships together upon the sea, peeled up the leaden roof of Westminster Abbey as though it were a mere sheath of parchment, and reputedly even sent the Queen herself hurrying to the cellar to hide from the wailing winds. The storm of my childhood, however, killed few, and is remembered more for the lack of warning from the trusted weathermen on TV than for any of its effects. These included the laying waste of close to fifteen million trees.

I can just about remember that night in mid-October, though the only detail to stick in my mind is the way the windowpanes shook, as though there was someone outside frantically banging to be let in. I was then a few weeks from my sixth birthday and my brother, sleeping on the top bunk and snoring lightly above my head, would have been about three and three quarters. I believe he did not wake even once, though this was not strange, for he had the ability to fall into a deep and untroubled sleep



seemingly at will, no matter where we were or how much uproar and pandemonium might surround us. I lay still in my bunk for what seemed like a week, trying to summon up the bravery to go to the window to see what was there. I would have woken him, but at the time I felt as though the wild wind was calling to me alone, though I could not understand from its garbled and frantic tongue whether its intention was benign or malicious, and so I waited out the storm from the safety of my bed. From that night on I became convinced that wind, water, rain and hail each have a language of their own, and that they speak it most clearly only once night has come.

I follow the path round a huddle of trees. The way the woods muffle sound and repel all but the thinnest arrows of daylight make it possible to believe they are inhabited only by ghosts. As a child I would mistake the word ‘corpse’ for ‘copse’, and for a long time it seemed to me that even the smallest woods and coppices had some special connection with the dead. As if to prove this, when I was in my early teens, somewhere in the woods that litter the low ridges of the South Downs not far from us a young man was found hanging from one of the trees. A family friend had been out walking his dog when, following the track around a sharp bend, he caught sight of a blue jacket somewhere above him. A blue jacket, and mud-caked trainers – he had seen both, or so I overheard him tell my parents. Though I knew neither the dead boy nor his family, the event confirmed my sense that forests welcome death just as lakes welcome swimmers or the sky welcomes clouds.

Since for me the young man had no name, no face which I could link to the story, for a time he was the image of Death – that shadowy figure of myth and legend whose features, rendered indistinguishable by the relentless work of time, have faded to a blank mask. I cannot remember hearing any other information about the boy, neither any reason for his actions nor account of his possible motives; but looking

back now it seems that with such a death there is never an explanation that will suffice. Our imaginings only reach so far before they return to us. For some time after the suicide, our walks in the woods became more tentative, as I imagined every shadow flung from every outstretched branch might be a body upon a rope, and every sudden flapping of birds that the dog sent scattering into the sky might be something less certainly defined taking flight.

These thoughts play through my head as I walk further into the woods, and soon I am completely lost. The path is forever corkscrewing back upon itself, returning me time and again to the same few trees. I am suddenly aware of the frail sunlight falling between the coil and braid of the entwined branches. Shadows multiply, I increase my pace, and discern movement ahead of me. Several times I mistake the call and flutter of birds for familiar voices. I turn at a fork in the path and begin to make my way down a slope that I trust will lead me to the slim valley at the heart of the Goblin Woods. I no longer trust my senses, but am still startled by the sound of footsteps out of synch with the echo of my own and, for a second, I catch a glimpse of my brother, his face a trick of the light roaming over the bark of a twisted beech.

Less than half an hour into the walk, and before I have even found a way to reach the track at the foot of the slope, I find myself unable to continue. The mulch that lines the woodland floor is made not of the familiar mixture of twigs, dead wood, leaves, moss, trampled flowers and other debris stewing down to feed the tangle of roots beneath the ground, but is instead the compressed refuse of the past and with each step I take I sink a little deeper. I must turn back. I swing fast on my heels, so fast I almost lose my balance in the mud. I start back up the track for home.

Within a wood, time ceases to function as it should. The density of the canopy creates a sense of almost continual twilight, and it is possible not only to mistake minutes for hours but to believe that the trees exert such strong influence over their terrain that within their bounds we are forced to experience time as they, the trees, experience it. Their languorous rhythm is felt throughout the forest while days, weeks, years race on outside its borders. And light too is different here, behaving as oddly as it does when passing through glass or liquid. Even on the darkest of days, on emerging from the woods, my eyes take several moments to readjust to the unbroken expanse of sky, and the relative sparseness of the world without makes everything, for a moment, utterly strange. As I walk back along the footpath, the world ahead – the empty road leading home, the stretches of overgrown grass, the sagging telephone wires spun out between poles – reminds me of those apocalyptic films which begin with long shots of abandoned skyscrapers, deserted houses, silent streets. The day after the end of the world.

Ahead is the house I have not lived in for years. I am back in a village on the outskirts of a city. It is our village, and the city where my mum is a teacher and my dad a social worker. But no one has gone in to work this week. I now draw close to the front door. I should not be here.

I wait for something that will explain everything. Nothing comes. There is no ritual to guide me, and little to weigh against my grief.

Things, though, would have been different in the past – in, say, ancient Rome. At the time of death the head of a Roman household would kneel over the sickbed and attempt to breathe in the last breath of his dying relative, to store something of their life within his own. A procession would then have carried the body to the outskirts of the city, and some of the deceased's family would have worn masks representing their

ancestors, whose illustrious and eternal company the dead would now be joining. Former slaves, now bequeathed their freedom at their master's death, would have wailed and rent their clothes. The relatives of the deceased, set apart in black, would have stayed inside for nine days beyond the funeral, never once letting sunlight fall upon their faces. And, perhaps because death is evergreen, the bereaved would have set a solitary cypress branch outside the front of the house in which loss had taken root, letting the shadows of the leaves stretch out like fingertips pressing silently upon the door.

Forgive me, I am a historian of sorts, and I am sinking into history. The truth is there are no cypresses outside this house. There are no cypresses in our village either, and none in the city where my parents usually work – though no one has gone in to work this week.

## 2. *Genus*

I would not have left the woods in such a hurry if I had known that a goblin was on my trail and had followed me all the way home. I want to be rid of him and so I decide to dig out our childhood copy of *The Princess and the Goblin*, thinking that perhaps it was George MacDonald's Victorian fairy tale that had inspired my brother and me to see goblins in the darkest stretches of the nearby woods. I do not see it in any of the boxes that we have recently moved from my brother's house, and so I take down the keys to the garage. I root through the garden tools, peer in the old cardboard boxes and look under the assortment of stepladders. I cannot find it. Perhaps the book itself has been spirited to the kingdom of the goblins.

After all these years I can still recall a few details of the adventures of the young princess and the son of a local miner as they attempt to thwart the wicked plans of a race of goblins that dwell in murky caverns and winding tunnels beneath the mountain. In particular, I remember that in the area around the mines the sound of goblin hammers and pickaxes could be heard pounding away throughout the night and that, though the goblins had strong, sinewy bodies, they had weak and tender feet without any toes on the end. I remember also that, at bedtime, my mum would read from *The Princess and the Goblin* and so many of the images seeped into my dreams; I would often wake in the night certain that I had recently been wandering through underground caves in search of treasure. My brother often told me that in the night he had seen a hidden trapdoor suddenly appear in the floor or in the corner of the ceiling, and out had poured an army of goblins, sneaking through our room and on through the window into the street. All this he watched with his eyes half-closed. He would always deny that this was a dream, and would often spend half the morning searching

for traces of the trapdoor, even going so far as to root through all the cupboards, haphazardly throwing out the clothes within so that he might find the hidden passageway he was sure was located somewhere in our house. We had to be careful, he said, or they might be back the next night and bring more of their companions with them.

I have often thought that the interest of the Victorians in fairies, goblins and other such phantasmagoria is strangely similar to the proliferation of conspiracy theories, UFO sightings and tales of alien abduction in more recent times. Many of us, it seems, long to believe that the universe is crowded with things we have not yet identified, that despite the rapid advances of science there remain phenomena that cannot be explained except by recourse to the imagination. In the Goblin Woods I had been convinced, if only for a second, that the past had come to life around me. The ancient idea of the luminiferous ether – that we are surrounded by a hypothetical substance through which light was thought to travel – has long since been dismissed; but it is sometimes not difficult to imagine that the air around us is indeed teeming with things we cannot see, that an invisible world is pressing in upon us, and that the weight is almost too much to bear.

The first goblins were said to have come from deep within the ancient forests of the British Isles. Later they must have spread across the world by stowing away in the hulls of the ships that made the maiden journeys across the channel. Being a small island, much of our history is intimately bound to the voyages of vessels moving to and from our coasts; even the shortest and most menial of journeys have had an immeasurable impact upon our fate. It was, for instance, a single infected ship coming into port on a grey, rainy spring day in 1348 that changed the entire path of the fourteenth century. Within days, the men who had been on this ship found rashes and

spots spreading across their skin. These were commonly followed by a high fever, vomiting, diarrhoea and, frequently, death. The sickness, known first as the Great Mortality and, later, the Black Death, struck down roughly a third of the country. It was also a single voyage, returning from the New World, that brought the potato, which would become one of the only constants in the changing diet of Britain's growing populace even throughout wars, famines and rationing. And yet, for all this, it is the journeys of goblins, hidden amidst the supplies in the dark underbelly of nameless ships, that are, for me, the most telling. For it is the things no one ever intends to carry back from their travels that often have the greatest effect – the arguments overheard in foreign cities, the strange customs witnessed, the new ideas discovered in distant harbours. Or so I learnt at university, once I had left my brother and his goblin far behind.

An alternative hypothesis places the genesis of goblins in the heart of the German woodland, most probably the Black Forest with its treacherous mountain ranges and rural villages where, every year, some of the locals still don twisted, goblinsque masks to represent the dark spirits of the winter that are being driven away. Both theories, however, maintain that goblins came from woods, and there are indeed many similarities between the dense pine and fir forests of pre-Roman Britain and those of Swabia – not least, that both forests were traditionally thought of as places where the law had no power. Even as late as the middle ages, many travellers having to make a passage through large forests journeyed in fear of encountering bandits, madmen or outlaws. Forests have always been places of strange encounters.

It is now the evening after my abortive walk through the Goblin Woods, and my mind is still on goblins, especially those leaving their familiar forests behind and hiding on creaking ships within the musty storerooms usually reserved for food and

munitions. These goblins steal bites of stale biscuits or else catch weevils and wolf them down between their goblin teeth. I picture whole tribes of them huddling in the blackest corners of ships bound for the new world.

I head to bed, and as I do I begin to think of one particular migrating goblin. Falling prey to those meandering thoughts which always come between turning out the bedroom light and finding sleep, I imagine my goblin finally reaching America and staring bug-eyed and unbelieving at the Statue of Liberty, trying to work out why the gargantuan grey lady was thrusting her arm towards the clouds like some monstrous deity. I imagine him drifting through New York, peering at all the strange shops, checking his reflection in the shiny glass of a skyscraper, and trying to decipher the sprawling words on the giant Broadway billboards. He has a single suitcase that he carries with him at all times, and a change of clothes but no banknotes, no coins. He cannot afford to live in the city and so, after a series of mishaps (some farcical, some more harrowing), he makes his way to Coney Island where he finds employment in a freak show. He is paid little but is allowed to sleep curled up on the warm leather seat of a carriage in the ghost train once the fairground closes. At night the rain makes banshee howls, rattles the roof, and rustles the plastic cobwebs that hang down around my goblin's makeshift bed. He lives on chilli dogs and pretzels, and learns that nothing is less truthful than a smile.

In the morning I wake to find him hardened, more resolute. He has changed his name from 'Gruesome Goblin' to 'Gregory Golin' and has moved to New Jersey, or Pennsylvania, where his gnarled fingers find work at a sewing machine or as a tailor, measuring shoulders, waists and legs for suits in the small backroom of his new home. Or perhaps, given the allure that silver and diamond hold for him, he becomes a jeweller – spending his day with his eye pinched against a loupe to trace the lines



upon the tiniest of crystals. Or, better yet, he becomes a butcher, dressed in blood-splattered apron and always with the sharpest of blades in his wrinkled fist. He has a family now and settles in a small neighbourhood with many goblin restaurants and a nearby high school where a number of the teachers are themselves goblins. He is hard-working, saves up to send his children far away to university and is heart-broken when they return renouncing the goblin tongue of the homeland he has left behind, and announce that they have no intention of marrying a goblin girl or taking over the family business.

When he was four or five, my brother had a goblin inside him. It appeared whenever he wished to do something he knew he was not supposed to and, after the requisite mischief had been done, it would disappear as quickly as it had arrived. My brother did not, however, attempt any secrecy and, indeed, would go out of his way to announce his imminent transformation, shouting that *Bebe is coming! Bebe is coming!* I am not sure how he had alighted upon the name ‘Bebe’ for the creature he became, but those short, repeated syllables seemed to perfectly suit the manic and frenzied character that ran wild about the house. Although I was two years older, ‘Bebe’ attempted to bite me a number of times and broke many of my toys. Bebe, it seemed, had no concern over what punishment might follow his devilry. He would stamp on train sets, throw out the contents of cupboards and drawers, and attempt to wrench every limb from every teddy bear, all while shrieking at the top of his voice – and the more annoyed and enraged I got at his wild behaviour, the louder he shrieked in pleasure.

Whenever these days I mention Bebe to my parents, I am amazed to find that they have no recollection of him at all. In fact, when I mention it they look at me as if I have told them the sky is upside-down. They remember the boglins that littered his

room, but not Bebe. Boglins, I should explain, were rubber puppets with grotesque, distorted faces that looked as though they had been left to shrivel up, like raisins, in the sun. Indeed, they were little more than a giant misshapen head; their eyes and mouths could be moved by thrusting a hand into the pit of the creature's skull, and their sole purpose seemed to be to allow the owner to frighten sensitive siblings. My brother kept them lined up in their cages against his bedroom wall, their wrinkled faces twisted into permanent grins, their boggle eyes glowing green in the dark.

But, to return to Bebe – am I remembering right? As I say, my parents have no memory of him and all, and my other brother, the youngest, was too young during the few months of Bebe's reign to be able to recall him now. So perhaps I am just imagining Bebe. Or perhaps he was summoned only a handful of times, tried out on a couple of rainy days and then abandoned forever. Or perhaps he simply kept his mischief well hidden from our parents, his power dependent on his being a secret.

If it was a secret then it is one that is now trusted to me alone. I have, I realise, become Bebe's sole keeper and custodian, and though once I would have recoiled at the sight of him I am now glad to have him beside me. Bebe has grown less querulous with age – though also a little ragged and world-weary, with the first few white hairs starting to show. It is sometimes said that our minds are little more than dumps or junkyards, and in the days following the funeral I felt as if my own memory might as well have been a mess of pruned branches, bags of cut grass, mattresses pierced by unloosed springs, broken crockery, out-dated globes, collapsed shelves, brass beds given over to rust, piles of flies living like kings amid the stink, and more junk arriving by the hour to be compressed, compacted, composted or buried deep beneath the rest. How strange then to find, amidst all the scrap, something antique, something

precious that only I know about. Whether this makes me more curator or rag-and-bone man, I am not sure.

But I cannot keep him, not Bebe. Of that I am sure. Bebe is not made for houses. I must set him free. Bebe will be more at home, I believe, in the woods at the back of the house, amidst its countless warrens and burrows. Goblins, after all, are subterranean creatures, their strange physiognomy – the sagged and crumpled folds of mottled green flesh – an effect of the endless nighttime of their dwellings. Yes, Bebe would be more at home in the woods.

As a child I never doubted that the strangest and most magical things might be hiding within the forest. Whenever we went to the woods together, my brother would often rush ahead and, when he had reached a suitable distance, he would turn and call back to me, claiming that he had spotted a tiger strutting between the trees, or a huge anaconda slithering among the leaves. By the time I drew level with him, however, he would take great delight in announcing that I was too slow and that the fabulous creatures had long disappeared, no doubt scared away by my clumsy, leaden approach.

My brother would also say that if we got caught in the woods when the sun went down we would never find our way back out. No matter how much he might have been enjoying the games we were playing, as soon as he saw the sun starting to set he would abandon dens and wigwams half-finished and start racing back towards the path, with me in pursuit. Years later I found myself on an unknown path within the woods at sunset, and the trees seemed, like those within a fairy story, to unknot their roots from the earth and change positions, until I was uncertain of how I might ever find my way back out again. Goblins, though, surely know their way through

nighttime forests as certainly as we know the alphabet. Bebe, then, is safe there, out there, in the Goblin Woods.

### 3. *Holes in the Skull*

I return to a forest a week later, when we gather in Fittleworth to scatter my brother's ashes. It is a cloudless day, with the sun reeling low in the sky and burning upon the back of my neck. I keep my head down as I follow the dark track of trampled leaves through the slopes and inclines of what my brother and I had named the Bracken Woods on account of the incalculable amount of coarse ferns that cover the slopes. From the car park we have to scramble up a sharp ridge amid a scattering of silver birches leaning toward the drop, some slanted at such a dramatic angle that it is a miracle they don't tumble backwards down the hillside when we rest against them to draw breath. After only a few minutes we reach the trig point at Hesworth Common, where the downs can be seen rising and slipping in successive waves into the distance. The earth itself is in flight, rippling outwards from the spot where I stand, staring.

We do not stop there long, and soon we are hurrying down a short slope on the other side of the common. We walk as though we are all in a hurry, though none of us has anywhere else to be, and we say little as we make our way in single file down the hillside. The track diverges at several points, though we ignore the pathways that lead toward the wiry press of holly trees and those that skitter further down into the swaying sea of bracken, where I have no doubt that a host of sleeping adders lie coiled. Instead we follow a thin, curling trail winding through the woods. The whole area is as labyrinthine and difficult to navigate as it had been when I was a child, with every turning branching off into several competing tracks, half of which vanish into dead ends or tangled shrub, while many of the others double back upon themselves or lead only in large, looping circles. Nevertheless, after twenty minutes we finally reach a clearing at the top of a squat hill that opens upon a gradual descent of heather.

The flowers are mauve and stippled with white in the feverish heat of mid-summer. From afar the low-lying shrub might easily be mistaken for a dark fire glowing on the hillside. There is a sweet fragrance rising from the slope, and I remember that heather is food not only for grouse, deer and bees, but also for fairies.

In fact, there was a time when fairies were thought to be so thick upon the British Isles that much was done to guard against their malice and spite. Fairies, you see, were thought to possess the ability to assume different shapes; for though some may have been tiny, impish creatures, there were also thought to be a great number of oafish fairies who resembled trolls, as well as others of incomparable stature and grace. It was said that they were responsible for the noises heard in the bones of empty houses deep at night, and also for the flickers of movement caught in the corners of mirrors, and for the cold breath that you might feel upon the back of your neck when you venture alone through an old building. They were also said to sneak into houses and steal newborn babies from their cribs, trading each human child for one of their own. A family might only realise that such a swap had taken place many years later, by which time it would be too late to reclaim the baby that had been stolen; there would be nothing to be done but to take care of the fairy child and hope the fairies were doing the same for the little human now living in their midst. Fairy children were said to be easy to spot: if the child developed more slowly than others of its age, if its hair was thick and easy to become matted upon the comb, if its ears pointed out and away from the head, if it preferred going barefoot to wearing shoes, if it babbled away in a language of its own invention, or if it lacked a healthy appetite, then you could be certain that you had been duped and had a fairy child.

There were, I admit, occasions when I was young that I wondered whether my brother might not have been the product of some similar trick, whether he truly was

the child of my own mum and dad. Perhaps, I thought, he had simply appeared from elsewhere. We were, you see, so dissimilar in almost every aspect. Where I was a quiet child with my mum's own tawny hair, he was wild, loud, prone to tantrums, and allergic at first to almost everything. Above all, he had a mane of fiery red hair. Many children at some time entertain the fantasy that they are different, that they must have been secretly adopted since they cannot believe they are related to the people they call mum and dad; in my case, though, it was not *my* origin I questioned but my brother's.

Where he might have come from, however, I could not say. In the same way, little is known of the genus of fairies, though many theories abound. Among the most popular is that they are fallen angels who are being punished for some terrible act that took place before the dawn of time. Others have it that they are an ancient race defeated by humans long ago in an elemental battle who were subsequently condemned to hide in those corners of the world that we are not always able to see. However, the idea I like the most is that they are the dead themselves: our friends, relatives and ancestors still moving among us, unable to leave the world behind. Each day another part of their lives is forgotten, the very substance of their existence fading as certainly as a thick dawn mist slowly being dispelled by the morning sun.

I look down the hillside and try to shake these thoughts from my head. Now really isn't the time to be daydreaming about such things. First goblins, now fairies; what next? But if my mind returns again and again to the impossible, it is only because my brother's death has so disturbed the world I had previously taken for granted that even goblins and fairies are now possible, believable.

By the way, I am invariably drawn to the suggestion that fairies are former gods. This would certainly explain their enmity towards humans, for once gods have been cast aside by their worshippers, their altars destroyed, their temples ruined, and

the prayers they gorged themselves on fallen silent, they are diminished and, over many centuries, they wither and shrink, their powers to prompt earthquake and flood dwindling away to nothing. In short, once forgotten, they lose their powers. It now seems to me, looking down on the low slope of brindled heather, that all of us, fairies and beasts and everyone in-between, live at least half our lives in other people's minds. When the last of our family and friends are stolen from us, I am certain that each of us shall no longer exist as we are now, for we rely on the people we care about to remind us who we are. We cannot lose them without losing something of ourselves. Perhaps then it is no surprise that these days I feel as if my stomach has been cleaved open, a hand thrust in and a great knot of my insides rearranged. Little by little I am being eaten away.

But to return to fairies and the question of their origin. I must admit that I am also drawn to the idea that they are the siblings of demons, creatures whose sole function is to usefully alleviate our guilt at the chaos and suffering we bring into the world, to shift the blame. This would explain how they were found in every corner of the earth. Unlike fairies, however, demons were thought to hide not only in caves, dark groves, heather fields and cliffs but also inside the human brain. Furthermore, once they had set up home in the brain they were notoriously hard to evict. Indeed, if exorcism failed to drive them out, many ancient physicians turned to a process known as trepanation. Once the patient is strapped down and secured in place, a deep incision is made above one of the ears and the flesh on either side is stretched and pinned away from the open wound. Then a sharp-toothed drill is used to bore a series of holes in the patient's skull until a circle of cavities is visible. A chisel is driven between these holes to form an interlinking plate of broken bone that can then be levered from the head to expose a portion of the brain to the light and air. Miraculously enough, the



operation seems to have frequently been deemed a success, and there is little doubt that it often alleviated the symptoms of epilepsy that may have been mistaken for possession. It is recommended by Hippocrates for a variety of cranial injuries and was practiced not only throughout medieval Europe but in Asia, Africa and the Americas too, being by no means fatal since new bony tissue would have grown to cover the hole once the flesh was stitched back in place. There were also, of course, many failures. To this day some of us are unable to be rid of our demons.

My parents traipse down the hillside on a dusty path picked between the heather, and I rise from the tree stump to follow them. The ground at the top is patchy and worn, the chalky scrub belying the greensand packed beneath, just as the invisible world of our dreams and longings lies buried under the visible one. We walk in the shadow of a single tree stretching its branches out towards the sky. Halfway we spread a blanket over a patch of dry grass and settle there, looking down to the foot of the hill where the speckles of mauve and white give out into a grove of beeches. None of us has very much to say. Finally my mum reaches for the rucksack sitting between us and unzips the top. It takes a few moments of fumbling for her to pull out the metal urn buried at the bottom of the bag and wrapped snug in a couple of spare jumpers. She rises to her feet and, after unscrewing the lid, makes her way into the heather. We watch in silence as she takes deep handfuls of the ash inside and throws it up around her as though it is confetti. Unexpectedly, the summer breeze catches the first few clusters and blows them back towards her. She is soon covered with a light spray of silver powder. From where we sit it looks as though she is being attacked by a flurry of fake snow. The woods, it seems, are reluctant to accept his ashes.

Once my mum has turned so that the wind is with her, she begins to walk among the low shrubs before the trees, tossing great clouds of grey into the sky and barely stopping to watch them disperse before she has thrown another. Fog is spewing from the open urn, much as a genie might appear when welling from an enchanted lamp. I have read that it was once believed that at the moment of a man's death an almost imperceptible mist would seep out from his open mouth before melting away into the air. And there are those who swear the body is lighter after death, though something similar might be said of those left behind – ever since the funeral I have felt almost weightless, as if the natural laws of gravity that had kept me tethered to the earth no longer apply. This certainly seems true of my mum, who appears almost swept up with the ashes she is scattering, though I notice that, however far she flings her arms out to throw the dusty clouds away from her, she keeps the urn cradled close to her body, tight between the crook of her elbow and her chest.

My youngest brother strides down to meet her and take his turn, and before long he is shaking out the urn to scatter the last flecks of cinder into the leaves and over the grass. Only a few days ago I caught the end of a radio programme which mentioned that the Tibetan Buddhists believe that the soul departs the body not in a mist spilling from the lips but that it seeps through the crown of the head before starting out on its next journey. The collection of texts that we in the West refer to as the Tibetan Book of the Dead suggest that after death we pass through a series of intermediary states before being reborn. The soul, according to these texts, often needs to be guided along its way. But what happens, I wonder, if the soul gets lost? Some Buddhist traditions believe there are six states into which we might be reincarnated – a deity, a jealous demigod, a human, a hungry ghost, an animal or a being condemned to live out the next life beneath the earth within one of the realms of fear and sorrow.

Sitting on the hillside, though, I cannot help feeling that instead of being born from life to life we are born again and again each morning when we wake, the disparate moments of our lives like flames dancing from candle to candle in a trail of smoke.

From the backpack my dad digs out a bottle of champagne and several plastic cups. We drink a toast and then lapse back into quiet. From somewhere far below the disembodied voices of walkers calling to their dogs passes over us before falling away, and if I listen closely I can also make out the snap of leaves and the crunch of bracken broken underfoot, the low rustle of the trees, and a car starting up on one of the dirt roads at the edge of the woods. I set my cup against a ridge of mud and grass and lie down on my back. The sky spins out above me and I notice that this is the first cloudless day since the funeral. Apart from the sun blurring the lowest edges of my vision I can see nothing but cobalt blue, and after a while I begin to feel as though I am suspended upside-down above a great celestial ocean which stretches so far beyond me in all directions that it is tempting to believe the whole world has been submerged. Were it not for the fact that it is impossible to glimpse my reflection swimming upon it, I could easily give in to the idea that each continent has sunk under the perfect blue sea and nothing now is left of the world but what can be salvaged from memory.

#### 4. *The First Bracken Battalion*

The spell of my daydream is only broken when a volley of barks from nearby dogs sends a spray of jackdaws fluttering in sudden, anxious flight, launching from the trees below and sailing out across the empty reach of blue above. I sit up with white pricks of light blurring my sight and it is many minutes before they are gone. For a few moments I am not sure where I am. It is such a blissful feeling that I cannot help but be disappointed when I realise we are still on the hillside, still in the mid-afternoon of a day I already feel I have lived many times before.

From somewhere close behind I catch the whoops and screams of a gaggle of children giving chase through the wallows of bracken. The summer holidays of my childhood were filled with long afternoons spent in these woods, and I can recall with perfect clarity a group of us setting off from one of the paths into the dense wilds of scrub and beech, my brother leading the way. The game was, as ever, a variation on war, with the forest providing innumerable hiding places and vantage points to aid the improvisation of manic battles, long campaigns and covert operations against some imaginary enemy lurking in the undergrowth.

Though I was two years older, my brother was bossy and loud and had, as usual, taken charge. The rest of us had long ago learnt that it wasn't worth trying to argue with him once he had assumed command. His voice was hushed and low and we moved as quietly as possible. He stopped only to listen for the muted crackle of movement in the brush that might announce an impending ambush. He was dressed in camouflage, the flack green and dull brown swirls covering both his trousers and jacket, buttoned tight to the neck. Two thick horizontal lines of battle paint stretched out from the bridge of his nose across his cheeks, blotting out his freckles. When he

posted sentries behind two trees, all of us, aware how his mood could turn if his instructions were not followed, instantly fell in line. A chunky Swiss army knife poked out from his back pocket and several times as he leapt from one short ridge to another, or dropped to his haunches to duck beneath low-sweeping branches and fallen trunks, it looked as if it might tumble out and be lost among the soggy blanket of leaves and mulch that covered most of the woods.

Soon he was on his belly, crawling forward on his elbows beneath the pleats and hems of the bracken. The reason we would all follow his commands in these games was not that he made a good leader nor that he knew the terrain better than anyone else – indeed, it would be impossible to tally up the number of times he picked a path only to turn back and try another a few minutes later, testing out each trail regardless of how far it might take us from mum, the dog, or the car. Rather it was that his never-ending monologue invested our movements with so much adventure. It really seemed that instead of making everything up from half-remembered snatches of war films, he was actually describing what was happening: that the bracken really had been transformed into an overgrown jungle at the end of the world, that every distant dog bark was in fact the rat-a-tat of machine guns, and that the sound of trampling thicket was caused by the caterpillar-tracks of stealthy tanks rolling ever closer.

He turned his head and gave a quick signal with his hand, and we all drew close, each one of us lying flat on our stomachs in the undergrowth and peering over a ridge into a small clearing set between two slopes. He referred to us as his battalion, a special squad of mercenaries on a death-dodging mission against the most villainous villains imaginable, with the fate of the world heavy upon our shoulders. We lined up side-by-side, packed so close together that I could feel my brother's chest rise and fall with every breath.

*They're waiting. Between that scrawny tree over there and the crooked one next to it. It's got to be a trap. I've already picked out a couple of snipers hiding on that ridge. We're outnumbered, five to one at least, but they're probably running low on ammo and it looks like they've left the west flank of their base unguarded. If we crawl round that way we'll be out of range of the choppers and we should be able to surprise them. Have your guns ready, but don't make any noise till I tell you. Right, now follow me.*

We turned to our left and followed in single file as he crawled forwards, head down and knees scuffing through the mud as he went. Nothing else mattered but surprising the enemy and saving the day. At the far side of the ridge we gathered once again and rose up into kneeling positions, ready to leap out firing our pointed fingers at the clearing between the trees as soon as he gave the sign. I remember that we froze to the spot while he whispered a countdown, before throwing ourselves forward with the loudest shrieks and cries we could summon, rolling and skidding down the slope and flinging our arms and legs out wildly to beat away the hordes of enemy soldiers trying to stop us. Though I am certain that the rest of the battle continued in much the same way, I have no memory of what occurred when we reached the bottom of the slope and made it into the clearing. No matter how hard I try to recall what happened next, I cannot. The end of the game is lost to me.

As we rise to pack away the empty urn and plastic cups, stuff the rug into the backpack and make our way back to the car park, I look down the slope once more, hoping to see the grey patches where the ashes have fallen. I can make out nothing but shocks of wild heather and the melting sun drawing close to the limits of the horizon. Perhaps because I am still lost in the world of goblins, fairies and demons which so delighted my brother as a child, it is not long before I am thinking of phoenixes –

there is, of course, much comfort in the idea that dust and ash need not necessarily mark the end. Whenever I hear a bird flapping up from the woods below I turn my head and seek it out in the absurd hope that it might bear the gold and scarlet plume of a phoenix. I study every curlew, finch, warbler and sparrow for signs that they have passed through flame and been remade.

In the Aberdeen Bestiary, a catalogue of beasts both real and imaginary compiled by scribes sometime in the twelfth century, the phoenix is said to live for five hundred years. As soon as it realises that it has grown old, the ancient manuscript tells us, the bird will gather small twigs and branches from the most sweet-smelling of trees and set about building itself a pyre. It will then turn so that its eyes face the deep light of the sun and will beat its great wings as though they are bellows, driving the flames until the fire consumes it. Soon something stirs within the ashes and, from the fluid of the dead bird's flesh, a worm emerges. After nine days this worm grows feathers and wings, and thus from its own remains the phoenix is born once again. The bestiary adds that the phoenix is a bird of Arabia and that the people of those lands refer to any solitary man as a phoenix.

The survival of such manuscripts from the middle ages is almost as extraordinary as the survival of the phoenix after it has passed through flame. The Aberdeen Bestiary is so-called because for around four hundred years it has been in the possession of Marischal College, Aberdeen, now part of the city's university. The book was donated to the College by its Regent, Thomas Reid, who is thought to have been given it by the Royal Librarian some time after it was taken to Scotland by James I along with the rest of the royal possessions. It is probably safe to assume the King had little knowledge of the fact that his librarian was trading books from his private collection with other bibliophiles; it is, though, unclear how the royal family

came to own the book anyway, for all that is known for certain is that it first appeared in an inventory for the library at Westminster Palace in 1542. Of the four hundred years of its existence before this date we can only guess. Had it already been in the palace for centuries? Had it been a gift from some nobleman or dignitary? Or had it been seized along with all the other property and lands belonging to the monasteries when they were dissolved by Henry VIII? It is impossible to say. Nonetheless, the fact that it remains at all, despite the passage of more than eight hundred years, the mass destruction of anything that might be considered idolatrous in the first zealous wave of the Reformation, a long journey many hundreds of miles north, a civil war, countless fires, floods, storms and other natural disasters, as well as two World Wars and the attempts of numerous book thieves, is remarkable.

No less remarkable is the amount of labour that would have been required to put the Bestiary together in the first place. As well as a detailed account of the creation of the heavens and the earth, the Bestiary contains descriptions of more than a hundred different creatures, both mythical and real, including numerous birds, mammals, livestock, reptiles, sea creatures, insects, plants and even a great many stones, each one presented alongside an elaborate illustration as well as an explanation of the moral lesson that can be gleaned from its nature and physiognomy. Even if we assume that much of the information therein was taken from earlier medieval bestiaries or copies of the ancient Greek Physiologus, the construction of the book must still, in the days before the invention of the printing press, have taken forever. How many months did it take the scholar to copy out the text, word by word, line by line, toiling from dawn until midnight each day? And as he sat hunched at his desk, his eyes straining in the candle-light, his wrist aching and his fingers blistered, could the writer have had any notion that close to a thousand years after his death, long after



his name and those of all of the men he ever knew have been lost to us, the book would remain?

Halfway back to the car park we pass a few lolloping dogs and their owners striding close behind and, though each of us is sullen and pensive, when they smile and raise their hands in greeting we smile too and nod back. I am amazed at how easy it is to pretend, if only for a second or two, that instead of scattering my brother's ashes among the bracken, we are simply out for an afternoon stroll on a warm summer afternoon. I feel suddenly embarrassed, and I am sure our smiles must appear so false and badly acted that I cannot believe the dog-walkers do not turn away in embarrassment. Yet they carry on blithely past us, their dogs scaring up small schools of blue tits from the brush. The light is starting to sink as we pass the trig point and, by the time the car park is in sight, the sun is becoming tangled in the highest branches of the trees on the slopes.

My body feels sluggish and heavy as I climb into the car and tug on my seatbelt. I toy for a time with the empty champagne bottle and wonder once again what had happened after my brother had lead us hollering into the clearing that day some fifteen years before, and how our battle might have finished. But I can tease nothing more from my memory. In all likelihood, our war never ended at all, for at the close of each afternoon when our parents started calling us home, we would not run back towards the car until everyone had agreed that our war would be resumed, right where we had paused it, as soon as we returned to Bracken Woods.

As we drive away down the dirt track, I turn back in my seat to see the summer sun low in the sky, slipping into the bracken behind us. I stare and stare at the sun, searching for something I might have missed that might make sense of everything, but it is untouched by either cloud or the beating wings of birds, mythical or otherwise,

and finally it burns so strongly into my eyes that even when I turn away for a few moments, everything I look at is hazy with light, as though fire has turned the whole world to ash.

### 5. *Shipwrecks*

The following morning I find a box containing a few of my brother's belongings. It has been stashed away under the bed in the room of my parent's house where I will continue to stay until summer swaps its fiery cloak for autumn's monastic robes of umber and sorrel. We are all squeezed in the old house together now, as if under quarantine. There is little inside the box, but this isn't a big surprise, since at the time of his death my brother was preparing to move to a new house and had somehow managed to lose most of his possessions in the process. I have no doubt that many of his clothes, bags and CDs are still spread across the many flats and spare rooms in which he camped out while fixing up the new house. Indeed, one of the first things I see in the box, amid several seaweed-green bottles of mouthwash whose expiry date has already passed, is a photograph showing the living room and kitchen area of the house he planned to move into. It is clear from the note scribbled on the back that it was taken only shortly before his death.

The room is almost empty of colour and there is debris strewn across the blackened floorboards. I can make out plastic bags swollen with broken glass, rusty nails and reams of crusty wallpaper that had been peeled from the walls. The carpet has been taken up and the tacks remain visible in one of the doorways. Though a few shards of chipped tiles still cling on to the kitchen wall, most have been removed to reveal the dank and furry rot beneath. The window is smeared with swirls of dust and dirt. Two coffee mugs and a newspaper lie waiting on the kitchen counter. A single wooden chair stands in the corner of the picture, as if trying to creep slowly out of shot. The whole place looks as if it has not been inhabited for a hundred years. It would not surprise me to see the lazy crawl of creepers or vines pushing through the

cracks in the walls or under the door. In short, it is a wreck, yet it is still possible to imagine how it might once have been, with a kettle smoking on the kitchen stove and someone leaning back in the chair after an evening meal, thinking of nothing in particular and with nothing in particular left to do but let the ending day drift towards another.

The desolation and ruin of the picture reminds me of those black-and-white photographs taken of London streets and homes on the mornings after an air raid when whole patches of the city appear to have been reduced to smoke and rubble. In many of those images it is as though parts of the capital have been deserted. The few people that appear, usually dressed in dirty, dust-stained clothes, are hollow-eyed and many of them appear to be staring straight through the ruins and piles of crumbled brick to something unknown in the distance. I remember, in particular, a picture in which the front and sidewalls of a house had collapsed. Despite the devastation, the sitting room had been spared from the devastation of the bombs, and a sofa and rocking chair sat perfectly preserved beside what remained of the hearth, now looking up at the murky sky newly uncovered above them.

As I look at the photograph of my brother's unfinished rooms, I cannot help but imagine that the streets outside the half-open door are similarly devastated, and that the whole country has been deserted in the wake of some disaster that has forced everyone to flee. The idea that broken chairs, dining-room tables, battered kettles, moth-gobbled curtains, ragged carpets, broken glass, worn electrical sockets, warped wood and dry rot might be all that would one day be left of us makes me feel strangely calm, as though my own sadness has been consumed by something greater, just as a whole school of minnows might be thoughtlessly swallowed by a larger fish swimming open-mouthed through the same waters. It is only then that I realise what

the dreary scene presented in the picture of my brother's house reminds me of most, and before I can stop it my mind is racing back through the years to a particular childhood camping holiday.

I must have been five or six, since I am fairly certain that my brother was close to his fourth birthday. We had taken the ferry across from Portsmouth to the Isle of Wight and were staying in a tent on one of the many campsites that are dotted across the east coast of the island. It was, we felt, our first holiday abroad. We can only have been ten minutes' walk from the beach, for when we dived deep into our sleeping bags in the evening it was possible to hear the low rush of the breeze sweeping in off the sea. I recall how more than once, late at night as we lay side by side, my brother whispered that he was certain the waves were getting closer and closer, and that if we waited much longer they would reach the tent and carry us all out to sea. I remember little else of the trip save for a visit on one of the final days to Blackgang Chine, a cliff-top amusement park dating back to the early Victorian era. There we travelled on a miniature railway, wandered through a giant hedge maze, and played on a pirate ship. Towards the end of the day, after walking through a garden filled with fibreglass dinosaurs and sabre-toothed tigers, we entered a haunted cottage – or so it was called. The light inside was dim, though the many-veined cobwebs strung between the rafters glowed silver, while the walls themselves hummed to the sound of a church organ being played at a funereal pace. We proceeded through the rooms until in the last one we were confronted with a family of grinning skeletons sat at a dining-room table. These skeletons, frozen in the middle of their meal, were doubtless the cheapest of dummies, but at the time I believed they were the real bones of people who had perhaps ventured into the cottage alive, only to reach a terrible and unexpected end while gathered in this very room. In the second that we paused in the doorway, frozen

in shock, I remember noting that their hands were reaching greedily out toward the mess of plates and cutlery strewn between them, and that their mouths were open, as though each one were on the verge of speech.

Though I ran straight from that ghostly feast, my heart thumping feverishly within my chest, I felt so giddy and elated with fear that later I begged to return that I might look more closely at the cadavers. If we had only had enough time before the park closed I would undoubtedly have gone back; though, of course, had I gone back, the terror and surprise I felt when I stepped through the door that first time would doubtless not have been the same. For some time afterward that motionless circle of corpses appeared before me every time I closed my eyes, though I am no longer sure whether I was disturbed more by the looks of fanatical glee fixed upon their faces or by the naturalness of their poses, as though acknowledging the fact that death might visit suddenly, even midway through a meal.

I have no idea whether the skeletal family still reside in Blackgang Chine, since for many years now the outlying reaches of the cliffs have been gradually crumbling into the water below and so, with each landslide, the park has been forced to move further and further inland. Indeed, the steep chine from which the amusement park took its name crumbled into the sea many years ago. I remember that even when we visited some twenty years back, much of the southern edge of the park, near the shaded area where we sat at picnic benches eating our crisps and sandwiches, was marked off by fencing, and when we peered over we could see what was left of the chine sloping sharply towards the water below. An overgrown path was also visible, leading down to the sea where, close to two hundred years before, a ship was wrecked against the ravine and all on board were lost among the waves. Unlike the vessel on which we had played, however, it was not a pirate ship.

The Isle of Wight has long been notorious for shipwrecks, particularly the area surrounding the three tall chalk stacks that rise from the water at the western-most point of the island. The Needles, as they are now called, might from a distance be mistaken for the huge, jagged fins of some tremendous leviathan lurking beneath the surface. A lighthouse was first erected nearby towards the end of the eighteenth century, though it is said to have been little help to sailors in times of storm or blizzard since the light would often get lost amid the spray and drizzle. It was after one such storm in 1842 that the inhabitants of the villages nearby awoke to find a giant sea creature stranded upon the beach. No doubt they were by then used to the bizarre offerings the sea made to the shore in the wake of the most ferocious storms, yet they must have been dumbfounded by the sight of a huge finback whale lying on the sand. It may well have still been alive when the first of the locals arrived at its side, its last breaths shuddering through its bulk, its tail not yet still. Whatever their initial reaction, it is clear that common sense soon prevailed for shortly afterward the beast was hauled away and sold at auction. The buyer was a man named Alexander Drabell, who had recently bought a large stretch of land upon the island. Once he had sold the blubber, oil and baleen of his colossal catch, he had the bones bleached before he reassembled the skeleton and put it on display in his newly-opened park of curiosities and wonders, which he christened Blackgang Chine. And, of course, I cannot help but wonder if I am not a latter-day Mr Drabell, for in writing this book you might say I have parcelled my brother up, carved his life into chapters, and put the bones on display. You might add that I have given my brother as little choice in the matter as the whale had when that it came tumbling onto land. This I accept but would point out that, unlike the great beasts that spend their lives hiding deep beneath the waves, my brother relished attention.

At last I set down the picture of the half-finished room, my eyes stinging. My brother's dream home would not be finished; at least, not in the manner he had planned. I cannot help but think that it may have been better that he never completed his project, for the work we finish rarely lives up to how we first imagined it. I try to convince myself that it was better to have woken every day with anything still possible than to have already fixed the future into shape; better to have lived each moment burning with plans and aspirations than to have grown to see them fail or go wrong. Better, no matter what some might believe, not to know how the end might come.

Then, just as I am about to pack away the box of his old possessions, something in the photo catches my eye and I realise – with a jolt – that I have been staring at the picture but not seeing it. There, in the window: something blurred and indistinct in the dirty glass. Could it be a face? It is impossible to tell, but I desperately want to believe that it might be the reflection of my brother as he took the photograph. I pick it up once more and hold the picture so close to my eyes that my nose is almost pressed against it, but all I can make out is a swirl of light amidst the grime.

I think again of those old black-and-white scenes of the Blitz, and I see that I had been foolishly mistaken in thinking that those smoke-filled streets and alleys were always completely deserted, for in each of them stood an unseen photographer recording the scene. At best we only ever see half of the truth, for there is always someone hidden – the invisible figure that trusts we will suspend our belief and ignore the fact that they are conjuring this scene for our benefit. A cold tremor trickles up the knots of my spine and for a second I do not dare move. I am overcome with the idea that my brother is standing behind me, looking in upon the room of his future home just as I am.



I turn round. There is nothing there but my shadow. I feel a sudden anger rise up inside me, and right now I want nothing more than to set fire to the photo. After a few seconds, however, I relent; I am well aware that I would not be able to bring myself to burn it. I know I will want to look at it again, and know also that, however many pictures or possessions I destroy, and however much I try to turn my mind to other things, my brother will remain a kind of ghost. In the end I place the photo face down amid the bottles of mouthwash and push the box back under the bed, deep under the bed.

## 6. *Wintering*

For a time we were drawn by the sea. Indeed we spent almost every summer day at the seaside, and there my brother and I would while away hour upon hour hunting in cloudy rock pools, poking the glutinous ribbons of washed-up jellyfish with our spades and filling small plastic buckets with starfish and tiny crabs. I can remember in great detail how we used to paddle and splash and throw ourselves into wave after salty wave until our eyes stung. I believe that both of us found the sea a source of wonder and fascination, though at times our excitement and awe turned to fear and anxiety at its great, roaring presence so close to the place where our flimsy tent was pitched. Once, during a holiday on the Isle of Wight, I found the idea that it surrounded us on all sides so alarming that I grew to fear that if too many people visited the island at the same time it might grow so heavy as to sink beneath the water. My brother, meanwhile, was more concerned that while we slept the island might drift farther and farther from the mainland and that we would wake in the morning to find ourselves lost in the middle of the ocean.

Every evening of those holidays, once we had returned from dinner in a nearby pub or seaside café, my brother and I would enter our portion of the tent and set our sleeping bags side by side. This would allow us to whisper for a while about what we imagined we might do the next day, though more often than not we would have forgotten all our plans and ideas by morning. One night we concocted a plan to walk around the entire island and measure its size in the number of footsteps the journey took. Another night my brother devised a plan to construct a raft from driftwood and twigs so that the two of us could sail back home in order to jump out and scare our parents when they returned. Still another evening I recall him wondering aloud

whether, after the sun went down, all the fish finally made their way out of the ocean, dried themselves down with special towels and found somewhere warm to sleep.

Or at least, all this is how I now remember the Isle of Wight. It is possible I might be confusing one of these early holidays with another – such as when we were camping on the Cornish coast or even across the channel in France. You see, each time we went on holiday my brother and I would invariably end up sharing a small partition of a tent on a campsite so close to the sea that we would often hear the gulls calling in the thick of night. Can we have had such conversations when we were so young? Are these really the thoughts of a child? Or am I putting words into my brother's mouth, making him more articulate than he can possibly have been? Can I really remember the evenings of a single week more than two decades ago? The more I try to look back, the more it seems that much of my childhood is veiled in the thickest mist. The closer I try to examine my own past, the more I come to doubt.

It has long been known that it is possible to implant false memories by suggestion and repetition, to be persuaded that we have experienced something that never happened, to recall in the most vivid detail events which never took place. Memory is riddled with holes, and we plug them with anything we can find. As if to illustrate the point, I find myself thinking of the time when, on a similar holiday to a campsite on the Irish coast, my brother and I leapt from a jetty into the freezing sea one rain-filled afternoon. Whenever anyone refers to that day I always nod and share in the recollection – indeed, as soon as the story is mentioned, I am transported back to the moment just before I jumped: I can picture the foamy waves around the jetty daring me to turn back, and can still smell the salt and seaweed scent of the ocean. Yet though I can still recall how the sudden immersion in the icy water squeezed the breath from my lungs and spread goosebumps over my skin, how the cold almost

winded me, and how I shivered and shook even after I was wrapped up in a warm towel afterwards, I cannot be sure whether the memory is really mine. The details are generic and somehow not quite real, as though I am remembering a fragment of a dream I dreamt many years ago, and I am sometimes struck by the feeling that everything described might as well have happened to someone else. After all, I have heard the anecdote so many times from my parents, and looked upon the photo that recorded the jump so often, that my mind may have simply worked hard to fill in the blanks. Memories are as easy to borrow as library books.

So, how am I to distinguish between them? I am not sure. Perhaps though I can cling to the fact that I have not imagined those nocturnal conversations, even if they may have been cast adrift from setting and chronology. I will not, then, doubt that it is my brother's voice I heard. But I must allow the tent to break free from its pegs and float through time and space...and outside there be long stretches of shingle, or sand dune, or forest or even river, yet none of that matters, because inside the tent I was curled up tight in my sleeping bag and I could hear him chattering away, regaling me with unanswerable questions or concocting impossible schemes, until all his plans and ideas finally trailed out into the sounds of sleep.

In the same way, I cannot say for certain whether or not we visited Carisbrooke Castle during one of our stays on the Isle of Wight, for I have nothing to help me prove that I have not conjured the memory from thinnest air. I can clearly remember my brother once standing next to a shining suit of armour and trying to peer in between the joins to check whether or not there was an ancient body mummified inside waiting patiently for the right moment to come back to life. This might have happened anywhere, but I do believe it was Carisbrooke, for even now I can close my eyes and recall making the vertiginous ascent of the steep stone steps that led up to the

keep, and looking out from the narrowest of windows across the fields and forests that stretched far into the distance. I had then stared out, just as Charles I must have done during the long and restless months of his incarceration there towards the end of the Civil War. How else could I have known that the land surrounding the castle dips to the nearby villages and farmhouses before it rises again towards the sky so that, no matter how frantically one might search for it or how few clouds disturb the horizon, the sea remains always out of sight?

By the close of 1647, even Charles himself must have realised that he had little hope of negotiating successfully with the Parliamentarians. At the Battle of Naseby two years earlier, after seeing close to a thousand of his men killed, he had witnessed as many as five thousand captured by the New Model Army under the command of Oliver Cromwell and Sir Thomas Fairfax. This marked a turning point in the Civil War; subsequent defeats at Langport and Rowton Heath, as well as the final drawn-out siege of Oxford, confirmed that the end was close at hand. Charles was soon imprisoned, while his captors discussed what was to be done with a monarch who, during his rule, had shut down parliament and ruled by tyranny for more than a decade, raised taxes, sought to arrest and imprison his critics, and led the English army to humiliating defeats against the Spanish, the French and even the Scots.

The few trusted royal advisers who stayed close to the King soon helped him escape Hampton Court. It was imperative that he get out of London as quickly as possible. His advisers suggested fleeing to France or else – remembering that the Governor of the Isle of Wight, Colonel Robert Hammond, had previously assured the King of his loyalty – to that small island just off the south coast. And so it was that Charles arrived on the Isle of Wight a few days later and was shown to his room in Carisbrooke Castle. The royal advisors quickly found, however, that Hammond was

not the ally for whom they had hoped. When Charles first glanced out of the window at the frost settling upon the fields below, there was no way he could have known that he would be forced to stay and look upon that same desolate landscape for close to a year.

Though he was initially allowed to wander freely about the island, after a failed rescue attempt he was confined to the castle. In order to keep the King from growing bored and morose one of the barbicans was made into a green for him to play bowls upon; it seems, though, that he spent much of his time in his room, and would no doubt have looked down at the farmland and forest each morning. Perhaps that was how he measured out the year he was kept a prisoner there, each day noting how far the snow had retreated, how much of the grass beneath had re-emerged. Perhaps he watched the tenant farmers tilling the soil, the horses dragging the plough, the crops beginning to stubble the fields. Perhaps – perhaps not; but what is certain is that he did not give up hope of escape. For at the beginning of spring, it was arranged that a horse and several men would await him outside the castle walls – a rope was slung up to his room to help him climb down the brick wall and hurry on to safety without drawing the attention of the guards stationed outside his door. All would perhaps have gone well had Charles not found that the bars on his window were set so closely together that he could not squeeze between them. Yet still he hoped and, even when moved to a different room on the other side of the castle, he managed to take with him a secret supply of nitric acid with which he might burn through the metal bars that blocked every window. This plot too, however, failed.

Summer came, then autumn and the harvest, the sun drawing in low and red in cloudless early evenings, as all the while the King looked on from his room. And just as the fields were once again growing frost, Charles was taken back to London, where

he would face trial for high treason in the early days of the New Year. An old wives' tale suggests that somehow we half-recognise the last winter we are to see and, therefore, feel saddened, though do not fully know why.

It was still so cold on the penultimate day of January that popular legend records the King wearing two shirts in case the crowd should mistake his shivering for fear. It was ten in the morning when he walked across St James's Palace to the Banqueting House, where he said his final prayers. The surrounding area was already thick with crowds who had gathered to see their monarch executed, as well as large lines of soldiers stationed throughout Westminster to keep the peace. A file of guards even stood between the scaffold and the throng of onlookers to ensure that the King's last words would not be heard. The crowd waited expectantly for many hours, since it was early afternoon by the time Charles emerged upon the scaffold and bowed down to place his brow upon the block. Thousands watched his head severed from his body in a single, clean stroke.

I cannot help but wonder whether knowledge of our impending death bestows on us a strength otherwise unknown; for it was only in the last few moments of his life that Charles I showed the poise and dignity then expected of a monarch. Perhaps, though, knowing the day and the hour of the end of one's life inspires some to madness rather than serenity.

As far as I am aware, my brother saw death up close just once – our grandfather's death. Pop, as we knew him, was the thirteenth child of a man who lost both legs in the trenches of the First World War, and died as slowly as my brother died suddenly. Death, in fact, waited in Pop's room for months, like a stray that had wandered in one day and made its home at the end of his bed. It was impossible to say when it had arrived and staked its place beside him since we only took notice of it

once it had been there so long that it already seemed like one of the family. Death, then, showed an astonishing degree of patience. At times it was as though it was toying with Pop, for there were many moments when it appeared to be rousing itself to lead him out of the door and away, yet every time it would suddenly change its mind and pull back in order to settle down once more and resolve to wait. Each morning we prepared ourselves for the inevitable, and each night we found Pop determined to hang on a little longer.

By the time Pop passed his ninetieth birthday, the only part of his character that was still recognisable was the streak of stubbornness that had stayed with him since his childhood. Dementia had stolen so much else over the many months of slow degeneration that preceded his death that it was as though he died long before his heart finally stopped beating. In my earliest memories he is somewhat strict, although usually good-humoured, his pockets always full of the strongest of mints and humbugs, and around his feet ran a highly-strung Scottish terrier. His house was filled with several sketches of ruined castles, and in the hallway hung a heraldic certificate detailing the history and etymology of the family name. I recall also that, in the pursuit of health and good muscular development (he had been a P.E. teacher long before my brother and I were born) he often tried to get me to lie on my back and try to bring my feet up to touch my head. Unlike my brother, I never managed it.

In his final decade, Pop's own lack of mobility had forced him and my grandmother to move in with my parents and take over a small annex on the ground floor. He was falling over every week by then. His back and legs were invariably mottled with the brown and purple of fresh bruises, and every time they began to heal he would collapse again and be left looking worse than ever. For as long as I can remember he had owned a fine oak walking stick which he kept by the front door –



when no one was looking, my brother would often grab the curved handle and wave it around as though it were a lightsabre. But soon, even with the stick, Pop began to fall almost every time he got out of bed; he moved more and more uncertainly, increasingly giving the appearance of being a man wrecked with seasickness. When he attempted to join in conversation his remarks were always elliptical and mysterious, as though he was part of another discussion entirely. At other times his sentences halted halfway when he could not find the word for which he was searching. Nouns came unmoored from their meaning and his illness remade every familiar object, and every well-known face, into something suspicious and strange. He seemed frighteningly alone, our comforting words appearing not to reach him. Is this, then, the deal death makes with us: that either it comes out of the blue and much too soon, as with my brother, or else it feeds on us a little at a time, so that when the final moment comes all that is left to claim are the dregs?

Yet even when it felt as if almost nothing of the man remained – his sight reduced to blur and haze, his hearing troubled by muffle and fuzz, his balance shot and his memories made as muddled and incomprehensible as rain and mildew make the pages of old books – Pop still clung on to life as fiercely as he could. Indeed, for a long time it seemed as if it would never be prised from his grasp. But was he wise to cling on? Is it worth living so long if the price you pay is giving up everything of who you once were? In his final months, my brother arrived before work most mornings, ready to help my grandmother move Pop from the bed, change his clothes or wash him; yet, more often than not, Pop appeared not to know either where he was nor who was the person slipping an arm under the small of his back and turning him carefully to his side.

My brother would have been about twenty-two at the time, and he visited Pop almost daily as he grew ever more frail and weak, helping him with a degree of gentleness and care that would have embarrassed him profoundly had it been reported to any of his friends. It is true that he would often play with his friend's children and his young cousins for hours on end, making up elaborate, giggle-filled games – but the moment he sensed he was being watched he would suddenly become nonchalant and uncommunicative. There was, of course, no one watching whenever, after a busy day at the building site where he worked, he would drive to my parents' house to attend to the host of little tasks that Pop needed doing, from changing bedpans and rubbing Sudocream into bedsores through to checking stitches and replacing bandages, all the while delivering a constant, reassuring monologue.

Did he ever wonder if the same kind of fate might await him? Once again, I have no idea, though I know that he was as disturbed as the rest of us those few times that, just when we had convinced ourselves that Pop's mind was so scattered that he had become numb to the indignity of his pain and suffering, something of his old self would flicker back. Even though all the evidence suggested that the man he once was had been lost to sickness and senility, there would be moments when some familiar part of him might still be glimpsed – just as when the sudden stirring of fish clears the cloudy surface of a pond and, for a second, a gleam of silver can be seen moving about the depths. A word, a gesture, a laugh: any of these would be enough to stop us in our tracks and force us to question all of our assumptions about his lucidity. Then, without warning, Pop would be gone again, leaving us shocked into silence.

It was as though his memories were still buried deep within him but had become inaccessible. Moreover, it often seemed that the more he struggled to grab hold of some last scrap of the past, the further it receded from his reach. It was as if he

were chasing ghosts. Yet though Pop was often panicked, obstinate and tearful in those last months, my brother never once grew angry, tired or upset with him. Whatever he saw each day, he accepted and then moved on.

But I myself, though, *cannot* move on. For just as the young and the old do not die in the same way then neither are they dead in the same way.

### *7. Doppelgangers*

Today, wandering through the local supermarket, I see my brother. Again. He is leaving one aisle just as I enter it from the opposite end. Though I only catch sight of the back of his head as he turns the corner, I have no doubt it is him. He has the same red-flecked hair, the same languid and unhurried walk and, as always, the collar of his polo shirt up is turned up to cover the nape of his neck. Without a second thought I hurry to try and catch up with him. A pair of doddering trolleys block my path at the corner, however, and, by the time I have forced my way between them, my brother is nowhere to be seen.

I consider calling out to him, but I worry that any loud noise might break the spell and so make it impossible for me to find him among the high-stacked shelves. I may have set reason aside for a minute, but embarrassment isn't quite so easy to do without. I put down my basket and begin to push past the slower shoppers desperately searching each lane before rushing on to the next. I am moving so fast that I almost stumble and fall into a tall stack of buy-one-get-one-free cola bottles on display at the head of one of the aisles. Several times I duck back upon myself, and more than once I return to the dairy aisle for a second look between the stacks of milk and yoghurt. Not for a moment do I even entertain the idea that the man I am chasing might be a figment of my imagination. In fact, I am convinced of quite the opposite – that the past few weeks have been unreal and illusory, and that there is a perfectly logical explanation (as yet unknown) as to why we have all fallen prey to the ridiculous idea that my brother has died.

Soon I'm confused about which of the lanes I have already been down and which I have yet to search. I am walking through some elaborate labyrinth and might

remain lost within it forever. After completing my third or fourth circuit of the main aisles, I decide that my brother has to be in the pasta section, since for the last few years of his life he had not only eaten pasta with almost every one of his meals but, in order to aid his obsessive desire to bulk up, he had also regularly eaten a large bowl of it as a snack after returning home from work or the gym. When I find my way to the pasta aisle I discover that it is completely deserted. I hover there for a couple of minutes, waiting beside the packets of butterflies, spirals, corkscrews and ribbons.

After a while I start searching again. I can no longer hear the heavy rain that had been beating down on my way in. The stark glare of the supermarket lights seems designed to misinform the senses. Here it is impossible to tell whether it is the middle of the day or the darkest hour of night. It soon occurs to me that, without either phone or watch, there is no way of knowing how long I have spent in pursuit of my brother. Soon the supermarket light gives rise to the impression that the end of time has come and then passed and that this sterile place is all that remains of a forgotten civilisation. Rows upon rows of tins and cans do nothing to alleviate the sense that something terrible has befallen the world outside and that the only people left on earth are a few anonymous survivors quarantined within. Even the hesitant and distorted voice crackling over the tannoy sounds as though it is, like the first phonograph recordings, the last relic of a distant and unreachable past. I start moving with increased urgency and, more than once, I pick up a packet or bottle to scrutinise its expiry date.

Ten years before, this supermarket had caught fire. The blaze, which had started in the adjoining petrol station, was not extraordinary in itself, but what was amazing was that when the supermarket reopened some weeks later it was impossible to tell which parts had been rebuilt and which belonged to the original structure. The reconstruction was, therefore, judged to be a great success, especially since it made it

seem as if the events of the recent past had never happened. Supermarkets are designed to be uncannily similar to one another, and each time I enter one I take it for granted that I am setting foot within yet another copy and that the original had long ago been lost among its countless simulacra. It is little wonder that so many people throughout the ages have posited that every life has been lived before and every conceivable action has already been carried out many times. Perhaps the world itself is a copy and there are an inconceivable number of other copy-worlds. Perhaps there are more than a million copies, over a billion acts of creation abandoned by dissatisfied gods, a pluriverse of countless universes outside the limits of our vision, and no way to tell which was the first or whether all are duplicates.

I was on the school bus, making the afternoon journey back home, when someone had spotted the supermarket fire in the distance. Everyone on board had pressed their faces up against the glass to see the trails of dark smoke rising from the supermarket, and as we grew closer it felt as if the sky itself was crackling with flame. That was the first and only time there was a moment of silence on the school bus. *Look at it go*, one of my friends whispered in wide-eyed appreciation as we passed close by, and what has stayed with me is the height of the flames as they twitched and leapt across the building. Almost all of us stayed gaping out of the back windows of the bus long after the supermarket had faded from view, and I remember everyone arguing afterwards about how much damage the fire would cause and how far it might spread and whether we would get a day off school tomorrow. There was something giddily exciting about the possibility that everything that was part of the dull adult world might be destroyed in an instant. We also, I fear, drew a guilty pleasure from brushing close to disaster.

I press on down the wine and spirits aisle, yet by the time I get to the fizzy drinks I am convinced that the supermarket has been designed solely to unravel the loose tangles of my memory. Every shelf taunts me. First there are the fat loaves of bread that, as a child, my brother could not touch without falling sick, thus forcing our mum to spend hours every day making cornbread and gluten-free spaghetti. Next there are the protein-shakes he drank each morning as though he was partaking in sacred communion with the savage and exacting god of bodybuilding. Finally, there are the fresh bouquets of flowers identical to those that have littered our house and garden ever since the funeral. I am dizzy and out of breath. I grab a bottle of water straight from a shelf. I gulp it down. The supermarket is a desert. This is my first drink in days.

Off I go again, off round the next corner, but my heart is no longer in the search. I am simply retracing my steps while my brother remains always a few aisles ahead of me, and it does not help that as I peer down each lane I encounter the same few faces staring back. But I must not give up. I begin to head back toward the dairy aisle and it is then, just as I am passing the pharmacy counter – where an old woman in an oversized raincoat is picking through a pile of crumpled prescriptions while the shop assistant toys with her nails – that I spot him. He is queuing up at one of the tills, his half-empty basket set down at his feet. I have to force myself not to run, as most of the shoppers around probably think I am sick or lunatic, though I cannot stop from increasing my pace.

He turns his head. I begin to raise my arm to wave to him. I have to catch his attention. I need to make him see. But then my rising arm falters. Stops mid-wave. It is not him. The man waiting at the check-out has a boxer's knuckle for a nose and bug-like eyes the colour of wet seaweed. He is nothing like my brother. My arm

slumps at my side. Only now does it occur to me that this man's hair is red, while my brother's hair had lost its fiery colour and changed to a light brown. The person before me is tall and solid, as my brother had been in his adolescence and early twenties. He is not the bulky colossus my brother turned himself into during the last eighteen months. It is not him. I have been searching for my brother not as he was the last time I saw him but as he had been much earlier in life. It is not him.

I leave the supermarket in a hurry and dash through the rain to the car, without bothering to look for my abandoned basket nor the quickly-scribbled shopping list it contains. After fumbling for a few moments unlocking the door, I climb inside and settle in the driving seat without daring to turn the key in the ignition. How have I managed to become so confused? The ghost in the queue doesn't look like my brother at all, yet I have wasted close to half an hour attempting to track him down.

A world populated by doubles, I find myself thinking, would not be such a bad thing. In fact, the idea that every person might be a double of someone else is strangely comforting. Even though I know it will not change my own situation, I still hope there is a doppelganger of my brother somewhere in the world who has managed somehow to circumvent his fate. This twin of my brother would not have grown so obsessed by bodybuilding, would not have sought to become a titan, a demigod.

The little I know of doppelgangers is that they bring bad luck and that they were originally said to go before the original, not to follow on after them. As I start the car and drive slowly through the downpour, however, I will myself to believe that the opposite is in fact true – not only because it allows me to indulge the idea that I might yet find a real double of my brother, but also because I feel that death would be so much easier to accept if we knew that once we were gone someone somewhere might still carry our likeness through the world. The rain lashes down as I head home.



The journey should be short but the wet roads are as treacherous and slippery as my thoughts.

I once read that Percy Bysshe Shelley saw his double at the start of the summer of 1822. Although it was not uncommon for him to fall prey to wild and unaccountable visions when overcome with sickness and delirium, he was not ill on that June morning when he met his alter ego upon the terrace of the Italian villa where he and his wife were then residing. Furthermore, he was not the only person who saw the doppelganger. The previous week, a friend staying with them in Pisa happened to glance out of one of the villa's high windows to see Shelley walking away from the house. He was, as usual, somewhat unkempt and had already discarded both coat and jacket in the heat. The friend thought little of this until, some minutes later, she returned to the window and saw him walking by once again, heading in the same direction as before. She was disconcerted at seeing him repeat his movements so precisely, and no sooner had she stepped away from the window than she changed her mind and turned back to take note of where he was going. Now he was nowhere to be seen. Yet the only way to disappear from view so suddenly would have been if he had leapt over the wall at the end of the terrace and fallen to the ground on the other side. Knowing that this was a drop of more than twenty feet, she started to panic that her friend had, in some reckless impulse, vaulted over the wall to oblivion. These fears were only allayed when she found out that Shelley had not been in the grounds all day and was in fact far from the villa on one of his errands.

Shelley's own encounter with his double was equally brief and equally disquieting. We know only what his wife recorded in a letter to a friend. Shelley

apparently told her that he had been walking upon the terrace when he came face to face with his doppelganger who asked him only ‘How long do you mean to be content?’ As if these cryptic words were not disturbing enough, that same night Shelley was troubled by a strange dream. He dreamt that a great storm stirred up the sea and sent floodwaters pounding against the villa; this relentless siege continued until the walls collapsed and everything inside was borne away on the waves. It was only two weeks after this that Shelley, along with his friend Edward Williams, set sail in his schooner from the Bay of Spezia for the last time. A month later his body was washed onto the beach, identified only by the copy of Keats’s poems that Shelley always kept in his jacket pocket. It was thought a terrible storm had sunk the boat and drowned the men on board, though to this day it remains unclear why they did not take off their heavy boots and coats and try to swim back to the beach, or else unloose the lifeboat and make an attempt to row through the wind and rain towards the shore. What seems stranger still is that though two men were killed and a schooner wrecked by the fearsome weather, those poems Shelley kept close to his breast somehow survived weeks of being washed by endless churning waves without either the paper becoming waterlogged or the ink smudging and blurring the pages.

There is, of course, no way of knowing which of our possessions will outlive us and which will disappear before we do, just as it is often impossible to guess which of our memories might persist and which will vanish without a trace. Yet it frequently feels as though we are bound to certain objects by some unknown logic, and that they retain a power over us which we cannot explain – a tatty old boglin we cannot bear to throw away, an heirloom, a memento, a lucky charm. I am reminded of my brother’s first leather jacket, which he had begged my parents to buy him for his eleventh birthday, and also the nunchuks he kept in his room and would occasionally take into

the garden and swing wildly around. Yet where most people cling to their keepsakes and draw strength from them, my brother instead contrived to lose such things. When I think of the meagre box of possessions waiting to be moved into his unfinished house as soon as he finished the decorating and refurbishing, I have to conclude that, either consciously or not, he did his best to ensure that he would leave nothing of himself behind. No trace. Not a jot.

Shelley wrote of being chained and bowed by the heavy weight of hours. Is that how my brother felt? He certainly had an uncanny ability to lose things, to mislay the past as it were. I cannot count the number of times he complained that one of his shoes had gone missing or that his keys had mysteriously disappeared once again. He often accused me of stealing the things he had mislaid but the truth is that my brother intentionally sought to lose as much as he could of his history. It was as if this desire to bulk up, to become a colossus, was all part of an attempt to be rid of his past – just as a damaged ship will often jettison any unnecessary cargo in order to stay afloat.

Shelley was twenty-nine when he set sail into the storm, five years older than my brother was when he made his own final journey. After Shelley's body was recovered, a small pyre of dried driftwood was set up on the sand and the poet was cremated there on the beach, not far from where his body had drifted ashore. His wife, following the belief of the time that such ceremonies were not suitable for women, did not come down to the waterfront for the makeshift funeral. His closest friends, most notably Lord Byron and Leigh Hunt, found the sight of his harrowed body so hard to bear that they remained far from the pyre until it had burnt down to dust and the few ragged cinders unclaimed by the blaze had been scattered across the shingle. Before the flames took hold of the body, however, Shelley's heart was removed so that it might be returned to his wife. She kept it for the rest of her life.

## 8. *A Fist of Muscle*

More has been written about the heart than any other part of our anatomy. It has long been thought to be reckless and mercurial, the source of love, locked in battle with the more sober and restrained head. While the brain formulates careful plans, the heart gives sway to whims and passions. It is the enemy of restraint and rationalism, the furnace in which our desires are fired. The Romans even went so far as to formulate the idea that the heart is the place in which our best memories and ideas are stored. In this way it was thought to function as a kind of secret safety-deposit box, or a tiny treasure chest where we bank our ghosts. As for my brother's heart, I know it was saved, though not returned to us. In fact, I have no idea what happened to it. I know only that when his heart was removed, it was found to be close to three times the normal size.

The post-mortem records that the walls and ventricles of the organ were so swollen that it was only with the most arduous labour that blood could be pumped through. His heart struggled, every day, until it could not go on. It was too big. So says the report. At first I feel relieved that I am getting close to understanding what had happened to him. But as I read on, I grow confused. I read the same sentence again and again: *Histological examination of the left ventricular myocardium revealed widespread myocyte hypertrophy with replacement fibrosis as well as an element of myocyte disarray*. The words mean little to me, even after a day and a night with a dictionary stolen from a hospital. What, I wonder, do such words have to do with the active and inexhaustible person that was my brother. They are words that, no matter how many times I return to my stolen book, refuse to make sense. I simply cannot

bring myself to believe that the statement is about my brother – it might as well be describing the orbit of a planet I have never seen, in a universe far beyond my own.

Is this all the heart is? A collection of ventricles, veins, valves, arteries, vessels, muscles, nodes and tendons? What about the rest? Everything else hidden within – his dreams and passions, his quirks and idiosyncrasies? The report tells me nothing of why the illness settled on him and not another – for example, myself. It will not tell me why he in particular had been chosen. It does not hint at where the condition had appeared from, or how long he might have borne within him such a fatal secret. It does not say how he might have felt, or how the disease changed him as time went on. The only fact that makes sense to me from the autopsy notes is that his heart weighed 886 grams. The same weight as a bag of rice. Or a small watermelon. The weight is important, you see. The weight of his lumbering heart. It is important not only because it must have weighed heavy inside him for many months until the day that it finally gave in, but also because it is by such criteria that lives were once measured.

The ancient Egyptians, preparing the body for mummification, would lay out the corpse and, after making an incision across the abdomen and cleansing it with wine both within and without, would remove lungs, liver, intestines and stomach. Even the brain would be removed, courtesy of hooked rods inserted through the nostrils, after which time the body could be coated with resin and bound tightly in strips of linen. The only organ left in place was the heart. This was for good reason: the soul could not travel on into the next world without it. At the very beginning of the journey into the underworld this most vital organ would be weighed, it being well known that all a person's sins and mistakes were written within the heart. Greed, malice, hatred, envy; all these were thought to make it grow fat and swollen. And on a

great pair of scales the heart was to be weighed against a feather that stood for truth and fairness. If the scales did not balance perfectly, the heart was cast aside to be devoured by a terrifying creature with the body of a lion and the head of a crocodile. When this happened, the soul of the deceased would be trapped forever somewhere between death and life. Only those with the lightest of hearts were allowed to continue their passage on towards the next world.

My brother has travelled on without his heart. I suspect that he is better off without it. It had only weighed him down, slowed his steps, until finally stopping him altogether. He had, as I say, a literally heavy heart, and it is tempting to think that his death was somehow connected with this. Did he sense what he was lugging around with him in those last months? Surely he must have felt it, the immense weight inside him like a stone, a cast iron padlock, a fist of engorged muscle. Did he try his best to ignore it? After his death, every time I wake in the night with my heart racing, I think instantly of him, and wonder whether its inevitable thumping ever scared him, or whether by the time he realised what was happening inside him it was already too late.

The word *record*, to note something down and store it for the future, is derived from the Latin *cor*, meaning heart. When we commit something to memory, we say we learn it by heart, and it was once believed that our heart records our longings, our ambitions, our regrets. It is not difficult, then, to see how a heart can grow heavy. And if his was weighed down, then now so is mine.

According to the early church fathers, or so I have read, the Book of the Heart is the place in which our thoughts, our works and our sins are inscribed. I wonder, then, whether my brother carried with him the weight of any regrets, or doubts, or mistakes. But what did he regret? I cannot say. My few guesses are feeble at best. Did he regret doing so badly at school? I am not sure. He had certainly been glad to see the

back of the place, though in the last few years he had worked hard at college courses to gain several advanced construction and design qualifications of which he was certainly proud. Perhaps, though, he regretted his inability to control his temper. I think of the fights he and I often had in our teenage years, and of his legendary fits and rages that would cause us all to scatter and flee. Yet those were long in the past. In his final months he had not warred with anyone. Not even me.

The more I think about the things that might have weighed heavy on his heart, the more I began to think about how little I know of the person my brother had become at the time of his death. I cannot shake off the thought that I had lost or, if you will, mislaid my brother some years before he died. You will remember that the double in the supermarket looked not like my brother did in his last couple of years, but as he had been close to four years before. This makes me feel even worse. His heart was too big; mine, it seems, too small.

I remain uncertain as to how we had drifted so far apart. Was it my fault? It is true that there had been a period when, as teenagers, we had gone out of our way to avoid each other. At that point it felt as though any time the two of us were in the same room some war or other would break out; at least once a week we shouted or screamed at each other or even came to blows. But those belligerent days had long been left behind and, in recent years, peace had broken out and we had laughed and joked as though the war years had never happened. If we often put off meeting up for that drink or getting together for a meal, it was only because we were both sure that the other would not mind and that there would be plenty of time for all that in the future.

Not only have I now lost that future, but I also begin to worry that over time my memories of our shared past will grow increasingly hazy and that each day I will

lose a little more of him. Yet at the same time I feel as though I cannot break away from him, and for many nights after the funeral as soon as I close my eyes I am overcome with the sensation that he is still there, lying as ever in the bunk bed above me. If I listen closely, I can sometimes hear him muttering in his sleep. Occasionally I am even able to suspend disbelief enough to believe that at any moment he might swing his head down and suggest a midnight picnic, or ask me to tell him a story about the land of monsters we might find if we were to venture through the secret tunnel found at the back of the cupboard. Sometimes I even open my mouth to reply.

He can only have been three or four when we shared a bunk-bed. We were living in a cramped terrace then, a house where the pipes gurgled and babbled all night. My brother and I had a raggedy stuffed toy that served as a door-stop so that our room would not be completely given over to darkness. We also had a cassette player which told us fairy tales as we drifted towards sleep and I can still remember the first time that I managed to force myself to stay awake (by repeatedly pinching my arm) until the story came to an end and the tape clicked off. A horrible silence settled over the room, as if a great bell jar had been lowered over us. I could hear my heart beating louder and louder in my chest. If I listened carefully I could hear the sound of a door being opened somewhere on the other side of the house, and even though I knew that this was probably nothing more than my parents coming up to brush their teeth before bed, I could not stop my mind from running wild. I had soon convinced myself that there were burglars creeping through the house and that they were heading for our room – hence the dull snuffle of feet on the stair, the sigh of floorboards, and the hundred other odd noises that old houses possess in their armoury. Each one my imagination seized upon as a sign of some approaching terror until, in desperate self-defence, I leapt out of bed, turned the cassette over, and pressed 'Play'.



It is not, of course, so easy to calm an adult mind. My mum, I think, might feel the same. Consider, if you will, what happens when my mum takes the dog for a walk along the seafront in Littlehampton. Like the rest of us, she finds staying too long in the wreath-filled house oppressive and overbearing, and so decides to head to the beach. She spends a long time at the harbour close to where the River Arun meets the sea, keeping the dog on the lead while she stands looking down at the bevvies of swans and cygnets huddling in the crooks of shingle that rise up where the river swerves at sudden angles. When the restless dog finally succeeds at interrupting her thoughts, she turns and follows the river down to its mouth before walking east along the beach. The tide is slowly drawing in and the unleashed dog makes a frantic dash across the sand, darting close to the edge of the lapping waves and then sprinting back again, as though daring himself ever closer to the water.

It is the dog that draws the young child away from his own family. The little boy begins to follow our dog across the beach, zigzagging as the dog does, and calling out to it in delight. Meanwhile, my mum is walking down the stony bank looking out to sea and listening to the sound of each wave following on upon the last. Her eyes are trained on the distant point where the ashen clouds touch down on the dark green sea, and so it is only once the little boy is close enough to snatch at the dog's tail that my mum notices him. He is perhaps four or five, though it is difficult to be sure, since he is dressed from head to toe in a Spiderman costume.

It is almost identical to the costume my brother wore at the same age. There were many days, in fact, when he would refuse to take it off, even to go to bed, his one concession being to remove the red and black mask and set it down beside him on the pillow. The only visible parts of the child on the beach are two blue eyes staring out from the holes in the mask. My mum freezes to the spot. When she finally starts

moving once more, she finds that the boy is moving with her. For a few minutes he runs along beside the dog, and she starts to worry that he might attempt to follow them all the way home. It is only when his family start calling out to him across the beach that he leaves the dog alone and wanders away. Once he is out of sight, my mum cuts short her walk and strides straight back across the sand. Towards the car.

She tells us that it is not the thought that it might have been my brother beneath the costume that has upset her but the knowledge that it was not. It is as though her heart is being tested. Wherever any of us goes, it is as though my brother is following. Time and again something moves in the corner of our vision, a flicker of colour, a change in the light. Some days, in fact, it is almost impossible to leave the house without meeting someone who reminds us of him. The smallest thing is enough – a shock of red hair, a few freckles playing upon the nose and cheeks, or a laugh, or a boast. The rest of the day is then lost.

*9. Pale moon*

The great spire rising up to jab through low-skimming cumulus makes Chichester's Cathedral the only one in the country visible from the sea, and it is in the shadow of this spire that I am now sitting, groggy and tired after a long and sleepless night. I am not the only person resting on the grass that surrounds the old cathedral with its unmistakable copper roof turned green from years of rain, there being a large number of couples and small groups sprawled on the lawn, eating their lunch or else simply soaking in the languorous summer heat. I have settled here hoping that I might be able to find some rest and forget the infuriating thoughts that troubled me all night. I cannot shake off the sense that no matter where I go I won't be safe from the nagging thoughts that follow me as expertly as my brother had whenever he had pretended to be my shadow close behind me, mimicking every action.

It was a few hours after midnight when I finally gave up trying to sleep. I had opened the curtains and sat, with the blanket still wrapped around my shoulders, staring at the moon, the comforting moon, across the surface of which I could see the many ruins of temples and great cities. The pale light spoke of an immense sadness, an impression compounded when, a few hours later, I returned to my books to find the names once given to the moon's barren ocean-beds: the sea of rains, the sea of snakes, the sea of crises, the sea of clouds, the ocean of storms. Whoever had so named the plains and wastelands of this distant rock must have had a heavy heart.

It is in order to escape the room in which I had spent such a fretful night that I decide to drive into the city, to the library. But even books cannot help me today. The words flitter and rearrange themselves before my eyes, forcing me to read the same sentence time and again before I can finally make any sense of it. I leave empty-

handed and sit instead outside the Cathedral, determined not to return home until I have managed to escape the shadow that has fallen over me. The last thing I want is to take it home with me. Back there everyone is doing their best to lighten the gloom, each worried that one wrong word will throw everything into absolute dark.

I shift in the heat and find myself staring over at the grand old building across the road from the Cathedral, the Dolphin and Anchor. It is now a public house owned by a national chain that seems intent upon erasing any original features the place possesses in order to make it identical to each of their other outlets across the country. Like everything else both within and without the city walls, however, it still bears the marks of its previous incarnations. It does not take much searching for me to locate the famous carvings of gold-scaled fish entwined with tilted anchors perched on opposite ends of the roof. They have recently been restored, stripped back to stone before being gilded once again with gold leaf. The bright fish-scales glint in the morning light, as if plucked from a sea of gold only a few hours before and now left there to dry.

My brother had worked as a bouncer at the Dolphin and Anchor – a colossus in a too-tight black suit, his bulging arms folded as he managed the queues that wound down the street on Friday and Saturday evenings. More than once he had to be reminded to take off his black sunglasses – they are pointless, he was told, at night.

Long before all this, however, the building had been a coaching inn where weary travellers might stop for a night or two. The inn was perfectly placed to provide a warm respite from the wild forests that once grew thick upon the areas surrounding the South Downs, while the Cathedral opposite would have been on hand to provide more spiritual comforts. There were separate berths for the servants and their masters, while the horses could have been fed, shod and bedded at the rear. By the nineteenth

century the Dolphin and Anchor had become a hotel, patronised by many wealthy visitors who came to Chichester in order to test for themselves the claims being made for the medicinal benefits of the coastal air. Still later, during the Second World War, it was frequented by fighter pilots stationed nearby at the RAF Tangmere airfield.

No doubt many of the pilots arranged to meet their sweethearts at this very place, attempting to forget for an evening the dark slipstreams of the sky, as well as the foreboding tales doing the rounds of the blinding light of burning cities glimpsed from far above, seen as though with the eyes of birds or gods. I remember an account I recently read of a childhood played out during the war in which the author, evacuated from the capital to his uncle's house in Sussex, noted that on those clear nights when all lamps and candles had been put out and one could, therefore, see for miles in every direction, the appearance of a plane overhead would cause everyone in the house to hold their breath. Even the most fidgety of children, the account continues, would suddenly drop whatever they were doing and become statues, just as if they were playing some strange and absurd party-game. The only movement visible was that of the statues' eyes as their pupils tracked the path of the plane across the heavens. As the lone bomber passed over, it was as though it cleaved the sky almost in two, sending stars rippling out in its wake. Only when the smoke trail had faded from sight, the author recounts, would each statue finally exhale.

The evacuees, mostly young schoolchildren transported far from their urban homes, must have been overwhelmed by the silence of the countryside at night. And, since returning to my parents' house for the funeral and its aftermath, I have often found myself lying awake half the night listening to the slur of the wind toying with the treetops, or the flutter of nocturnal birds swooping down for mice or voles somewhere in the woods. Without the roar of traffic, the dull thud of music from

nearby flats and houses, the drunken curses rising up after closing time, the dogs howling their sonorous missives and the cats screeching their lusty entreaties, it is impossible to distract myself from all the wandering thoughts that fill a mind after dark.

At times, the quiet defeats me. It enlarges my worries and fears, and I have come to feel that night in the countryside is little more than a long and restless wait for dawn, interrupted only by the occasional patter of summer rain against the windows or the rustle of foxes slinking ever closer to the bins. Whenever I am gripped by this growing sense of unease, I find the only thing that calms me is to throw open the curtains and search for the moon in the night sky. It is an impulse, I have read, shared by many ancient travellers who, finding themselves in foreign lands, sought out the moon in order to prove to themselves that though everything else upon the earth may change, some things always remain. As every traveller knows, the moon's ashen light shines down upon each new and unfamiliar landscape just as it shines down over the home that has been left behind. Perhaps that is why it is said that the moon is the last friend of the exile and the departed; though two lovers may be separated by thousands of miles, it is the same moon they glimpse as they search the sky.

I have also read that General Eisenhower repeatedly made his way to the window to scour the night sky for the moon when he stayed at the Dolphin and Anchor in Chichester on the fifth of June, 1944. It was the night before the Normandy Landings. He too must have struggled to sleep, knowing that in a few hours more than forty thousand paratroopers would be landing behind enemy lines and around one hundred and fifty thousand men would be wading through the freezing water toward the coast, the only light in those drawn-out hours before dawn the sharp glint of gunfire reflected across the waves. Before returning to the hotel, he had visited the

82<sup>nd</sup> and 101<sup>st</sup> divisions to prepare them for the mission, yet by the time he retired to his room it may still have been light, Britain being then on double-daylight. Once night finally fell, however, Eisenhower must have returned to the hotel window again and again, all the while hopeful that the sky would remain clear and the moon unobscured – the pale light it afforded was vital for the legions of soldiers trudging blindly through the shallows towards the German bunkers and the distant rattle of machine-gun fire. The landings had already been pushed back a day, with the raging wind unsettling the sea and driving clouds across the sky. He must have stared as if for ever at the horizon's frayed edges.

From the grass outside the Cathedral I watch a steady stream of people wander in and out of the Dolphin and Anchor. Just as the hotel has changed over the last few decades into a chain pub, so my brother, by the time he began to work on the door there, had shrugged off many of his former selves. In fact, he moved through so many personae that it sometimes seemed as though he saw life as little more than an endless game of make-believe. No longer the toddler in my shadow, the little boy convinced he was Spiderman, the obsessive painter, the camouflage-wearing commando, the martial arts devotee, the amateur photographer, nor even the surly and aggressive teen ready to pick a fight with anyone who argued with him, he had by then recast himself as a local colossus, the giant doorman. It was a role he fleshed out with struts and curses, yet the truth was that no matter how often he went to the gym, no matter how much he bragged that he was nothing like the rest of his family, or that reading was only for girls and school for the gullible, it was always impossible to tell how much was performance and how much was for real. Perhaps he would have said the same about me – that I only ever pretended to be gentle and reserved. But there was certainly something theatrical about his stock poses and surly gait when he assumed

the role of doorman. Even in the final year of his life, he often turned cagey when people asked him about where he had grown up and what his parents did, as if he suspected that at any moment someone might see through his act.

There were many Friday nights when the two of us would travel into town on the same train, both heading towards the Dolphin and Anchor. My brother would usually be dressed in his black suit and would spend much of the journey casting disparaging looks at my scuffed trainers or the shirt I had chosen to wear. Before he went out he would spend close to an hour dressing himself in preparation for the part he had to play, and he could never understand how I could bear to go into town to meet my friends having made so little effort. *If anyone sees us together*, he would often tell me, *I'll have to pretend we've never met and I have no idea who you are*. Almost every time we journeyed in together, as soon as the train began to draw in to Chichester station he would go on to say, *If I see any of your friends trying to come in tonight, you know I'm going to turn them away, don't you? They're not getting in when I'm on the door. Bunch of fucking losers. Shouldn't be allowed. No way they'll be allowed in. Not on my watch. Not a fucking chance*.

He would always, however, let them in without even asking to see their ID. Indeed, more often than not he also chatted and joked with them while they were waiting in line on those nights when the pub became so crowded that it was forced to operate a 'one-in one-out' policy. His threats were little more than a well-tested tease that he could not resist trotting out again and again. And for all his bluff and bluster, whenever he met one of my old friends beyond the Dolphin and Anchor, he would always spare a few minutes to catch up with them. This he would do even after I had moved away from home and long left the city behind.



Occasionally, when I had not gone to the pub myself, I would come in the car to pick him up after work and drive him and some of the other bouncers back home. He usually said little during those late journeys, and perhaps that is why I can still recall with almost perfect clarity the night he turned to me and suddenly began to speak, almost as if to himself, about a fight that he had broken up in the pub. He said that when he was pushing through the throng to get to the brawlers in the centre it was as though everything was happening in slow-motion, and each drunken punch took forever to reach its target. We were driving down the deserted dual carriageway, some time close to midnight; a slim curl of moon hung down among the streetlamps and my brother kept his eyes focused on the night sky unfurling out in front of us as he spoke. By the time, he continued, he had got to the scene of the altercation, most of the crowd had given up trying to pull the men apart. In fact, many of the onlookers were instead cheering the brawlers on as they set into each other and went reeling and crashing into the tables around them. He shook his head in disbelief as he recounted that one man, himself a muscled strongman, whose face had been cut by a broken glass in the fracas, had turned pale when he realised he was bleeding. For all his muscle, the strongman had looked down at the blood on his hands with eyes as big as saucers.

The sun is beginning to slip west, and I notice a group of men getting up to throw away their plastic sandwich-wrappers and return once more to their offices. I continue staring at the Dolphin and Anchor but, though I consider it for a long time, I do not dare cross the road and venture through the double doors in case someone should recognise me and ask after Luke. Luke. I am sorry, I realise now that I have not mentioned my brother's name before. I'm not sure why. It is perhaps because to say his name out loud might make his death somehow more real than it already is. It is

as if his name has somehow become an enchanted word, such as those that appear in ancient stories and unleash wild elemental forces if uttered. Something has certainly convinced me that it cannot be repeated without dire consequences. It is also the case that by the act of naming we seek to exert power over something, and to define its limits. Neither are possible now.

The name 'Luke' originally meant someone from Luciana, or someone christened in memory of the apostle. My brother, though, once tried to persuade us that his name was somehow derived from *lupus*, the wolf. Where he got this notion from I have no idea, though it certainly seemed fitting at the time. Perhaps he concocted this explanation simply as a prelude to a game, since straight after proclaiming his lupine ancestry, he chased us round the house, swiping the air with outstretched fingers that he assured us were about to sprout the sharpest of claws. Even two thousand years ago, people were familiar with the idea of humans being transformed into wolves, though the reasons for such a change have been much debated over the ensuing centuries. Suggested causes include partaking of human flesh, drinking the dark waters of enchanted streams that bubble up from the depths of the earth, and sipping freshly-fallen rainwater from the four-point footprint of a wolf. The curse was easy to pick up but almost impossible to cast off. It is true that Romulus and Remus were said to have been suckled by a she-wolf and, many centuries later, Saint Francis reputedly tamed a wild wolf and ordered it to leave the residents of the city close to its lair in peace; nevertheless, by the Middle Ages the wolf and its strange, half-human relative had come to signify those who had been cast out from the world and abandoned by God.

The werewolf is a potent symbol, suggesting as it does that each of us has some residue of animal instinct lurking within, some primordial spark of rage that at

times threatens to overwhelm us. The myth also proposes that we are prey to passions and emotions that cannot logically be explained, and that it might take only the smallest of catalysts to make us strangers to ourselves. In our teenage years, my brother and I often unleashed our most primal and uncontrollable emotions on each other, both of us competing to provoke the other, going on and on until one of us was no longer able contain our anger and lashed out. We honed such skills until we knew with absolute certainty what would upset the other most: which embarrassments, failures or disappointments, which worries or insecurities. At such times, we were each other's fiercest enemy, and it was only after the funeral, far too late, that I understood what this really meant: that we knew each other intimately, better than anyone else, and that this knowledge, no matter how it enraged us, bound us together.

Just as it is only under the cover of darkness that the werewolf's metamorphosis is said to take place, so it is that night can have the most unsettling effect on people, as my brother regularly witnessed at the Dolphin and Anchor. I remember him saying that once the night comes on even those who previously seemed calm and gentle might suddenly grow savage. It is no wonder that, for centuries, the moon was thought to make people mad.

The biggest moon I ever saw, I saw with my brother. We were in Cornwall for the summer holidays and the sun had set while we were eating in a small pub not far from the coast. My brother must have been nine or ten and, as ever, had finished his plateful before anyone else had managed more than a couple of bites. The caravan we were staying in was only a few minutes' walk from the beach, and so our parents allowed the two of us to run on ahead across the sand. A low breeze was stirring the unruly reeds dotted over the dunes as we clambered through the dips and rises, sand falling and scattering beneath our uncertain steps. At last we made it to the sea. It was

only then, standing out of breath with the sloping dunes behind us and the calm ocean stretching out into the darkness at our feet, that we saw the full moon. It filled almost a quarter of the heavens, and I can still hear the gasp my brother gave as he looked up: the sky had sunk down upon us and, if we only stood on tiptoes, we might surely be able to reach out and touch it. We stayed frozen for several minutes with our necks crooked back, staring at the great pock-marked globe, each crag and crater illuminated by the ghostly yellow light. It was a rot-dappled autumn apple, a circular map of scars and bruises, and its double swam across the water before us.

Some Native American tribes gave each full moon a different name in recognition of the unique characteristics of each lunar cycle, the first of which was the Wolf Moon, so called because in the first month of the year it would have been common to hear packs of wolves driven by the snow and frost to forage close to the camps. Subsequent moons were called Snow Moon, Worm Moon, Pink Moon, Flower Moon, Buck Moon, Sturgeon Moon, Corn Moon, Harvest Moon, Beaver Moon and Cold Moon. Among different tribes, different names were often used, and so other appellations included Hunter's Moon, Blood Moon, Hunger Moon and, among the Sioux, the Moon When Ponies Shed, the Moon For Making Fat, and the Moon For Black Cherries. Though I knew nothing of those terms back then, standing on the moonlit sand of the Cornish coast, something of the same idea must have crossed my mind, for I remember thinking that this full moon was quite unlike any I had seen before. Like the underside of a rusty flying saucer, it shone its beams down thick and heavy upon us.

It would, I believe, have been a Sturgeon Moon, the moon which calls that bony-beaked fish closer to the surface; and for some time as we gazed up at it we remained silent. Whatever game we had been playing as we crossed the dunes had not

only been halted but also been erased from our memories, and to this day I have no idea what we were talking about before we glanced up at the night sky. No matter how hard I try to concentrate, I cannot say what we might have done earlier that day, nor when our parents finally joined us, nor what happened later that evening. Just ten minutes, give or take, have stayed with me of that day. All else is blank.

Of that night, now some fifteen years ago, I remember looking at the moon most clearly, the sand still warm beneath our feet and the dark waves rising and crashing, each time carrying something of the spectral light closer to us before bearing it away again. I remember too that when we finally lowered our heads it was my brother who spoke first. And though I cannot be sure of his exact words, I believe he said something like, *It's so close that whoever is living up there can probably see us right now*. Then he began to wave his arms, just as people stranded on tropical islands are said to do when attempting to draw the attention of passing boats or planes, and soon he was running up and down the beach. Before long, one of his sandals had tumbled off into the sand. Still he went on waving at the moon.

At first I simply watched him run back and forth in front of the lapping water, but something in his manner was so assured that soon I found myself joining in, and after a while we were both hollering up at the moon. Though we began by calling out greetings to whoever was up there living on that distant rock, it was not long before we were improvising jabbers and squawks in imitation of what we imagined moon language might sound like. We crowed and gibbered so much that, had there been a witness, they might well have thought that with our flapping arms and noisy cawing we had been driven so mad by the great craggy globe looming above us that we had come to believe we were birds. Finally, wheezing for breath and overcome with giggles, the pair of us collapsed together onto the moon-sparked sand.

Of the rest of the evening, I can remember nothing. The memory does not fade out slowly into shadow but rather stops as suddenly as if the reel of cinematic tape on which it played has been brutally scissored. I find myself wondering whether each new memory displaces one that has gone before, or whether we let go of so much of the past because to hold onto everything really would make us mad. I go over the memory many times, but I am unable to move further than that moment when we fell back laughing together. Perhaps our parents arrived soon after and we all walked back over the pokes and sags of the dunes to the caravan. Perhaps we lay there for some time, unable to believe that we would ever see such a moon again. Or perhaps we ventured into the sea for a swim. For though I can remember little else, I do recall the stars bobbing on the surface of the waves, like eager insects buzzing around the huge Chinese lantern above.

I get up slowly from the Cathedral lawn, still unsteady with tiredness, and brush lashes of grass from my legs. I think once more of the moon I had seen that sleepless night, its grooves and contours still rising up clearly before me every time I press my eyes shut. I cannot bring myself to believe that the mournful orb that kept vigil with me until first light was the same moon my brother and I had stared at together on that childhood holiday. It is little wonder that it was once believed that the moon repeatedly dies and is reborn, a new moon growing each month from the scrawniest sliver of its last life. And because it is the insomniac's most faithful companion, because night after night it watches the same small struggles repeated again and again, each time it is remade the moon must surely grow a thicker skin, its husk becoming ever more calloused. In the end it must feel almost nothing.

I look one last time at the Dolphin and Anchor, and see the doors where my brother used to stand swing open to let a few lunchtime drunks stumble out. As I turn

away, the sharp glint of sunlight reflected from one of the high windows hits my eyes – and, since the mind often chases itself in circles as certainly as the moon turns forever in the same orbit, I am reminded once more of General Eisenhower, who rose early after that long and no doubt sleepless night and returned to the window for one last chance to scour the sky before dawn. Had he stayed at the hotel window for long enough he would have seen the hazy glow of the setting moon untouched by cloud. Despite all evidence to the contrary, I am convinced that the moon that was then casting its light upon the coast of Normandy was not the same one that the General saw from the Dolphin and Anchor. Some moons are unique, and that was one of them, drifting like a searchlight across the black waves as the soldiers attempted to wade towards the shore. Some moons are not repeated, and cannot be reborn.

*10. A Chemical Catalyst*

I am walking through the stone cloisters towards the main body of the Cathedral, though I am not quite sure how I got here, or why. I had fully intended to head straight back to the car; my feet, though, have decided upon a different direction. Some memories are stored, I think, not in the mind but in the body, the touch of each hand ever held being etched among the lines on the palm, the taste of every kiss written forever on the lips. Before I know it, I am all but within the Cathedral. It is only the slap of my steps against the stone floor, echoing out like tiny claps of thunder, that brings me back to the present. And though I think of turning around, some strange resolve sees me carry on along the path I have unwittingly started upon – around the deserted courtyards, past the detached bell-tower outlined against the watery blue sky and into the main building through the heavy double doors.

It is almost silent inside, with the light filtered through the stained glass cast down in mauve and saffron pools upon the polished stone slabs. I make my way down the right-hand side of the cathedral, weaving between the high columns and arches that separate the south aisle from the nave, my pace soon slowing when I notice that the sound of every tiny shuffle or cough rebounds off the great vaulted roof and echoes out around me. It is impossible to make even the slightest movement without it being seized upon and amplified by the building itself, as if every motion is heeded, every word or gesture acknowledged. And yet, for all the Cathedral's melancholy grandeur, it has lost much of the mystery and enchantment it held all those years ago when, as hushed schoolchildren, we had been led around to see the medieval knights asleep within their worn stone sarcophagi, the fourteenth-century misericords and the clan of gurning gargoyles that line the outer walls. In fact, the Cathedral now feels so



hollow and unfamiliar that for a moment I am uncertain whether I am actually in the same place, or have instead stepped inside an elaborately-constructed set. I begin to suspect that behind one of the thick stone buttresses I might find a film crew, or whispering audience waiting for a play to begin. This fleeting idea serves to heighten my suspicion that I should not have ventured back after so many years away, and that I do not belong here, not among all these statues. All these images.

But then, this place has always been a kind of theatre. In the eleventh century when, shortly after the Norman conquest, the first foundation stones were laid in the centre of the city, even the most affluent of local noblemen and titled gentry would have had few other sources of entertainment. Yes, there were the pleasures of the hunt and, in certain households following the fashions of the court, the music of a harp or lute played late into the evening; but their stories, their dreams, they were to be found here, in the Mass. The tale of a broken man with bloody nails driven through tendon and muscle and dying upon a bind of splintered wood must have been the most haunting and vivid theatre imaginable. This terrible dying brought to life on Sundays must have been indelibly inscribed upon the mind's eye, a strange and unearthly drama re-enacted without fail every week.

I am half-hoping for a similar quickening of the senses, and this perhaps goes some way to explaining the disappointment I feel at finding only a draughty stone building empty even of tourists, home only to dust motes swirling in the drifts of coloured light. The only other person I can see inside is an old woman hunched over a horde of low-burning candles, her lips moving soundlessly as the flickering light causes her shadow to dance upon the wall behind her. Without the bustle of crowds, the booming echo of hymns or chants, or the noisy murmur of competing prayers, the Cathedral is stripped bare. There was a time when it overflowed with pilgrims and

locals packed elbow to elbow throughout the nave. After the death and canonisation of Richard, Bishop of Chichester in the early thirteenth century, thousands of pilgrims came to visit his shrine in hope of witnessing one of the miracles for which it became famed. Saint Richard's bones were believed to have cured the flaking skin of a leper, enabled a paralysed man to begin to walk once more, and even raised three men from the dead. As I make my way down the south aisle I wonder who was the more deluded: those of our ancestors who placed their trust without reservation in the power of miracles to save them from their troubles, or those of us today who will not accept that our lives are dictated by forces beyond both our control and our comprehension.

The shrine was destroyed in 1538, under the orders of Henry VIII, though rumours long persisted that the bones of the saint had been stolen away and preserved in secret by the most devout of his followers. In truth, little remains of the original building. In the twelfth century alone two fires gutted the building, destroying the roof and wrecking the arcade stonework. Much of the rebuilding work, which transformed the thin nave into a wide gothic vault, suffered in the Reformation – most of the brass was taken away to be smelted down, almost all the statues were smashed and many of the intricate carvings were damaged beyond repair. In the seventeenth century the Cathedral was struck by lightning and, one hundred years later, just when work began to fix the crumbling and insecure roof, the tall spire collapsed in upon itself. Somehow, by a miracle, not one of the builders, artisans, craftsmen, joiners or apprentices was killed, the spire happening to fall at the exact hour during which they were all taking supper. With every storm, fire or collapse, something of the original Norman edifice was destroyed and had to be replaced. Perhaps loss is the price of survival; perhaps to endure we must be prepared to give up something of ourselves. On impulse I reach out and press my hand against one of the stone pillars, moving it

carefully across the ancient brickwork as a doctor might if searching for a pulse. Despite the summer heat, it is as cold as a splinter of ice.

To guard against further ruin, some fifty years ago now, the Cathedral roof was coated in copper to protect the rafters and ceiling work from damp and rot. This copper, oxidised by the sea air blown in from Bosham and Selsey, has now turned algae green, and on a clear day is visible from many miles away, across the fields and rambles that border the city. Nature is, of course, forever busy with change – hence, the study of Chemistry with its fascination with instability and flux, with the magic by which one thing is fundamentally altered by contact with another. Examples are all about us, such as the way my brother's face grew flushed and swollen if, as a child, he was given any food containing wheat, or grew big with bravado after sinking shots in the hockey clubhouse in celebration of triumph. Other reactions must occur deep within the brain, and might even serve to explain why he got so much pleasure from hiding for hours in wardrobes or under beds just so he could eventually jump out and surprise me; or why he would watch the same few films again and again; or have a terrible fear of sharks despite never having seen one. His own analysis of this phobia, when asked to explain it, was that sharks were the only animals that he might not be able to beat in a fight, and for this reason alone he declined countless invitations to visit the beach or to travel by boat. He spent an inordinate amount of time thinking about which creatures he could reasonably expect to defeat in combat, and often asked his closest friends whether they thought he could take on, say, a bear, a wolf, or a snake.

Just as an inert element might become explosive or unpredictable when exposed to certain catalysts, so there is no way to know how we might react when thrown together with different people. Perhaps one day a chemical formula might be

discovered that could explain why it is that we are drawn to some and not others. Whatever, I certainly understand my own chemistry enough to know that had Luke not been my brother, we would not have got on. We simply did not laugh at the same jokes nor share the same passions. Even our dreams would have been hard to reconcile – as a teenager my brother would grow irritable at the mere mention of books. He was dyslexic, you see. When he reached his twenties he did try to read more, beginning with a selection of dark and violent gangland memoirs. He, though, was always one for the tangible, the visible, what can be held and possessed. No, we were not elements that would have ever interacted had it not been for blood, that most secret chemistry.

The transformations of the body, in contrast, are clear for all to see: the first growth spurts, the singsong fluctuations of the voice finding its pitch, and later – suddenly and without warning – the first grey hairs, a few stray wrinkles, the curve of crow's feet and laughter lines, firm flesh turning to doughy sags, and a thousand other tiny changes that creep up on us while we are looking the other way. If such a thing as the soul exists, might it be just as malleable? If the soul is somehow tied to us then is it as subject to change and transformation as the mind, the face, the heart? Or does it stay always as young as a child?

I clear my throat and the sound rolls off through the Cathedral, only to return to me heavy and resonant with echo. I have stopped in the south transept, under a giant blue and red stained-glass window which shows, on the left side, the crucifixion, and on the right, an empty cross around which a green snake is coiled. Something in me aches to believe what those familiar with these pews believe – namely, that some part of us might outlive the body, and that somehow our essence might be distilled from bones and blood.

When I was about seven years old, my brother and I were given a ZX Spectrum 128 computer. It consisted of a stubby joystick and a black plastic keyboard that was plugged into the back of the television. In order to get a game working, we would have to place a cassette in the machine some time before we intended to play, as it would take between ten and twenty minutes to load, all the while making a high-pitched dial-tone whine. I do not remember us ever becoming impatient, the long wait serving only to increase our anticipation. We would often shout at each other if one of us got too close to the machine during this time; even the slightest of movements could be enough to reset it and so necessitate starting the long loading process once again from the beginning. Yet what I recall most clearly is that we took it for granted that our characters on the screen (be they animals, sorcerers, karate-masters or soldiers) could never really die. When they were killed (by enemy fire, hidden traps or spikes falling from the ceiling) they simply started again, brought back to life.

This simple experience of resurrection, repeated again and again until we either completed the game or grew tired and turned it off, was central to the way we thought about death. We had, of course, already witnessed it in other forms. I remember the two of us often armed with spades and warm coats, helping our dad dig countless holes to bury goldfish or hamsters in the garden. Every holiday, our primary school allowed a different family to take home the three school rabbits, and during the half-term in which my brother and I enjoyed that privilege all three of them came down with the same illness and each one of them died. I can still recall the two of us shamefully lugging the empty hutch back to school the following Monday. Despite this, we still inhabited a world where none of our friends or family had yet died, and we still took it for granted that we would live to be as old as our two living great-grandmothers, both then well into their nineties, one of whom, a miracle known as

‘Bumbee’, had danced upon the stage in Paris before the war. Though death had been talked about at primary school, the details we were given were never satisfactory, and no one ever answered the simple questions to which we sought answers: *Where exactly is heaven? Is there a map of it and can we have a look at it? Are dogs allowed in? What is the food like? How many people can it hold? And what happens when that limit is reached? What? What happens then?*

*11. The Jester and the Ape*

A middle-aged couple with an unfeasibly large camera are making their way toward the high altar. Their muffled voices carry across to me, and I realise that I have been standing for some time under the same stained glass window in the south transept, gazing at the coloured light but without seeing. I stretch my arms out in front of me and then begin moving once more. It is getting late and part of me knows that I should be starting back home, but I find myself heading up past the choir stalls and the presbytery to the very back of the building. I am convinced there is something inside the Cathedral that I need to find. I walk as if in a dream, as though my body is no longer under my control. A bleeding Christ stares down from grey stone, head cocked as if considering the question of whether we die once, or many times. I picture the souls of those buried within the tombs here somehow distilled to mist and vapour, leaving the mournful world behind and rising higher and higher above the rooftops, until they finally disappear somewhere above the flight path of the peregrine falcons that have made their home in the Cathedral spire.

The family of falcons have been living in the turret at the base of the spire for many years. Their nest looks down upon the bald and misshapen heads of the gargoyles spitting rainwater a few feet below. They are a brooding, vicious bunch, their ferocity set off by their beauty: the regal curve of beak beneath dark eyes, the sharp talons ever ready. They can sometimes be seen dropping almost straight down from the turret, waiting for the last moment to stretch out those slick blue-grey wings and swoop upwards, often twirling and twisting in the air as though showing off to the world below. They are strange lodgers for such a place, though perhaps these resplendent but remorseless predators – the fastest creatures upon the earth, darting

fiercely through the skies to pick off the slowest of gulls or waders – are as good a symbol as any for the savage and pitiless wrath of God.

Falcons are territorial and protect their nest brutally. No doubt these ones believe that the cathedral belongs to them, that it is their own private kingdom. As I pass the choir stalls, I see the picture of Luke the Evangelist, in whose gospel it is written that though the birds have their nests and the foxes have their holes, the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head. No wonder those falcons look so assured of their place, their every unerring movement marked by unthinking certainty. Doubt is peculiarly human.

Mum has always maintained that she knew from a young age that she would call her first child Sam, regardless of the baby's gender. It was, then, only fair that my dad be allowed to choose the name of their second child. By then it had been some ten years since he had given up his vocation as a Methodist minister and turned away from the church; nevertheless, it is hard to believe that my dad's choice was not in some way influenced by his theological studies. Saint Luke is the patron of physicians, yet it was my brother's intense dislike of visiting the doctor that I often think of now. If only he had gone for the simplest of check ups. If he had only taken ten minutes after work to visit the local surgery and confide a few of the problems he was having in sleeping, then perhaps he would still be with us. He was not squeamish, as a child did not share my fear of needles, and he had in fact been in hospital twice in the eighteen months before his death – once to fix a hernia developed after overworking himself at the gym, and once to fit a cast where the bones in his wrist had been fractured, by a iron pole. Our strong man did not, I think, want to speak about what else might be wrong with him, nor to admit he might not be as invincible as he often boasted.



Saint Luke is also the patron of artists. Painting was something at which my brother excelled as a child, much to my frustration. In fact, my only memories of him ever sitting still are when he was drawing or painting. He could happily sit forever with his paints or pens, conjuring vivid pictures of rivers, snakes or mountaintops. I, though, could never get the brush to do what I wanted it to. In the end I would screw up the piece of paper I'd been working on and throw it into the bin, while his would go on to be proudly displayed on the fridge or the wall. Three of his best pictures I remember well: one of poisonous tree-frogs resplendent in shocks of sharp colour; another of a blazing forest fire spreading furiously between the trees; and a third of skies brimming with dark clouds, each one heavy with the threat of storm. In Renaissance paintings and frescoes Saint Luke himself is frequently depicted as an artist, Christian tradition suggesting he was the first person to create an image of the Virgin and her blessed son. Countless pictures show him leaning eagerly forward, brush in hand, dabbing on the first tentative strokes of his painting of the Madonna and Child, who are often shown in a burning vision before him. Are they real, he sometimes appears to be asking, or am I dreaming them? Perhaps the evangelist nurses the suspicion that by painting them onto canvas and by writing down their story, it is he himself who makes them real.

Luke's Gospel is the only one containing the parable of the Prodigal Son, with its two brothers, opposites in almost every way: one patient, calm, unremarkable, the other reckless, wild, prodigal. As you will know, it is the latter, the younger one, who runs away from his family and goes out into the world on his own. He is then seized by remorse and staggers back home, making his father so pleased that the old man has a fatted calf killed to celebrate. But families do not fare so well elsewhere in Luke's Gospel – for it is here that Jesus declares *If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his*

*own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple.* In the same chapter he goes further still, and says that anyone who would follow him must also give up all their possessions. To begin again, he appears to say, it is first necessary to cast off everything that has gone before. There can be no half measures. The Christ that appears in Luke's Gospel is neither serene nor gentle, not the meek and mild figure of stained-glass scenes and Sunday-school lessons. This is Christ the revolutionary, the figure who says explicitly in Matthew's Gospel that he has *come not to bring peace, but the sword*. This is a figure my brother would have got on with, for he too was stubborn, hard to read, and brooked little compromise. Luke's Jesus is a strange and complex character, and still after two thousand years we little understand him. Even the most fervent of evangelical Christians shy away from his command that those who would go with him give up everything that keeps them attached to the past, to their families, and to their very self. Luke's Jesus advocates a radical new way of living but it is one that, as in Buddhism, requires a complete break from the comforts and delusions of our former lives. If the message is alluring, then it is also terrifying.

Those few verses from Luke's gospel return to me as I make my way towards the back of the old Cathedral. There is little here to give me comfort, if only because all I can think of is that my brother himself had no time for religions or the religious. *Bible-bashers and God-botherers? Losers, bloody losers. Heaven? Give me a break. That's just 'cos their own lives are so fucking crappy.* Something, though, draws me deeper into the building. Maybe it is the stillness, the sense that nothing inside has changed for hundreds of years and that, even after several hundred more, everything inside will remain as it is at this moment – an image that serves as a calming counterpoint to the stained-glass images of crucifixion suspended above me.

I stop dawdling around the great classical organ and walk on, determined to get out. I pass the ornate choir stalls and remember being eleven or twelve and sitting up in those hallowed seats with the rest of the school choir during the carol service. My brother had mocked me mercilessly for joining the choir, and his teasing was made worse by the fact that I did not know how to respond, for there was no way I would have dared try to articulate that feeling of becoming lost within a song, or how the simplest piece of music might make you forget yourself and believe, if only for a few minutes, that you are someone else entirely. The choirmaster told us that angels communicate with God through music alone. Perhaps people do too.

During the carol service the freezing winter breeze swirled through the Cathedral and toyed with the tall candles. I sat shivering through the sermon. Then, when we were finally given the signal to rise and sing, I felt a number of wooden grooves rubbing against my shins. As soon as we sat again at the end of the carol, I reached down and ran my fingers across the area beneath my seat. After that I couldn't resist bending down to look, and that was how I discovered some of the Cathedral's fabled fourteenth-century misericords – small carved ledges hidden at leg height to provide comfort and support in the days when believers would remain standing for many hours at a time. Each one was carefully decorated. For some unexplained reason, the subject matter of these intricate wooden carvings is almost exclusively pagan. Close inspection revealed that in the place of martyred saints, or the likeness of some zealous local patron, was a series of strange carnival grotesques. One depicted a hunched man with the hind-quarters of an ox and cloven hooves where his feet should have been. Another showed a close-up of a bearded old man, his face being licked by the long tongues of a two-headed serpent. Yet another depicted a naked jester dancing with an ape.

When the next reading finished and the time came to rise to our feet again and begin the next carol, I had such a hard time keeping my mind trained on the words we were supposed to be singing that, in the end, I found myself moving my lips silently, like a carp begging to be fed. I could not get the curious images of the misericords from my head. What on earth they were doing there, those little impish secrets concealed just out of sight? Were they intended as jokes or as mystical symbols?

Making my way under the high arches and round the corner at the eastern end, I finally come across the part of the building I have been searching for all this time. Here, in the middle of the pathway, a number of the stone slabs have been prised away to reveal the remains of a Roman mosaic lying under the Cathedral floor. Now, more than ever, I need to confirm for myself that a little piece of a forgotten world has survived, lying dormant for thousands of years beneath the newer layers of brick and stone. I lean over, looking down through the glass panel at the fragments of tiny hand-painted tiles scattered among the foundations, confirmation that something of the past always lives on beneath, below, within. The tiles fit together in a weave of light greens and faded blues – an ancient jigsaw with half the pieces lost. It has only recently been discovered, and was probably all that was left of a decorated pavement that passed through the Roman town of Noviomagus Reginorum, an important settlement founded shortly after the invasion of Britain in AD 43. The town grew quickly and, many centuries before it was renamed Chichester, held large markets, a small amphitheatre, public baths and a temple dedicated to Neptune and Minerva. New stones grew when old ones fell. The temples have collapsed and much of the old city walls have long since crumbled, but somehow this colourful mosaic escaped ruin, even when a whole cathedral was built upon it. In fact, that is precisely what preserved the mosaic. Could those first bishops and builders, come to banish the

ancient pagan deities, have known that by setting the first stones in place they were sheltering this patchwork pavement from rain, snow, hail, the thick sea air and the scuff of horseshoes and carriage-wheels?

This is exactly what I have been looking for though I had not known it: evidence, proof, witness that something always endures. I am aware that this particular piece of evidence, the mosaic, is little more than a few small knuckles of half-faded stone, but nonetheless I feel as though it has been waiting for me and for me alone. I stare for a long time at the glass-sealed pavement several feet below, thinking of all the boots, makeshift shoes, sandals, bare and calloused feet, hooves and paws that must have once made their way across it, on their way to the busy market or else perhaps to plea for favours from the great goddess of wisdom and the capricious god of the sea. I am reminded also of all those soldiers and settlers come far from their homes to this island of rain and drizzle that Roman historians were quick to describe as inhospitable, a cold and savage province peopled by the most cunning and barbarous of tribes.

I can hear the rustle of feet as clearly as my own heartbeat. But how can we tell what might actually survive and what vanish? The mosaic has no answers – and neither do the misericords, the stained glass, the crucifixes, or the stone knights in their sarcophagi as I pass them on my way back down the aisle and through the vaulted nave towards the door. And as I walk it comes to me that the strange, unending conversation between the living and the dead is slow and halting, and that there is no way of knowing when a voice will reach out from the darkness and remind you suddenly of a life once lived, but not yet given up.

## 12. *The Red-Headed League*

*The mind is like an attic, it can only hold a certain amount of knowledge.* So says Sherlock Holmes to a new friend some weeks after they first begin sharing lodgings. *There must come a time, he adds, that for every new thing we learn we forget something that we once knew.* If the same is true of memory, that for every day lived some other day from many years ago is taken from us, then there is nothing we can do to stop the past from being edged out.

As soon as Holmes learns that the earth revolves around the sun, he remarks that he will endeavour to forget this fact, it being of no use to him at all and would serve only to take up unnecessary room within the impeccably organised attic of his mind. Yet we are usually not given a choice of what we keep and what we forget and, with the exception of the most startling and unique experiences which imprint themselves forever upon the underside of the eye, any event we bear witness to might at any time be lost. After the funeral I often hear my parents speaking of something my brother and I did together as children – a story we had written, a fantastically complex game we had invented – only to find that I cannot locate it in my own cluttered attic.

Doctor Watson is aghast that Holmes can have gone through life ignorant of such basic knowledge as the relative positions of the earth and sun. Watson makes a point of enumerating his new acquaintance's abilities and limitations: on the one hand, a profound knowledge of chemistry and previous criminal cases, as well as great skill at boxing, fencing and playing the violin; on the other hand, a curiously limited and particular comprehension of geology and botany, and a complete absence of any awareness or understanding of astronomy, politics, literature or philosophy. Perhaps

that is enough for anyone, for it sometimes feels that though today we have a world of learning at our fingertips, we still spend half our lives scrabbling around in darkness, unsure how far our knowledge might take us or indeed whether, at the moments in which we are unexpectedly tested, it will prove to be any use at all.

These are some of my brother's abilities and limitations as they come to me: highly skilled steel erector and builder; basic knowledge of carpentry and construction; expert at overcoming small disappointments; adept at falling asleep in any place, and at any time; near professional expertise as a hockey player and weight-trainer; mischievous and fiendish sense of humour; inability to control his temper; intense fear of anything that might be perceived as in any way intellectual. How might he describe me, you may wonder. Well, I think it might be best to pass over that. The more pressing question is how would he have defined himself? How would he have wanted to be remembered? I do not know, for he rarely spoke of serious things and often, when conversations turned serious, he would say that he believed the earth was as flat as a pancake, that human beings were descended not from apes but from reptiles, and that the world would end a week on Tuesday. I was never sure which he enjoyed more: making those who knew him laugh or shocking people not used to his jokes. But laughter is not the same when it echoes back after many years; like the timber of old boats it is warped, discoloured, and tinged with sadness.

Back in my bedroom, several days after my trip to Chichester, I am absent-mindedly rooting through my chest of drawers in search of some remnant of our shared past, when I come across a copy of *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*. It is missing its back cover and many of the pages are badly wrinkled, but otherwise it is remarkably well preserved. I cannot resist turning the crinkled pages until I find the story of 'The Red-headed League', and soon I am absorbed. My brother's red hair has

always been a source of fascination. Everyone else in our family all have the same mousy brown hair as me – parents and grandparents, distant uncles and aunts, cousins many times removed. Yet his hair was not the light strawberry-blond that often goes with pale skin, nor the brighter orange associated with the Celts, but a deep and fiery red closer to flame than gold. I never once heard him called ginger or carrot-top, and though this was probably in part because he would have been quick to attack anyone foolish enough to have dared it must also have been because his hair defied such descriptions. Luke was marked out from birth as feral, wild, strange – an exotic bird with bristling plumage.

Red hair is caused by a simple gene variant and is, furthermore, a recessive characteristic which accounts for the fact that it may appear in children whose parents are not themselves redheaded. It is a sleeping trait, rarely awakened. The same is also true of the genetic mutation that helped his heart swell up to its final monstrous size. This too had slept through many previous generations, as though biding its time. I cannot stop myself wondering why both these sleepers woke in him alone.

The physicians of the middle ages, following Greek and Roman philosophy, believed that the human body was principally composed of four humours, namely black bile, yellow bile, phlegm and blood, and that good health depended upon a natural balance of these. Those with too much black bile, for instance, would be melancholic, prone to depression and inertia, while those possessing an excess of yellow bile were thought to be headstrong and ruled by their passions. People with red hair were, perhaps naturally enough, thought to have too much blood and were therefore characterised as having a sanguine temperament. They were said to be spontaneous, impulsive and unpredictable, and it is true that my brother was all of those things and wild and tempestuous too. What is more, he frequently played up to



the idea that there was a devil within him, and he revelled in hiding my favourite toys in impossible-to-reach places, and scribbling over the pages of the books I treasured most, grinning maniacally all the while. And I would scream, scream with rage.

My brother's own rages were legendary and cacophonous. As a young child he was liable to stamp his feet repeatedly or throw himself violently around the house while screaming at the tops of his lungs until eventually, having exhausted all his energies, he would collapse upon a nearby sofa and fall instantly asleep. His whims were equally extreme. At ten years old he persuaded my parents to buy him a whole set of fishing equipment – tackle, rod, lure, floats, knives, boxes for bait; for weeks he had gone on about taking up fishing. He then carried his new kit down to the river Arun and spent the day getting more and more angry at the fish swimming past his line until he was shrieking at the river and attempting to pummel the water with his fists. He returned empty-handed, packed the equipment away, and never talked of fishing again. Another time he decided that he wanted to be a photographer when he grew older. He saved up for the most expensive camera he could find, which he wore round his neck for a few weeks as he crept around the garden looking for wild and exotic creatures to photograph. After his first reel was developed – a collection of blurry tree trunks and patches of grass – he put the camera back in its box and stashed it at the bottom of his wardrobe. Perhaps he somehow knew that his life would be short and thus felt the need to cram in as many lifetimes as he could. Perhaps once he had lived a day as an artist, a fisherman or a photographer, he felt his restless inner clock telling him to move on and become something else while he still had the chance.

In 'The Red-Headed League', Sherlock Holmes reminds Watson that, as a rule, the more bizarre a thing is, the less mysterious it proves to be. It is only the commonplace that is puzzling. *My life*, he declares, *is spent in one long effort to*

*escape from the commonplaces of existence.* There is, of course, nothing more commonplace than death, and nothing harder for the mind to fathom. I cannot help but think that in many ways my brother's death is akin to those closed-room mysteries in which the detective is faced with a seemingly unsolvable problem, such as a dead body found in a room that has been locked from the inside. Perhaps it was Luke himself who locked the door. There is certainly no visible reason why, on a sunny afternoon at the end of June, just a few months after his twenty-fourth birthday, he should suddenly have collapsed, never to wake again.

Holmes turned to his hobbies to help him focus on the problem in hand, and in the adventure of the Red-Headed League, set during the dull autumn of 1890, he suggests a little music, noting that this stimulates the mind better even than cocaine. I do not, though, see how a spot of violin could possibly help me work out why my brother is so suddenly gone. Indeed, he hated the violin with a passion and would no doubt have been deeply aggravated if exposed to Sherlock Holmes' violin playing – even Doctor Watson at first suggests that his friend's impromptu solos are somewhat exasperating. In later years, however, Watson is soothed to sleep by the low, dreamy, melodious sound of the great detective improvising upon his Stradivarius. And there, over there, even as the sound of a sonata for a single violin spills from an open window, I see my brother. He is leaning against a lamppost. On Baker Street.

His head is shaven, his mouth restless with chewing gum, his shoulders slung back and arms swung low, his skin-tight T-shirt straining against his chest and a chunky silver chain jangling around his wrist. He is the object of curious glances from men with mutton chops, frockcoats and fob watches as they saunter down the street. Not one to take such attention lightly, he gives them back his best *What-the-fuck-do-you-think-you're-looking-at?* face. He is propped against the tall black jut of a

streetlight, fiddling impatiently with his mobile then glancing up when the heavy clomp and smack of horseshoes on cobblestones announce a hansom cab heading down the street, the driver's red face and greying whiskers visible beneath his cloth cap as he tugs on the reins and rounds the corner. My brother at first undoubtedly feigns a lack of interest, as he always did when faced with something he did not understand, and does his best to turn his gaze back to his phone, while the Baker Street Irregulars mull slowly by.

What would it have taken to finally stir him from flicking through his text messages? The thick pea-soup fog curdling upon the street? The pale and ragged children shivering in vacant doorways? The ladies in crinolines, flat bodices and hour glass bustles? Or, would it have been the sounds – sounds such as the cries of the match-selling beggars and cripples asking for Christian charity, the cat-calls and haggling rising from the busy markets, the regular din of competing church bells, the clatter and racket of cabs and carriages, and the barrow boys at street stalls hollering out their prices?

No, none of these. Whenever my brother went to an unfamiliar place, the first thing he would remark upon was the smell. He would always be the first to pick out and comment on the musty smell that lingers in the houses of the elderly, the scent of damp that always hung about the inside of our family tent, or the tang of chlorine that he identified as it wafted through the air whenever we drew near the local swimming pool. It is likely, then, that within seconds he is clamping both hands over his nose, unable to believe the stink of the nineteenth-century: the sickly reek of the thick and choking fog, the overpowering odour of the bubbling sewers and, more powerful still, the foul stench of the Thames – the murky waters overflowing with animal carcasses, dead strays and rotting human corpses. I can see him stooping suddenly as his

stomach heaves, his text-messages now completely forgotten – he is, he senses, not where he should be. And so he starts moving, hurrying down the road, ignoring the dour-faced gentlemen and cockney street-sweepers in his way. He had only been to the capital a couple of times in his life but as he studies the successive street signs (Baker Street, Regents Street, Marylebone) he no doubt recalls the names from school holidays when we would spend long evenings squabbling over the Monopoly board. He soon begins to nod his head, a little of his confidence restored, and whispers to himself as he increases his pace. *No problem, I've got this down.*

I press my eyes closed and cling on to this daydream, following my brother for as long as I can. I must not let it go, no matter how absurd the picture. He begins to revel in the shocked stares and gasps he gets from men and women upon their errands. It is the kind of attention he delights in, and his movements become more and more theatrical as he notices people stealing glances at his skinny blue jeans, his great silver belt buckle the size of a cigarillo case, and his shiny white trainers gradually being darkened by the street's endless dust and slop.

My brother plays up to the looks he is getting: thrusting his face close to those of the people closest to him, gurning, grimacing or flapping his tongue out like a thirsty dog and then reeling with laughter at the shocked expressions he manages to elicit, or else engaging those who do not turn away in mean-eyed staring competitions. I can picture my brother's exuberance at his sudden celebrity brimming over, and before long he is cocking his fingers into a makeshift pistol and pretending to take aim, then spinning on his heels, twisting his legs and loping off into all manner of silly walks, all the while chewing away on his stick of gum.

The longer I focus upon the scene, the more real it becomes. There is, it seems, something within me that is desperate to believe that he might just be alive

*somewhere*, if not in heaven then in some equally distant and unknown place. And why not in the world of Sherlock Holmes, a world in which a man might topple down a cliff and later return to his Baker Street rooms unscathed.

Yet as hard as I try, I cannot hold onto him – restless as ever, now bored of showing off to the gathered crowd, he marches down the street until all trace of him is lost amid the thick pea-souper. I try to console myself by returning to the book propped open on my lap. However, I soon realise that I will have to turn back to the beginning of the story; on my last attempt at following the narrative I was unable to keep my mind from straying far from the words on the page. This is not in the least bit surprising, for since the funeral I have found it difficult to concentrate and have trouble keeping my attention focused on even the most basic of conversations without my thoughts drifting away, following not some placid stream of consciousness but a fierce river whose current I cannot fight. In the first days of shock and numbness after Luke's death, I assumed that as the weeks went by we would slowly be furnished with answers to all the questions that plagued us about what had happened. Yet none are forthcoming, and so I have begun to give myself over to the idea that much of it will remain always a tangle of guesswork and conjecture.

Of all the mysteries the renowned detective was called upon to solve, that of the Red-Headed League is perhaps the strangest, for at first it appears that no crime has been committed. There is no corpse found in strange and remarkable circumstances, no jewel or private fortune suddenly gone missing, no hints of violence or sinister threats, no dark secret about to be exposed and no warring family; nothing, in fact, that would trouble the police. There is only a stout old man – according to Dr Watson, *an average British tradesman, obese, pompous, and slow*. He is dressed in a drab black frock-coat which does not quite cover the Chinese fish-scale tattoo above

his right wrist, and carrying a frayed top hat that he often wore to conceal his fiery red hair.

This portly gentleman begins by telling the detective that he owns a small pawnbroker's business in Coburg Square. He then produces a copy of *The Morning Chronicle* dated April 27, 1890, which is quite a feat considering that this London newspaper ceased circulation close to thirty years before, in 1862. I am struck by this discrepancy, perhaps because I have always been convinced that the fictional world and the real world are bound together by laws we little understand. It is certain that they overlap more frequently than we imagine, and a great number of people seem to cross over from one to the other.

The obese visitor, soon introduced as Mr Jabez Wilson, opens his newspaper to show Holmes and Watson an advertisement announcing that a vacancy has opened up in The Red-Headed League. It states that any red-headed man wishing to apply should arrive promptly at the League's offices in Fleet Street on the following Monday. Mr Wilson goes on to recount that, encouraged by his assistant at the pawnshop and the thought of the salary he would receive if accepted into the League, he made his way to the address specified in the advertisement.

He was not alone. Indeed, he says it appeared that every man with even the faintest hint of red in his hair had decided to try his luck, for he spotted men with copper hair, men with orange hair, men with hair the colour of the sun just as it touches the treetops in the evening, and a hundred other shades besides. However, it soon became clear that few of them possessed the rich and vivid flame-touched tint that both Mr Wilson and my brother shared. And just as my brother was marked out as different from the crowd by his strange and wild hair, so too was Mr Wilson. Most of the applicants were turned away by the League's clerk with a few curt words, but Mr

Jabez Wilson was accepted almost instantaneously. He was then told to report to the Red-Headed League's offices again the next morning where, for four pounds a week, he was asked to do precisely the rote work that so enraged my brother at school – Mr Wilson was asked to copy out, page for page with quill-pen and ink, the entire Encyclopaedia Britannica.

My brother had been set apart from the rest of us since birth. His appearance hinted at some Celtic heritage that had been lost to everyone else in the family, as though he was somehow intimately bound to those fierce and courageous ancient tribes. As a child he saved his pocket money for bangers and firecrackers, as though even then he understood all this: if everyone around him was determined to force him into the stereotypical role of the flame-haired wild thing then he may as well play up to it. He certainly appeared to relish the fact that he was different. I remember that at a young age he would tell us, without even a hint of a smile, that he was not one of us; and on those nights when he would set up his tent in the garden and insist that he was going to sleep outside and forage and hunt for his survival it seemed possible that he had indeed arrived from some distant and half-remembered Celtic isle.

At other times his blazing hair appeared to be the outward manifestation of that inner fury which he so often had trouble bringing under control. It was easy to see when he was overcome with anger – his movements would become twitchy and his face begin to turn as red as his hair. In my teenage years I became adept at picking up on such signals so that I could time the last word in any argument perfectly before sprinting to my room, slamming the door closed and turning the lock just in time to leave him banging and cursing on the other side. There was no closed room mystery here: we were trapped, of our own volition, on opposite sides of the locked door. There were, of course, a number of occasions when I misjudged both his mood and

my own ability to escape in time. I was often left with bruises to show for my miscalculation.

Yet despite the fact that he had amassed a large collection of weapons including, somehow, a police taser, his fury was most often turned upon himself. Even if he had been working on a painting for the last two hours, should he get enraged he would tear it into tiny pieces without a second thought. Indeed, his most prized possessions might be flung across the room or smashed mercilessly against a wall until only broken shards of metal or plastic remained. Even after he had destroyed the toys or gifts he had spent months saving for, he was careful not to display any regret or remorse.

This rage started as childish tantrums that could not be quelled, and grew over the years into the most terrifying and savage transformations. But what was its source? Did he feel infuriated that those things that came so easily to others were closed off to him? Did he feel that he was set apart, that life was not how it was supposed to be? I had little idea back then, and I have less now. I only know that his rages began to decrease in both frequency and intensity around the same time that his hair turned brown. In 'The Red-Headed League' Mr Jabez Wilson tells Sherlock Holmes that he came to the League's offices in Fleet Street every day for eight weeks and painstakingly copied out the pages of the Encyclopaedia Britannica, but then one morning was flabbergasted to find the door locked and the men he had been working for disappeared – leaving only a notice saying that the Red-Headed League was dissolved forthwith. In much the same way, we were all astonished when Luke's hair suddenly changed colour.

The initial change was easily explained: in his late teenage years, he bought a bottle of black hair dye and applied it, in secret, whilst locked in the bathroom one



evening. He was so pleased with his strange new look, his hair as jet black as a handful of crow feathers, that he retouched his hair again and again every couple of weeks until the bottle was empty. That, though, was the last time he bought any kind of dye. When his new roots grew they were, to everyone's surprise, the same shade of tawny brown as my hair. After a couple of haircuts, the last remnants of the dye were gone, and for the rest of his life his hair stayed the same colour as mine. And his rages, they began to cool.

The dramatic alteration in appearance and temperament, the sudden shutting down of Luke's very own one-member Red-Headed League is a mystery suited to the annals of Sherlock Holmes. And that must be why my brother is still striding down Baker Street past hansom cabs, dandies and dilettantes. He is off to 221B to have all his questions answered.

### 13. *The History of Crocodiles*

Before Mum and Dad are up I have left the house. In the early hours of open roads it does not take me much more than an hour to reach the farm. We never thought to call it by its full name. 'The farm' says it all. This is the rundown corner of East Sussex where Mum grew up. I park beside the shop. The roof is battered and rusty, the white paintwork faded, and the front windows cloudy with dust and cobwebs. Lined outside the door are several bags of compost, one of the few things now sold here, and which my grandfather still loads into the boot of his car before delivering each week to neighbouring farms and allotments. Tucked in amidst the sagging plastic is an I.O.U. scrawled on a torn piece of notepaper.

My grandfather must have seen the car from the window, as he is now waiting for me at the door. He does not ask why I have come. Nor does he remark on how early it is. He gestures for me to come inside. In the days when my brother and I had chased each other around our grandparent's ramshackle farm, the shop was usually filled with locals looking over the many boxes of fresh mushrooms or else picking up punnets of strawberries and potted plants. Now the room is filled with countless empty polystyrene boxes stacked haphazardly against the walls.

My grandfather's office is the tiniest of cubbyholes harbouring a wooden chair, a small safe, a calculator, a pad of post-it notes and a whole heap of inkless biros. He hands me a cardboard box full of old paperbacks he has found in one of the packing sheds. *Have a look. See if there's anything that takes your fancy.* It is impossible to say how long the paperbacks might have been hidden away back there, though a few at the top of the pile have clearly been shrivelled and curled by years of damp. It always amazes me that, though most of my grandfather's sheds and

greenhouses fell into disuse a long time ago, he is forever rediscovering all manner of things. Boxes left in one shed might vanish and be given up for lost only to turn up a decade later in another of the outhouses, under an upturned lawnmower, or a reel of fencing. When I was young the back half of the farm had seemed a strange and mythical place where time did not operate as it did elsewhere, and my brother and I often used to imagine that each shed might provide a gateway to another age – one long in the past or far off in the future. My grandfather's latest finding brings my childhood imagining back to me.

*Is it alright if I take a look around?* My grandfather nods. *Of course. Looking for anything in particular?* I hover in the doorway. *I'm not sure.* I leave him to his accounts, turning from the tiny office towards the storeroom at the back of the building. I make my way through a maze of broken crates and a heap of ancient newspapers. I open one at random and am disappointed to find that the headlines, local stories and little histories have all bled together into a dark and illegible blur. I look instinctively upward toward the roof, searching for the life-size papier-mâché crocodile that lived up there during my first visits to the farm. Yes, the crocodile. I remember it had lain upside-down upon the rafters, so that its beady eyes, battered snout and the scaly ridges massed upon its back had all been visible from below. It had originally been a lurid green, though years living among the spiderwebs and earwigs had turned it a mottled brown, the colour of long-stagnant water. I am still not sure how it came to be there, though I believe it was made by my uncle many years before my brother and I were born. It served as a focus for many of our games as either ferocious enemy or occasional ally, and we would often scare each other by pretending we could hear the low, thudding footsteps of the crocodile approaching, famished and enraged by years of hiding in the darkness, and eager to quench its

appetite. It has, though, long since been devoured by moths, a somewhat ignoble end for a creature whose ancestors had survived the mysterious extinction of the dinosaurs some sixty-five million years ago, not to mention the long ice age that followed. It was once said that crocodiles feed upon the moon and can live for well over a hundred years because, after all their time upon the earth, they alone have truly mastered stillness.

Not long after I started secondary school, I was sent to the office of one of the history teachers to discuss my inability to fit in and make friends with the other children. Unlike my brother, I was a fairly quiet and reserved child. Now he had gone, though, I wasn't quite sure who I was supposed to be. It was there that I saw, on the wall behind the teacher's desk, a picture of Churchill, and beneath the wartime leader's worn and heavy jowls his insistence that *An appeaser is one who feeds a crocodile, hoping it will eat him last*. At the time, I had little idea what an appeaser might be, though I remember being excited by this crocodile reference, which I took to be a secret sign meant only for me. In that strange and unsettling new place I wanted desperately to believe that my very own crocodile was safeguarding me.

It seemed natural to me that the two crocodiles – one living on the farm, the other a symbol of the merciless duplicity of fascism – should be bound together, for whenever I heard mention of the war, my first thought was always of my grandparents at the farm in East Sussex. My grandmother had told us many a story of her own father, long dead by the time my brother and I were born and, by all accounts, a selfish, stubborn and reckless man with a gift for making bad decisions. A family trait perhaps. The story that my grandmother told most often was of his time leading a platoon during the Second World War. After marching for many days through occupied Europe, he and his men were blistered, sunburnt and itching with sweat and

lice, their skin rubbed red and raw; and so, when they came to a river, my great-grandfather proposed a quick dip. No matter how many times I heard this story, I was always amazed that they did not consider what might happen next, for had they been watching those events played out in a film at the cinema the same men would surely have been shouting at the screen in disbelief. Nonetheless, the men stripped down and descended into the waters, leaving all their kit, uniforms and weapons safe upon the shore. In due course the inevitable happens – enemy forces, an Italian infantry division, to be precise, comes passing by and my great-grandfather and his men are duly captured. The whole platoon was subsequently transported to a Prisoner of War camp, escaping only when it was closed following the Italian Armistice in September, 1943.

This story of disastrous decision-making does not end there, however, for after this escape my great-grandfather somehow managed to lead his men not due north to neutral Switzerland or even north-west through occupied France and so towards home; instead, through a colossal error of judgement, he took them north-east. My great-grandfather would brook no criticism – he was like my brother in this respect, for the voicing of any concerns only made my great-grandfather still more adamant that he was in the right. He was not, however – within less than two weeks they ran straight into the path of German troops. They had no choice but to surrender. He and his men had thus simply swapped one Prisoner of War camp for another.

When my great-grandfather finally returned home at the end of 1945, remarkably unscathed by his internment both in Mussolini's Italy and Hitler's Third Reich, he always maintained that even had he taken the men under his command in the opposite direction they would still have been caught. He firmly believed, you see, that he was cursed with bad luck and that his fate followed him wherever he went. He

was by no means bitter or angry about this, he had simply decided that while some people stride through life without facing any difficulties or hardships, he was destined to suffer only the worst luck possible. He compared this to being born with red hair, saying that he accepted his lot and there was, therefore, no point in trying to fight it.

My own grandfather was in many ways the exact opposite. He was a gentle and thoughtful man, the kind of man who does not choose to talk about the past. What good does it do? In those ragged years after the war he worked on a number of different farms before saving enough to buy the small plot of land I am walking around this morning, and where for the last forty years he has grown mushrooms in a line of dark sheds set alongside a meandering stream.

Outside the door at the back end of the shop is a large, rusty vat that has filled up with rain. I make my way around it and follow a small alley between several rows of breeze-block mushroom houses that remind me of a stretch of bunkers set out for some as-yet undefined emergency. A few feet across from them, the packing sheds are crammed with all manner of useless odds and ends. I am struck again by the same feeling of uncertainty and expectation that I used to feel when beginning a game of hide and seek. When it was my turn to be the seeker, I would stand beneath the crocodile and count to one hundred before bursting through the back door and starting down that alley, knowing that my brother might be holed up in any of the buildings before me, hidden amid the old gardening tools, rusty deckchairs, and stacks of cardboard boxes growing moss. Perhaps that boisterous child is still there, curled up behind an old tractor tyre or mouldy sofa, torn as ever between the urge to stay still and silent and so prolong the game and the equally strong craving to leap up suddenly and start screaming.

I carry on into the alley between the buildings. I start down the right-hand side of the line, pressing my hands against each of the mushroom bunkers in turn. Each one is padlocked and will not budge. They had always been impenetrable when we were young and, now that I think about it, I realise I have never seen the inside of a single one of those whitewashed buildings.

We were told they were filled with mushrooms and we accepted this as the truth without ever asking for proof or verification. However, our grandfather could have told us that he was growing miniature orang-utans and baboons in there and we probably would have believed him, for he spoke with such casual authority. Besides, as little children we took it for granted that adults would never lie to us.

I push against each padlocked door in turn, hoping that one of them might open just a crack to let me catch a glimpse of whatever is kept inside. None of them will yield. The reason we were given for these always being kept locked was that mushrooms grow only in pitch black, taking root from shadow. This, by the way, is almost precisely what some of the early church fathers said of the soul: that it is added mysteriously in the darkness of the womb. Perhaps that might explain why so many children are afraid of the dark. I picture a child locked inside one of those sheds, and feel a shudder drip down every knot of my spine. I pound against the heavy door with my fists, rapping out our secret code – three knocks, pause, then two, pause, then another three. Then I press my ear hard up against it, but all I can hear is my heart pounding out its own secret code.

I turn quickly from the bunkers and hurry over to the sheds on the opposite side. I am jogging now, certain that time is running out, though where it is going I cannot say. I explore shed after shed, pushing through the thick cobwebs that hang down from every corner. I find old bags of fertiliser, wooden boxes, coils of hose, an

assortment of troughs, spare parts for the cement mixer, wobbly chairs chewed by woodworm, a few flat tyres and an endless supply of polystyrene crates. I grow more frantic with each new shed I enter. I am soon in a mad rush, shoving aside great piles of bubble-wrap and knots of plugs and wires. I rifle through old boxes, splintering cupboards and chests of drawers, nudging aside with my shoes any bags or cartons I do not dare disturb for fear of the insects or reptiles I might find making their homes within.

I find nothing. I leave the final shed and turn out of the alley toward the small stream that marks the end of the farm. I am out of breath, and need to sit down. Beside the slow trickle of water stand the bones of a tractor, its frame turned a turgid brown where the bright orange paint has curled clean from the rusty skeleton. Tyres, seat and gearbox have all been stripped away, and the rest has been put out to pasture beneath a few stunted apple trees. The tractor is so frail that it is hard to believe it can still stand unaided. It puts me in mind of those reconstructions of dinosaurs that fill the main halls of museums of natural history, their giant bones suspended by the finest threads of translucent string. My brother and I climbed on it many times, appropriating it as a getaway vehicle or makeshift time machine, but I have no doubt that if I even brush it with my fingers now it will collapse to a heap of dust. That we had never seen it move did not bother us, for like everything else there we felt it belonged more to our fantasy world of make-believe than to the real world that existed beyond the farm's borders. Like many of the curios we came across in the packing sheds, its own history had finished long ago and it served to remind us that things had been different before we were born, and would be different too when we grew older.

There is nothing for it. I have to go back. I turn and start towards the shop and my grandfather. I have kept him waiting long enough, and know there is no way I will



be able to explain to him what I have been looking for. At first I am disappointed that my ramble around the farm has yielded so little – no hidden secrets, no hints, no crocodiles; but soon I start to feel oddly upbeat. I am actually relieved that so many of the doors are locked, for had I been able to look inside and then found nothing I would have felt crushed. This way I can at least hold on to the possibility, however slim, that within the crumbling buildings there is something of vital importance. Something.

#### 14. *Gods of Luck and Chance*

I take the car and zigzag east along slim, tree-lined roads for some time before driving across the invisible and arbitrary border that separates the counties. It is not long before I have joined the slipstream of traffic moving steadily along the coast, following the rows of jagged cliffs that rise above the water for many miles looking like huge teeth sticking out from some ancient giant's jawbone. I am on that high, snaking road that I remember vividly from the days when my brother and I would be sitting in the backseats, arguing about whose tape would be played on the stereo or else asking again and again how long it would take until we got to wherever we were going.

Before long I turn from the dual carriageway onto the thinner road that leads to the sea, an almost unbroken line to Eastbourne, where my brother was born two decades before. I feel as though I am being drawn back – back to the ancient pier and promenade where as children we had walked almost every morning, back to the grey terrace where we once lived. The past has its own peculiar gravity.

I slow down to navigate the succession of roundabouts that make up the northern perimeter of the old seaside town, and as I drive I realise that part of me longs to believe in the idea that we are guided by spirits, angels or other supernatural forces who might transform the most random of coincidences into good fortune. I sometimes think that guardian angels were first dreamed into existence as shadows of those demons that are said to coax people toward one more mouthful, one more drink, one more night or one more wager, for both of them are the product of that urge to convince ourselves that we are not responsible for our lives – neither our successes, nor our failures and mistakes.

The wind has hushed to a low hiss by the time I reach the seafront. In the distance, thick grey clouds are being summoned up from the blurred line where sea meets sky. Since there is little point turning back now, I leave the car in a small car-park close to the beach. Here there is a deserted café comprised of a few plastic tables with faded technicolour carousels fluttering in the breeze. I decide to walk the rest of the way along the strand into the town. Yet as I set off I am guided by some shadow, some irrepressible force suddenly pushing and tugging me in directions I would not usually have considered. Indeed, for a few seconds it feels like my shadow and I have somehow switched places and that it, not me, is now leading the way down the street with myself tethered behind.

My shadow and I make our way west along the thin path that weaves along above the shingle, passing a number of ice cream vans and bathing huts while the frothy waves rage against the shore. It is not long before the path curves sharply inland and the long line of hotels and guesthouses come into view, their whitewashed façades rising imperiously over the beach, as though together they make up the outer walls of a great fortress designed to protect the land from the furious whims and impulses of the sea. Bay Lodge, Ivydene, East Beach, Sea View, Atlanta. Despite the discount signs in the windows and the new coats of paint, it looks as though many of them are unchanged since the time they first opened their doors to gentlefolk escaping the heat and noise of the city. That was back when the cool and invigorating sea air was thought to cure almost any ailment.

Some way ahead I can see the carefully-tended carpet gardens. Lined up before them stood lonely postcard stands set beside empty Punch and Judy kiosks and stalls selling plastic buckets and spades, wind-spinners, rubber rings, inflatable dinghies and tooth-chipping sticks of rock. All this familiar paraphernalia, however,

strikes me as somehow unreal, as though all the items on display outside the stalls are little more than props left behind by some travelling theatre company who had, one morning, departed in haste. Eastbourne is a town that has not quite managed to shake off the archaic connotations of the Edwardian seaside holiday, and my mind is soon filled with images of red-faced men wearing straw boaters and daring ladies dressed in cumbersome, knee-length bathing costumes. How is it possible that we are able to feel nostalgic for something that we ourselves have never experienced? I have no idea, but it is a feeling easily awakened by the sight of black and white postcards of dapper young men with rolled-up trousers standing awkwardly upon the sand.

It was close to two hundred years ago that the new railways first made it possible for the urban poor each summer to leave behind the cotton mill, factory or colliery and journey to the coast. The signs and posters on the shop-fronts and stalls dotted along the shore bear testament to a time when families would save for many months for their annual two- or three-day holiday at the seaside: donkey rides, penny arcades, deck chairs for hire, paper cones of freshly-picked cockles, pink candy floss, a fun fair with dodgems, the camera obscura at the end of the pier. Unable to afford the luxurious guest houses on the promenade, most of these families would have made their way through the maze of terraces to the bed and breakfasts peppered around the old playing parks. And it was here, in the backstreets, that my brother was born.

He was a winter baby, born on the 20th of January – a day of frosty winds and high, storm-harried tides. It was the dog-eared year of 1984, less than two months before the start of the Miners' Strike. He was a small, colicky baby, brought home to a small, draughty terrace whose windows thumped against their panes every time the wind stirred. The 20th of January is also the Eve of Saint Agnes, a night on which it was once believed that, if young, unmarried women carried out a series of arcane rites

before going to sleep, they would be visited by their future husbands in their dreams. These rites included not touching a drop of water or a crumb of food all day, then eating only a 'dumb cake' – a dense, salty loaf prepared in complete silence – before walking backwards across the house and up the stairs to bed. No doubt one of the reasons for the long popularity of this ancient tradition was that it played upon the way that time works differently in dreams.

As I walk on along the seafront towards the pier that can now be seen jutting out into the foamy water, I try to remember when I was last in Eastbourne. It must have been more than a decade before, perhaps even closer to two, and the last trip I can recall was when my brother and I had been taken by our grandfather to play in the penny slot machines on the pier and attempt to enlarge his already impressive collection of copper coins. The sickly smell emanating from the numerous deep-fat fryers being used to cook ring-doughnuts on the boardwalk hung about the arcade, and there was a dense red carpet that whispered beneath our feet as we wandered between the machines. On special occasions we would head out from the arcade toward the end of the pier, making our way past the poster shops, glassblowers, fish and chip outlets and tattoo parlours to take a ride on the clunky ghost train that stood beside the entrance to a nightclub. The door to the club was always padlocked shut when we passed by in the middle of the afternoon, and this made it more mysterious than the ghost train itself, especially after my brother hazarded a guess that locked inside were the demons and phantoms that had grown too dreadful to be let loose within the ride next door. It did not surprise me to learn, a few years later, that during the war that very same building, which served as a theatre long before it became a nightclub, had been emptied out and filled with machine guns, as a last bastion of resistance against

Hitler. His invasion of Britain was anticipated any night that unaccountable sounds were heard rolling in from the sea.

At the entrance to the pier, the sound of children fighting mixes with the shrill calls of the seagulls hovering in wait for a passerby to drop a chip or ice cream. Beneath these sharper sounds I can just about make out the whirring ebb and flow of a Wurlitzer organ, and the murmur of the water upon the shingle. I cannot bring myself to walk over onto the decking and down toward the bright and swirling lights of the arcade – my childhood outings to the pier had too often ended with me feeling cheated. I used to hold on to my share of the coins as tightly as I could, studying the machines carefully to try and work out how long a penny might take to fall to the first level, while also looking to see which of the miniature mountains of coins wavering on the ledge looked most precarious. Once I had made my choice, I would take out one coin at a time and attempt to feed it in at the optimum moment, praying that it would push as many other coppers as possible over the precipice below. Given the care with which I worked, it was all the more galling to see that though my brother took handfuls of coins out of his pot at a time and shoved them as quickly as he could into any slot within his reach, he was frequently rewarded with an avalanche of pennies. I could only conclude that he was somehow blessed, a judgement that now appears ridiculous, not least because looking back upon his life the one constant appears to be his perpetual battle against that strange thing we call luck.

I stand on the shore for some time, watching people come and go onto the pier as the sky slowly turns grey overhead. I rub my eyes, and when I open them again I can see my brother wandering past, right in front of me, as if he too has just come from the pier, especially since he seems to be clutching his winnings under one arm. I blink once, twice, and he is gone, though I cannot forget the look on his face. He

wears a self-satisfied grin that he does not bother to hide, while his eyes are dancing with mischief – the same expression he pulled every time he won at bowling, crazy-golf or tennis, determined always to milk his hard-won success to the full. On those occasions he would be almost unable to contain himself, glowing with boastful pride and braying that it was not luck at all that had helped him but skill alone. And yet each one of us knew, but did not dare say to his face, that the opposite was true; for, aside from the skills he later developed at hockey, he was incomparably clumsy and cack-handed at every game he tried. He was always too rash and impatient to master the basics of any new sport, and was easily goaded into a blind fury that only made him still more inept. It was as though his clumsiness was a kind of curse.

Perhaps because his victories occurred so infrequently, no one ever interrupted his bragging, and so for a few minutes he would strut around, recounting in epic detail every one of the moves that had led to his triumph, as though performing to a vast invisible audience. He had the worst short-term memory of anyone I knew – taking off his shoes and then spending hours searching for them, or later in life getting in the car and, halfway through the journey, finding himself unable to recall where he was supposed to be heading; nevertheless he could recount perfectly every single one of the times he had beaten me at any game, from table tennis through to monopoly. It was as if his mind wilfully discarded everything except those rare occasions when he was touched by luck and the world was suddenly more welcoming, his dreams briefly within his reach.

Since luck seemed to him so vital and yet so fleeting, he did all he could to recreate those circumstances when he had felt its touch. If he had once won a game of tennis while wearing a black headband, he would then put on the same headband every time he played. Indeed, he amassed a whole army of talismans, small items that

he had invested with meaning in an attempt to ensure that good fortune did not desert him: lucky penny, lucky socks, lucky teddy bear, lucky this, lucky that, lucky anything. And just in case this was not enough, whenever we started a new game he would set out a long list of detailed specifications about not being watched while he was playing, or the order in which we all had to take our turns. There was, it seems, always a lucky way of doing things. And unlucky, of course.

I, though, decide to forego any plan or procedure, and make my way deeper into the town without any particular design – save the hope that I will find the place where we used to live. I take a deep breath, stand up from the bench and turn away from the rickety old pier. Whitewashed guesthouses and haughty old hotels loom up in front of me. I have absolutely no idea which direction I should head in, though figure that as long as I keep the sea behind me I ought to be all right.

I follow a zebra-crossing over the road and away from the beach, my pulse quickening at the thought that I might find our old house. Even though we had only lived there for two or three years when I was small, I hope that the same strange intuition that has taken me this far might somehow lead me back. I have a sense of it in my head: a cramped terrace where my dad kept his bike in the front hall in order to ride to work each morning; where you had to wiggle the television aerial for hours to pick up a signal; where the yellowing carpets matched the yellowing wallpapers; and where a bus stop could be seen from the front window so that we might run out just in the nick of time to get a lift into town.

I pass behind one of the larger guesthouses onto a narrow street that appears to be made up almost exclusively of chip shops, cramped and dimly-lit pubs, betting-shops, small arcades, bingo clubs and pool halls. From the outside the few people I can see within look uniformly bored and restless. After a few hundred yards I turn a



corner and soon find myself on a wider road where most of the houses are flanked with tall and weathered hedges, behind which almost nothing is visible. Though I have little idea where I am in relation to our old home, I do my best to focus only on the path ahead and not the doubt slowly eroding my faith in the possibility of finding the house where we had shared our very first midnight picnic.

Over the rooftops ahead of me I can see the thickly-wooded hills that for centuries have looked down upon Eastbourne. Dark clouds hover precariously over the range, though for now it looks as if they are hesitant to cross the invisible border that separates the town and the surrounding countryside. I push on, suddenly reminded of the ancient rituals that rural families in this area once performed to make sure they would be blessed with good fortune for the coming year. When my grandfather was a child, there were still large groups of men who went wassailing around the time of Old Twelfth Day, a celebration which happens to fall only two nights before my brother's birthday. In Sussex this tradition was more often referred to as 'Howling'. The howling boys, making their way between the many local farms and orchards, would often ask for sixpence in return for ensuring a good crop would grow in the coming season. Their leader would usually be dressed in an outlandish costume comprised of many mismatched and multi-coloured patches sewn together into a large and loose-hanging cloak, topped off with a large hat bearing the image of a rosy-red apple. The villagers who followed him often carried with them makeshift instruments, such as cow's horns and lengths of gas piping, on which they would blow to announce their approach and frighten away any and every evil spirit.

Once the group had formed a circle around the largest or the oldest apple tree, they would begin to beat it with sticks, after which they would pour a little ale onto its roots to placate the gods who watched over fruit trees. Next they would join together

in a song to instruct the roots to stand fast, the top to hold well and every twig and bough to bear the best of apples. Finally the leader would give the command to raise the horns and to holler, which they did raucously for many minutes to complete the howling ceremony. If they were not given a few small coins for their troubles, the howling boys might be invited into the farmer's kitchen and offered mugs of cider and biscuits in recompense, after which they would journey on to the next farm in the village. In some areas, gangs of wassailers would even fire guns at the trees to wake them from their slumber, and in others they put pieces of hot toast in the branches. The one constant in each ceremony was the underlying belief that the earth offers us the chance to start again. Wandering half-lost through the backstreets of Eastbourne, I am a howling boy.

I walk on down another road of high-backed houses, making my way further from the beach and so drawing closer and closer to the hills rising up in front of me, all the while searching still for that small terraced house. Though I try to call back recollections of our time there, I find my memory of the few short years we stayed in Eastbourne shadowy and full of blanks. Whenever I try to conjure up the day my brother was brought home from the hospital and entered my life for the first time, a picture appears in my mind of the tiny, wrinkled child being carried through the door. He is not dressed in baby-grows and warm blankets to ward off the last of the winter chill but wrapped instead in old sheets of newspaper, just like the greasy portions of fish and chips for sale upon the pier and all along the seafront. This howling boy was different.

The sky is, by now, almost completely dark, with the silhouettes of the trees at the very top of the hills ahead hoarding what little is left of the light. I pull my jacket tight against the wind. On any other day I might take the worsening weather as a sign

that I am being warned off, that the gathering clouds are cautioning me to return to the car and leave the past unstirred. But I keep on walking, determined to prove, both to myself and, indeed, to my brother, that our Eastbourne, the Eastbourne of our childhood, has not been lost.

I wander past endless terraces, all the while clinging onto a memory of the small bedroom where my parents first set down that little alien, still blotchy and red with creases. I remember that this howling boy had screamed, without pause or respite, every night for the first month of his life. At first I found it frightening and upsetting that my own mum and dad could have brought something so wild and untamed into our house, and when the savage began to cry I did my best to stay as far away as I could. However, I could not temper my curiosity and would sometimes creep in to peer at the alien between the wooden bars of his crib. Yet when I finally grew bold enough to reach out to him, I discovered that if I placed my hand on his round, wheezing stomach, the tears would suddenly stop and the tiny blue eyes would blink open and stare at me as though it was I who had suddenly appeared from some distant planet. For a time I felt as if with this simple touch I had acquired some kind of magic power.

The shore is far behind me now, but the smell of it still carries through the streets and hangs about the alleys leading down between the houses. I study each building in turn, but I can find none that jog my memory. Instead, the more I think about our time in Eastbourne the more confused I become, for the fragments that remain of the two or three years we spent there are without order or sense. Time seemed to flow in fits and starts back then – indeed, some days we would go into the garden in the morning only to look up the next moment and find the sun sinking behind the house. When we were four or five, I remember my brother frequently

warning me not to even peek at the wooden clock in the kitchen in case we would suddenly find it was dinnertime and we would have to give up our game. He believed that if we did not look at it then it would not dare move ahead to that dreaded hour. Even when we took felt-tips and drew watches on our wrists we made sure that the hands were always set to nine or ten in the morning so that the day would not be able to rush away and escape us. Time was unpredictable then and every clock illogical and inconstant, as though their inner mechanisms were worked by a brain-addled cuckoo.

At that very moment I glance up – just in time to see something dark and indistinct flutter above me. I am convinced it is a guillemot: that black seabird with a milky-white underside, once known as the ‘willock’ by the fishermen who lived along the south coast. Willocks spend their whole lives upon the sea, returning to land only to visit their nests. It is not memory as we know it but some deeper instinct that each time leads them back, no matter how long they have been away, to the same cliff nooks and crests. Despite my best efforts, however, it seems I am no willock.

15. *Lures and Lizards*

Slate-grey clouds fill the evening sky – the streets have emptied out, rain is clearly on its way. I should seek shelter too but have already passed the Lamb Inn, the Windsor Tavern, the Prince Albert, the Waverley, the King's Arms and, indeed, the Black Sheep. The wind is tugging at my clothes. Seeing a park up ahead, I cross the road and make my way towards it, keen to take a break from examining hundreds of almost identical homes for signs of something I might recognise.

I cut across the damp grass towards the play area, ducking under the low-sweeping branches of the few trees dotted across the green and drawing stares from the few dog-walkers pacing along the pathways. The empty playground is in the back corner of the park, and after I push the heavy cast-iron gate closed behind me I make straight for the line of swings, already being heaved to and fro by the breeze. It is only when I sit down on the middle swing that I realise how much my legs are aching. Without thinking what I am doing I soon find myself swinging backwards and forwards. As I push myself higher and higher through the cold air I feel that familiar whoosh of weightlessness spreading up from my centre, the same sensation that I remember from a series of dreams I had as a child in which I was always falling, in slow-motion, from a terrible height. These dreams prompted my brother to tell me that if a person falls a great distance in a dream and does not wake up before hitting the ground, then he or she will never wake again.

Then I feel it, growing from deep within the pit of my stomach: a dull and queasy ache brought on by a sudden memory of an event that took place some twenty years before, in this very same park. The swing draws to a stop as a shot of guilt hits me, and the whole day returns to me. Though I cannot be sure, I believe that on the

morning of that day Luke had been sitting on the lower bunk with his tree-frog book spread out across his lap, running his fingers across the pictures and making up his own story to go with the bright and vivid pictures of life in the rainforest canopy. He must have been about three years old and, as ever at that age, he spoke every word of his story aloud, just as he gave voice to every thought or idea that entered his head, not yet having realised that it might be possible to hold something of ourselves back from the world. The minute I walked into our shared bedroom to tell him that we were going to the park, he set down the book – spine up across the duvet so that he would not forget his place. He then followed me, bounding down the stairs, both of us going two at a time until the final three, which we leaped down with the loudest whoops and hollers we could summon.

We were off to the park, that place of myth and legend whose mere mention was enough to make both of us jumpy with anticipation. If on that morning you had asked us what we thought heaven might be like, we would have answered without hesitation that it was sure to contain an adventure playground crammed with the highest slides and most precarious of rope swings. Heaven, though, was rarely on our minds, and certainly not on this particular morning. It was a Saturday morning, and this was to be the first trip the whole family had taken together since the newest baby, our younger brother, had arrived. The journey across the three streets which separated our terrace from the park was, back then, a distance which seemed to my brother and I as immeasurable as the one that separated our house from heaven itself. Along the way the two of us argued about what we might become when we got to the giant climbing frame: would we be pirates upon an ancient galley? Cowboys within a besieged ranch? Or astronauts scaling the sides of a space station?

As soon as we had crossed the final road, all of us holding hands in one long chain, and made it onto the green, my brother and I could contain ourselves no longer and both of us began to sprint towards the play area. Soon it was just the two of us. No one else mattered. Not our parents, not our younger brother. It was as if they did not exist. Just like now, even now, as I write. In our rush, Luke and I were half-tripping over our own feet, urging each other faster as we raced towards the climbing frame, both of us eager to be the first to scramble to the top and proclaim ourselves King. Being two years older, I should have realised there was no way he could have beaten me. Indeed, on any other day I would have slowed down, given him a sporting chance, or even fallen back and let him win. But for some reason, on this particular day I was so consumed with staking claim to the climbing frame that everything else ceased to exist. I pushed my head down and tore forwards, my breath ragged as I covered the last few metres to the play area, my kingdom awaiting me. And then I was there, shoving the great metal gate open and rushing past it towards my throne.

I did not, however, make it to the climbing frame, nor even to the patch of wood chips that lay scattered in a circle around it – not that day nor for many weeks after. I was, though, running so fast that when I heard the scream I could not stop straight away, and I tumbled forward for a few more steps as the wails and panicked shrieks rang out behind me, until I was finally able to draw to a halt. Even before I turned around I knew what must have happened. Time and again our parents had told us to be careful with the heavy cast-iron gate, and so by the time I span around my legs were shaking and a sickening feeling of guilt had made a roundabout of my stomach. Though it can only have been ten seconds before I reached them, the journey back across the playground took several lifetimes, with each footstep as slow and difficult as if I was fighting the strongest of gales.

My brother was sitting dazed on the ground, the blood running down his face like an unstoppable stream of Ribena. The heavy cast-iron gate had split open his head. But, even more terrifying than his heaving and shuddering for breath as blood dripped down onto his favourite T-shirt, was the look on my parents' faces. Anger I could have coped with; it was what I expected, and at that moment I knew I deserved far worse than a slap around the ankles or the confiscation of my favourite toys. Fury, indignation, disappointment; all I would have happily accepted. What I saw instead was fear, a look I had never seen in my parents' faces before, a look that would find its way into countless bad dreams to come. Both had turned a sickly pale, and my mum's eyes were already welling with tears. I remember being struck by the shocking realisation not only that my parents were as vulnerable as us but also that I alone was responsible for this sudden and traumatic change. I felt dizzy and nauseous, and it was only then that I noticed that since returning to them I had been biting my lip, my teeth clenching down with such force that I too could taste the sour, metallic tang of blood upon my tongue.

Before I could even open my mouth to speak my dad had bundled up my brother in his arms and, together with my mum, still carrying her newborn, was running back towards the house. This time it was me who was lagging behind, though trying my best to keep up. The knot of guilt within me twisted tighter and, by the time we were all loaded in the car and hospital-bound, I felt as if I was going to be sick. I was convinced that the longer my parents went without speaking to me the greater their rage would be when they finally broke the silence. I had broken my little brother and he might never be fixed. And what of the terrible punishment that might await me? Luke was sat beside me, sobbing quietly as he held my dad's hanky to the dark



gash in his head. I pressed my own head against the car window and watched the street signs blur past. What, I thought, if my parents never speak to me again?

Later that day, we brought him home from hospital with five stitches woven across his forehead. My parents did speak to me – indeed, they appeared to have no desire to punish me. Instead, though, of calming my anxieties, this only added to my fear that some dreadful and unimaginable punishment would be inflicted at some unknown date in the future. This thought followed me around for many days and remained with me long after the stitches in Luke's head had been removed and the scar began to fade from plum-jam purple to salmon pink. And with it festered the suspicion that is now reawakened – that I have let him down. Grief has many voices: the mad clamouring of anger and sadness; the nagging voice of doubt and disbelief; the incessant babble of longing and regret – but none is stronger than that which asks, again and again, what could I have done to stop all of this from happening? It is a voice that constantly whispers in my ear, reminding me that this was my younger brother whom I should somehow have better looked after.

I look about at the empty swings beside me, teased by the wind. For a minute it looks as if the playground has been preserved in its same run-down condition for twenty years simply to stir my guilt. A light sting of rain begins to whip across my face. I pull myself up and make my way toward the gate, determined to leave the playground behind me and not look back. The rain grows harder as I reach the street. It is soon blurring the yellow glow of the streetlights, and I try desperately to remember the way I came; but once darkness falls the streets of a town change shape, wind in upon themselves. I will not, then, find the house now, not in the dark and the sudden downpour. Besides, the memory of the clanging metal gate combined with the driving rain are enough to warn me off from daring to venture any closer.

As I break into a jog, the mist and drizzle melt away, and in their place I see my brother back in the room we shared somewhere in this seaside town. I recall him rubbing the stitches on his head with one of his little plastic lizards, convinced that this would not only soothe the splitting pain but also somehow heal it – he believed that the green-and-red speckled reptile might grant him the power to cast off an old skin and grow a new one from scratch. Still haunted by my part in his accident, I had said nothing that would dispel this belief. After all, men have tried far stranger remedies and elixirs in the past; indeed in the Sussex of our great-grandfathers it was said that the fat of an adder, simmered down into a viscous oil, had the power to cure deafness – a belief perhaps connected to the myth that adders are themselves deaf. Still more peculiar is that it was for a long time believed that any painful swelling on the neck or larynx could only be cured if touched by the hand of a hanged man still swinging on the gibbet. In the days of public hangings, it was often possible to see a long queue of the sick standing before the gallows.

It was also believed you could lure an illness from the patient and transfer it into another vessel, as if some diseases would only leave a person's body when offered a new home. Fevers might be drawn out and trapped inside trees, or else given to ponds and streams. Again, a live snake might be wrapped around the neck of one suffering a sore throat, then sealed inside a bottle and buried deep beneath the earth and, once the snake began to decay, so it was said, the infliction would waste away. Yet again, a snail might be rubbed on a wart then pushed onto a thorn so that both the creature and the growth would wither together. Such remedies were popular, I think, because they promised that pain and suffering might be easily displaced – and for proof there was, of course, the story in the Gospels where Jesus released the devils

that were dwelling inside a man from Gedara and sent them instead into a herd of swine, which then went careering over the cliff and into the sea.

The rain is frantic as I run back through the streets, attempting to retrace my steps and recover the seafront and the warmth of my car. My clothes are soaked and my wet, bedraggled hair is slapping against my face. Now that night has descended all the landmarks I saw on my journey inland have changed shape – the pubs, fish and chippies, bingo clubs and pool halls, betting shops, boarded-up cafes and newsagents. I hurry on through the rain, wishing that I could somehow have switched places with my brother, that all his bad luck could have been transferred to me, that I could have done something – anything – to save him.

Then suddenly, up ahead of me, a great crack of lightning draws a slim silver fissure through the night sky. Instantly my head is emptied of worries and regrets, and is filled instead with an image of my brother shrieking and laughing as he pointed out of our bedroom window in the old Eastbourne terrace at a storm blown in from the ocean. Every time a storm began we would haul the curtains open and lie on our bunkbeds, both keeping up a steady stream of conversation as part of a pact that we would help each other stay awake so that neither of us would miss one of those strange and magical moments when our bedroom would be lit up by the blinding flash of lightning. As soon as we saw it, the brief spark of light so powerful that it remained visible even when we closed our eyes, we would fall silent, waiting for the accompanying heavy-percussion of thunder to ring out, both of us counting beneath our breath to measure how close the storm was to our house.

We would then wait expectantly for the lightning to draw a little nearer, hoping that when the light came close enough to fill the whole of our bedroom it would summon up djinns and genies who would do our every bidding and might even

carry us away. And off we would fly, high across the top of rainclouds just as surfers ride the most violent of waves; and so on and on we would travel, to some mysterious kingdom hidden just beyond the horizon. During many storms we would grow bored waiting in our bunkbeds and would gather our blankets around our shoulders and move to the window. Soon we would be sitting side by side with our faces almost pressed against the glass. I remember his breath so close that I could feel it on my face and could see it clouding the glass in front of us, making the town outside a blur. We would often stay like that for hours, listening to the rain beat against the windowpane, and only when the sound of the storm was a dull rustle in the distance would we gather up our bedding and return to our bunks. Once or twice, however, too tired to sustain his vigil my brother would fall asleep and I would feel his head slump against my shoulder and light snores begin to spill from his lips. At those times I tried to stay as still as possible so as not to disturb his dreams. After all, perhaps he had managed to find a way to go on alone to that mythical kingdom beyond the clouds.

I am now running through the storm, memories of this cramped, shared bedroom of ours spurring me on, and leaving me no time to puzzle at the strange fact that the lightness that suddenly lifts my body depends upon so little. As I run I count the seconds, just as we used to do together, calculating the distance between the centre of the squall and the puddles I am now splashing through. Though my clothes are sloshing heavy and wet against my skin, and though the rain is smarting my eyes, I am almost giddy at this recollection. And so I push on, faster still, through the downpour, recklessly heading towards the eye of the storm.

I sprint half-blind through the deluge, the fastest I have run since sports day at school so many years ago. I would not be able to stop running even if I wanted to. My shoes are wrecked and even my socks are now sodden, while my lungs draw wet,

ragged breaths; yet despite everything I cannot prevent a smile from spreading across my face. By the time I reach the seafront I can see the carnival lights of the pier stretching out into the crashing waves, the stately guesthouses waiting for their guests to return, the straggly gulls being harried by the wind, and just a few stray walkers caught out in the rain battling with untameable umbrellas. I am now racing against the thunder and lightning, daring them to try and catch me, some unknown force spurring me on as I chase long-flung shadows across the shore.

16. *A Ringing in the Ear*

There were many times I told him to drop dead. He said worse to me. He was, indeed, my worst enemy. Everything I said, he would argue the opposite. What's more, he would often insist that something had to be true simply because he believed it. Cavemen were obviously stupid, he once told me, because if he'd been around back then he would have harnessed up the dinosaurs and put them to work. *Not all of them, mind. Not the puny, wimpy, weedy ones like you. Just the useful ones.* Another time he tried to convince me that birds could sleep mid-flight, and would keep on drifting through the slipstreams high above, like tiny satellites on autopilot orbit, until they woke hours later in a different continent and miles from home.

But what sticks most in my memory must have occurred when I was about ten or eleven. I was walking past the kitchen when I overheard the tail end of a discussion on the radio, and stopped briefly at the door to listen as a disembodied voice discussed the idea that nothing is real, and that everything we see is made of the same malleable fabric as our dreams. After hearing just that tiny snippet I felt so disorientated that suddenly I could no longer recall where I had been heading before I paused outside the kitchen door. The strange and wonderful idea was soon lodged at the back of my brain, like a tick that proves impossible to prise off. When I had tried to explain it to Luke, though, his only response was to laugh and say, with a huge grin on his face, *Perhaps you're just a stupid figment.* I tried to start again, saying that this was not the point – but seeing that he had succeeded in annoying me a little, he broke in before I had a chance to finish, saying *Be quiet! You stupid figment.* For the rest of the afternoon he followed me around, insisting I was just an illusion again and again at

regular intervals until eventually I snapped and chased him round the garden, shouting that I would show him just how real I really was.

Many times Luke said that he was the only person in the world who was real, and challenged the rest of us to prove him wrong. It should go without saying that he would never accept any of our proofs – he simply could not bear the idea that he was not the centre of the universe. His goal, it seemed, was to be the largest planet in people's memories and imaginations. To my infinite annoyance, he often succeeded.

My brother would almost certainly have agreed with the countless myths that assert that death and forgetfulness are two sides of the same coin – twins, if you will, or at the very least siblings. Every schoolboy knows that the ancient Greeks named one of the five rivers of the underworld 'Lethe', meaning forgetfulness, since if any of the dead journeying through the depths of Hades sip from its dark waters, they forget everything of the life they have left behind. It is not just the Greeks either – the Chinese have a similar story of a bridge the dead must cross which, should they wander over alone, will erase all their memories. Memories it seems are part of this world, not the next – or, at least, we cannot take our memories with us when we die. In other words, forgetting is a form of death.

I do not like this idea at all and so take comfort in the notion that not all memories live in the brain – that cluttered old storeroom where so much goes missing – but that some are kept elsewhere inside us. These days I often hear an old song or catch sight of a faded photograph and am suddenly struck by a memory long gone missing from my storeroom of a brain. Such memories rise instead from my fingertips, from the base of my spine, or from the very pit of my belly, and they often

leave me feeling stunned and unsteady. Yet I have no control at all over when any of my recollections might be unexpectedly awakened and a shiver of recognition might pass through me. It might happen at any time: the radio tuning the inner ear effortlessly into the past; a turn of phrase or a laugh that echoes one heard long before; the sight of a special shirt found at the bottom of a pile of old clothes; the musky reek of Luke's Lynx deodorant or aftershave; a long-forgotten joke rediscovered on the tip of the tongue; or the din of rain at night, a din that my brother used to say was just like war drums beating on the windows. Each kindle a memory I thought my mind had long since discarded.

Of all the arts, I think music is invested with the strongest power to invoke experiences long in the past – or even ones we have never lived at all. There are two main types of music: those songs that remind us of something within and those that take us away from ourselves. Or, to put it another way, music that helps us to remember, and music that encourages us to forget. There are pieces of music that convince us we are all joined by some common thread of experience, and others that persuade us that we are alone in the universe. Some songs lead us to believe that though it is the middle of July, snow is falling from a sky pockmarked with blazing stars; others that there is no sky, no stars, no world outside at all, and that beyond this single moment nothing else is.

As a teenager, my brother would often retreat to his room and play his favourite songs so loudly that he made the floor shudder. Though he usually stuck with one of the latest West Coast hip hop releases, his taste ranged from reggae through to metal, the only common theme being that the songs he played at maximum volume had to be either raging vehemently against the world or else telling everyone in it to go to hell. Extra points were awarded, it seemed, for the number of expletives a



song contained. His music came pounding out while he bench-pressed in the small corner of his bedroom that had been converted into a mini-gym, or practised throwing darts with such violence that he often later found it impossible to pull them out from where they had stuck deep in the dartboard or surrounding wall. None of this would have mattered very much, were it not for the fact that once he found a tune he liked he would play it on repeat, listening to the same track again and again, sometimes for hours. When this happened, the rest of us would have to resort to earplugs or rival music to prevent ourselves from being driven mad. I suspect that half the time he played the same track repeatedly just to make absolutely sure the world knew it should go to hell.

I cannot remember whether it was Mum or Dad who remarked, at the time, that there was in fact nothing more hellish than the same song played forever. Hellish was as good an adjective as any: after all, the ancient myths of the underworld are replete with examples of individuals who are tormented by having to perform a single, repetitive task for all eternity – from Sisyphus forever pushing a great boulder towards the top of a mountain, to Tantalus, crazed with thirst and up to his neck in a pool of water that recedes each time he bends forward to drink. Indeed, since the time of those early myths, hell has become synonymous with the idea of endless repetition, and nowhere is this more vividly brought to life than in the cruel and imaginative punishments meted out in Dante's *Inferno*, where the greedy and glutinous are forever being torn to shreds by rabid dogs, and heretics writhe and twist without respite in tombs of insatiable flame. Perhaps the American military got some of their inspiration from the *Inferno*, for in the Guantanamo Bay detention camp loud music – from heavy metal through to the theme tunes from children's television programmes – was played incessantly in order to deprive the inmates of sleep.

Just as we found his habit of playing the same few songs again and again to be a form of torture, so my brother would often grow enraged when he heard any melody that was placid or calm, as if he could not quite fathom why anyone would listen to music to relax rather than to rouse or stir them. Among the CDs of his that I come across after the funeral are *The Last Meal*, *Fuck It*, *Lucky Star*, *Deeper Shades of Euphoria*, *Back to the Old Skool*, *A Grand Don't Come for Free*, *Confessions*, *Born Again*, *Death Row Greatest Hits*, *Rhythm & Gangsta*, *Shock Value*, *The Big Dawg* and *Execute*.

As I search through his bags and boxes, these titles remind me that his idea of a great song was one that had a relentless fist-thumping beat, wall-shaking bass, and lyrics that were either brag or slam. I cannot confirm this impression though, since I have no intention to listen to any of them. Indeed, the first batch I find fills me with such anger that I decide to smash them to smithereens. At first I try to snap a few between my hands, but it proves almost impossible. Next I stamp on a handful as hard as I can, but CDs turn out to be remarkably resilient and so I have to take a rolling pin from the kitchen to break them into pieces. It is slow and methodical work, and by the end I feel ridiculous, not least because I have to find the dustpan and brush to sweep away the destruction before Mum and Dad see it. Once again, I feel like my brother has deliberately made me look stupid. But even those I haven't destroyed will not be played – not because I am worried that the songs will bring back emotions that I cannot control but because I have come to believe that songs themselves are different each time we hear them. They are sponges that soak up our personal histories, those private moments when we first listened to them and the feelings contained within those moments. There comes, in fact, a point when we no longer hear the music at all.

As is no doubt clear, I never enjoyed my brother's music. I called it repetitive, contrived, fake – all swagger and no substance; and he repaid the insults by lashing out at everything I listened to. I could not understand how anyone could enjoy listening to those same mindless songs again and again. It is only now, looking back, that it occurs to me that he probably could not have cared less about the music. It was not the melody, the lyrics, the catchy hook, the shouty chorus, the violent beat, the stomach-churning bass, the sly rhymes or anything else about the songs themselves that he enjoyed. It was the attitude. *Fuck It. Fuck It. Fuck It.*

It was the same with his intense bodybuilding and preference for dark glasses and aggressive poses. For his tenth birthday he begged for a black leather jacket. Every day for a month he pleaded with my parents to buy one for him. There was nothing else he wanted, nothing. Every mealtime, without fail, the conversation would be turned to the leather jacket. *Think how good I'll look in it. Think how impressed everyone who sees me will be. I'll clean my room every day, and never tease anyone again.* Pause. Silence. Then: *If you don't get me one I'll wait until everyone's asleep and then throw ice-cold water on the lot of you!* In the end, Mum and Dad had no choice but to give in. The one he chose was a tough, hardy biker jacket, black as octopus ink, and with an oil-slick sheen and a musky animal smell. Whenever I now catch the scent of new leather I see him prancing up and down the living room, flexing and snarling as though it had made him suddenly more animal than man. He wore it all the time, and it became difficult to take him anywhere since he could not pass a mirror without stopping in his tracks to admire himself, either nodding his head approvingly or else raising an imaginary gun towards the assailant he saw in the reflection, the enemy who might or might not have been just a figment of his

imagination. He imagined himself more Schwarzenegger in *Terminator* than a slight, freckly, red-headed boy from Sussex.

When he played his music as loud as he could I would do my best to compete by turning my own stereo up to maximum volume. But there's no easy way to drown out *Death Row*. We were in permanent war as teenagers, and a single word or the tiniest of actions was often enough to spark epic battles. The fact that the battlefield was skewed only made things worse: his dyslexia made it impossible for him to compete with my good grades and awards at school, whereas my shyness and clumsiness meant that I was never going to be picked for as many sports teams as he was. We picked on each other's weaknesses with that perfect combustible spark of vitriol born from sibling aggression. We tallied up each little win, no matter how trivial – the sporting tournaments and exam scores, the party invites and number of friends, the crazy golf and bowling victories. But more than anything we latched onto each other's defeats, raking over the petty humiliations and public embarrassments of the other. We would go out for a family meal and, when he struggled to read the menu, I would call him a retard. I would come last in my race on sport's day at school and he would stand jeering and pointing, calling me a billy-no-mates book-nerd who would be better off running with the girls. We would pass constant comment on each other: I would call him ginger and scrawny, he would call me fat and greasy. I would call his friends 'chavs' and he would call mine 'gay'. I would call him 'stupid' and he would call me 'weak'. In short, we taunted each other without mercy or respite. We did it all so that we could briefly lord it over the other, taking infinite pleasure in those few seconds of put-downs until one of us would reach breaking point and lash out, and our would parents intervene and broker a fragile truce.

I have, I confess, found myself missing all that hatred, all the anger sparked by the knowledge that my adversary knew everything about me. He knew exactly what I hated about myself, all the little secrets I tried so best to hide, all the things in my heart and personality and appearance and social life I was ashamed of and wished I could change. And I knew the same about him. Half our time, you see, we spent in one another's minds.

And I am surprised to find that, despite the years, something of all this still burns within me. The love I feel for him is held in perfect balance against the hatred I nurture. Yes, I hate him, with a hatred that throbs like a raw wound. I hate him because he is gone, because this is bloody typical of him. It is just the thoughtless, selfish and reckless kind of thing only he would do: to piss off and leave us all to clean up the mess he has left behind. Well fuck you, Luke! *Fuck It. Fuck It. Fuck It.*

17. *Man of the Match*

The night after I return from Eastbourne I sleep, for once, untroubled by either insomnia or those strange and hopeless dreams in which the past ebbs further and further from my reach. I wake up, however, feeling more exhausted than ever. As I throw open the curtains, my eyes are drawn to the soaking wreaths and bouquets lying in a neat line at the top of the garden. They have not been moved since they were set down for the funeral last week. Even from the window I can see that many of the flowers have begun to wilt in the summer heat, the petals beginning to curl and wrinkle, the longer stems looking as if they are trying to struggle free from their arrangements. I try to recall what they looked like when they were fresh and new, but the longer I stand and stare down at them, the more I become convinced that they have always been faded and withered and that they will remain there until they have disintegrated completely and turned black and rotten upon the lawn.

I dress quickly and make my way outside, scaring away the straggle of wild rabbits that come from the woods at the back of the garden to feast on the damp grass each morning. I can still see the holes in the earth where stakes were driven for the marquee that covered the coffin and the mourners, as well as stretches of mud and scuffed grass where countless smart black shoes were milling and fidgeting throughout the service. I usually try not to think too much of that day. It is, though, impossible not to as I wander over to the line of flowers. Up close the bouquets look almost alive.

I catch a hint of movement out of the corner of my eye and I suddenly straighten up, as if I have been caught doing something I shouldn't. At the bottom of the garden, in the elm-shaded nook that the early morning sunlight cannot reach, I can

dimly make out something rustling along the hedge. No doubt one of the slower rabbits. Or a squirrel. Maybe even a curious hedgehog. Nonetheless it is not difficult to trick myself into thinking that the undefined shape in the shadows might be my brother, three or four years old and his T-shirt and shorts already filthy, making mud pies and digging a hole that would take him all the way to Australia. The idea that he might be down there waiting for me to join him does not seem strange at all, since even as children we had known that if we made our way to the bottom of the garden we might find any number of strange and unexpected creatures that normally remained invisible to us. Whenever my brother and I carried our plastic buckets and spades into our first garden to hunt for buried treasure left by smugglers or pirates, we were always amazed that just by digging below the surface we might find a different universe. Earwigs scuttling in lopsided circles, fat black slugs oozing slime, blind worms writhing through the clammy dirt.

For a while we together imagined that vast armies of worms and ants and earwigs and beetles were massing their forces in every field and garden, underneath every house and school, waiting patiently for some signal that the time had come to begin their invasion of the world above. As this makes clear, once we stepped out of the back door, we entered another world, and were never sure how many of the laws that governed the one we had left behind still applied. We were both drawn to those stories about fairies and sprites living at the end of a garden, and we spent many hours searching for the ones we were certain were hiding somewhere amid the flowerbeds. Indeed, my brother would sometimes carry a butterfly net along with bucket and spade in the hope that he might catch an imp or pixie and then command it to do his bidding. We both believed that the gnomes down there came alive after dark and took part in secret midnight reveries.

Whenever we visited our grandparents or aunts and uncles, we always made straight for the garden, hoping that by squeezing into gaps in hedges or sidling behind sheds and greenhouses we might find an entrance to a secret garden. The fact that we never found a concealed entrance to a magical kingdom did not put us off searching the same gardens again and again, for we were certain that their pathways were always changing their location and might appear between the flowerbeds one day, only to move somewhere completely different the next. We were, I think, inspired by *The Secret Garden* – a copy of which sat on the bookshelf in our shared room and showed, on the front cover, a small child reaching out in wonder and delight towards a door half-hidden amid a tangle of vines. I do not think, though, that we ever opened *The Secret Garden*. I am certain that we would have been disappointed to learn that the story's young heroine opens a secret door hidden behind overgrown ivy only to find a ruined garden full of untended flowers.

The secret garden little Mary Lennox discovers was intended to serve as a symbol for something far deeper and more mysterious than my brother or I had ever imagined. Frances Hodgson Burnett was a keen believer in Christian Science, which posits that the material world is nothing but illusion and that the only reality is that of the spiritual world. It is surely not mere coincidence that she also believed she would one day be reunited with her own son in a paradise garden. He had died of consumption at the age of sixteen in 1890, and she continued to write to him long after his death.

Burnett was not alone in giving credence to the idea that it was possible to attain direct personal knowledge of the next world. In Britain alone, in the second half of the nineteenth century there was enough curiosity to support two weekly periodicals, *The Medium* and *The Spiritualist*, as well as a large number of monthly



publications, all focused upon communication with the spirits of the dead. At the same time, mediums and clairvoyants frequently conducted well-attended séances, countless hypnotists made a living by inducing trances, and for a few years it was immensely popular among ladies in fashionable circles to experiment with Ouija boards, automatic writing and afternoons of table-turning, in which the dead would send messages to those present by spinning and tilting the table before them. It was as if the more spiritualists were mocked in the press, condemned by the church, or criticised by renowned scientists, the more their hold on the popular imagination increased. In those years it must have felt, even to sceptics and non-believers, as though the dead were crowding in among the living, like a thick fog that seeps in through every window and under every door.

As early as June 1853 the *Illustrated London News* was lamenting the rise of spiritualism. The editorial declared that *Railroads, steam, and electricity, and the indubitable wonders which they have wrought, have not proved powerful enough to supersede and destroy that strong innate love of the supernatural which seems implanted in the human mind*. This, though, is a false opposition. Inventions and innovations never have any hope of destroying interest in the spiritual, because it is precisely at those times when the world of the living is suddenly changed that we cling all the more to the dead.

I pick my way slowly between the bouquets, bending to try and read the cards tied to each spray. In many cases the ink is smudged and all but illegible. Small pools of morning sun are welling in the folds of the petals. They look brittle and translucent. Beside a tightly-corseted bulge of lilies and chrysanthemums lies a slim black tie bound in a single knot. I recognise it as a tribute to the time my brother had tried to run his own business managing and hiring out a posse of bouncers and doormen, a

short-lived venture whose lack of success he found deeply frustrating, though he was careful not to show his disappointment. He invariably inoculated himself against the humiliation of failure with an air of nonchalance and disinterest, an act he had practised since he was first diagnosed as dyslexic, and later perfected when he started secondary school.

In fact, as soon as he finished primary school he began to change. Perhaps it was the formal diagnosis of his dyslexia itself that was the catalyst. All of a sudden he found himself in a straitjacket that no amount of struggling or fantastic contortions could shake loose. More even than his fiery red hair, this new tag marked him out and set him apart. Over night, he changed from a curious, outspoken and imaginative child keen to try and understand everything around him to a boy that successive school reports characterised as anarchic and uncontrollable, deflecting each question with an obscene joke, flippant remark or wild prank.

He would probably have mocked all these flowers laid out so neatly on the freshly-cut grass, if only in a clumsy attempt to defuse the eddy of emotion they betoken. As I stare down at the line of heart-shaped wreaths and pale bouquets, I try to recall the meanings associated with each bloom, for every flower was once thought to convey a different message. Indeed, a few hundred years ago, the language of flowers often played a significant role in the careful and furtive rituals of courtship in this country. Meticulous knowledge of its intricacies was vital. A prospective suitor would not have had much success in gaining favour with his beloved if instead of sending a blue tulip (for faithfulness) or a forget-me-not he sent hydrangeas, which stood for frigidity and coldness, or white carnations, symbolising disdain and contempt.

The flower for grief was the marigold, that shockingly bright plant with a fat cluster of florets at its head and a sharp and musty scent. Yet the flower most

associated with funerals today is surely the lily; hence all around me the loose-flapping petals of washed-out pink, eggshell yellow and speckled white lilies. It was once believed that feasting on lilies would return someone who had been transformed into a beast back to their human form. I know exactly what my brother would have said in response to that ancient fragment of folklore: *What if they didn't want to be changed back, eh? What if they'd been happier as a fucking animal?* I rub a roughened petal between thumb and finger and find myself wishing that it were possible to return to a world where everything stood for something else.

At the end of the row is a dense knot of blue and white flowers bound in the shape of a hockey stick, and I hunker down beside it to take a closer look. It was brought here by members of the Middleton Hockey Club, along with one of Luke's old hockey shirts emblazoned with his nickname and number. He had played for them for the best part of ten years, amassing close to a thousand goals according to his teammates at the funeral. The number of *Man of the Match* and *Player of the Year* awards he had been given was less certain, since he somehow always managed to lose the silver trophies in the raucous celebrations that followed the end-of-season awards night.

At the funeral, I spoke to many people who had played beside him – stocky young men who recounted his past triumphs with something close to awed reverence. The list of his audacious interceptions and unbelievable goals, along with his most notorious fouls and flare-ups at referees, seemed almost endless. I spoke too with players from rival teams whose respect he had gained in long and closely-fought matches. Though it is tempting to think of all their earnest tributes as friendly exaggeration, in truth little his teammates said was far off the mark. It was not that Luke was a different person once he put on the shirt, shorts, long thick socks and

studded boots, but that he somehow seemed to inhabit himself more fully on the hockey pitch.

He must have been overjoyed to have finally found something at which he excelled. He was blunt remade as sharp, sharp as a sliver of broken grass. Sprinting across the Astroturf towards the goal, he possessed a grace and refined agility that puzzled and amazed anyone who had only seen him sitting slouched and morose in the classroom or had witnessed any of his blundering attempts at riding a bicycle, trying to cook or even catching a ball in the park. During hockey matches he was quick and alert, unexpectedly dextrous and cunning, and not only did he know it but he revelled in it, showing off with dummy passes and half-twirls as he dodged effortlessly past the defenders determined to stop him. Almost every week he attempted seemingly impossible shots at the heavily-guarded goal, playing as if he was convinced that the outcome of any game depended only upon his confidence and self-belief, and that he was in competition not with the huddle of players on the opposing team, but with himself.

There was something both uplifting and melancholy about watching him play. As soon as a game got going it appeared as though his mind and body were working in perfect tandem, with no gap between thought and movement, and no room left for even the slightest doubt. Normally he must have felt that his body was out-of-sync with his brain and unable to keep up, since he had dented countless tennis rackets and golf clubs by angrily throwing them to the ground when they would not do what he wanted them to. Many a time I saw him grow enraged when his dyslexia prevented him from translating his thoughts and stories into words on the page, or from getting to the end of even the simplest book. I cannot count the number of books he tore up or ripped to shreds. And that is why seeing him shrug off his frustrations and give in to

instinct and intuition was both elating and upsetting, for once the weekend game finished and he got back home, thoughts of school on Monday morning dredged up all his resentments and disappointments, and it was not long before he had returned to his usual sullen, clumsy and surly state.

In the clubhouse, the world made sense to him. As soon as he was wearing his number and clutching his stick, everything was reduced to black and white, to winning or losing. For a few hours, nothing else mattered, and that other life no longer existed – the one where random luck and chance often ruled, where everything was perplexing and threatening, and where the future promised only the possibility of further humiliation. It must have been exhilarating to go from being the boy who came last in every test during the week to being the club's star forward, bearing the hopes and dreams of all his teammates. Together, he and his teammates reminded me at times of some intimate religious fraternity, single-minded and zealous, quick to pounce on anyone they thought had let the team down. The field was their church and the clubhouse might as well have been a seminary, since once inside they cleaved tight to their sacred beliefs and poured scorn and derision upon all who did not share them.

Like a religious sect, they also had their own articles of faith and arcane rituals. Among the former: that the socks one player wore for each match could never be washed; that they could not lose if they played home games on odd dates and away games on even dates; that they would be doomed to failure if all members of the team did not walk from clubhouse to pitch in less than twenty strides; that certain coins, key rings and other trinkets kept in pockets throughout the game would provide a little good fortune when rubbed. Their communion was a series of vodka shots, one tiny glass brimming with translucent liquid for every goal scored, all lined up in a neat row

upon the clubhouse bar – and the penalties for spilling a drop of the sacred liquor or failing to sink each one in quick succession were severe. It seems likely that some of my brother's happiest times were there, for even more intoxicating than the cheap spirits kept behind the bar must have been the respect and adulation that came with scoring the winning goal or making the most courageous tackle or dodge. In the aftermath of those games when he was lauded as the saviour of the hockey team, he must have believed that anything was possible. Yet he was always the first person to say that *nothing lasts*. Even in the midst of celebrating, he would tell his teammates that they should enjoy it for now, because things would probably be different next week – it was as though he had accepted that it was his fate to never be allowed to hold onto any of the glory or success that occasionally passed through his fingers. Nothing lasts, but everything persists.

It was also with the hockey club that Luke made his only trips abroad – outside of family holidays – going on tours that took the team across France and Spain as well as to the Netherlands. From the stories I heard recounted, these trips invariably involved not only closely-fought matches against local teams but also a prodigious amount of drinking of the kind found in city centres on Friday nights: the kind that encourages the drinkers to shed all inhibitions and conscience. Yet for all the photos I saw, and all the obscene tales I heard of drunken dares and riotous pranks, for some reason I find it hard to imagine my brother outside the small locus within which he spent almost every day of his twenty-four years. Save for these hockey tours and our family holidays, he rarely travelled further than twenty miles from the house where we had both grown up and near where we had gone to primary school together. Perhaps he felt he was under the spell of some strange force, as though he lived not at

the dawn of the twenty-first century but thousands of years before, when the known world stretched only as far as the horizon.

He never, of course, went away to university, but instead worked in a gym within walking distance from our parents' house. Even when he was living with his girlfriend in a small ex-council house in Lavant, working all day on the building site and half the night as a doorman in Chichester or Worthing, he still frequently found the time to drive the fifteen miles back to his old home so that Mum could cook him dinner and he could kip for half an hour on the old battered sofa in the living room. He was intimate with the area, and took a great amount of pleasure in the fact that everyone who visited the local pubs and clubs knew his name. Indeed, when he talked of friends and relatives who had left the area and started again in new cities, a tribe of wanderers that included myself, he usually shook his head with a certain weariness. He felt we had failed some kind of test and, furthermore, our endeavours were ridiculous. How could someone hope to find happiness and contentment in somewhere strange and new if they could not find it in that intricate spiderweb of friends, family and memories we call 'home'?

I sit down next to one of the fat, round wreaths and pick off a few shrivelled petals, trying to come up with reasons that might explain why he was so wary of travelling. No satisfactory answers present themselves to me. No one can ever really explain why we choose one place and not another, why some of us cling on like barnacles and others drift out with the tide. Besides, I am glad that he lived a local life. Even now something of him remains imprinted here. Or hereabouts.

18. *Homesickness*

When I try to picture my brother heading out on his own to start a new life, I am reminded of something that occurred on our first trip across the channel, when he was five or six. We were walking back to our campsite after lunch in a neighbouring village, following a route that led down a dry, dusty road flanked on one side by a line of lanky sunflowers, their sullen faces peering down from over a pale stone wall. All the local cottages had their windows shuttered and the roads were deserted save for a few shepherds and their flocks slumped in the shade; we did not realise, though, until we were already halfway down the path and sweating furiously, that this was because everyone in this part of rural France was sensibly hiding from the midday heat.

The sun was blanching the road and a sandy-backed lizard scuttling across my foot when I stopped to draw breath. I remember my brother dragging his feet at the back, something we rarely saw him do as he usually delighted in taking the lead, rushing ahead every so often to make sure the path was safe for the rest of us. On this occasion, though, he was groggy from the heat and as we walked he asked again and again how much longer it would be until we got back to the campsite. Every so often he would kick up small clouds of dirt that, instead of falling back to earth, hung in the air around us. We turned a corner and ahead I saw the burning air trembling above the path, the trees beyond it warped and contorted in the searing afternoon sun. For a second I felt terrified, since it was as if the very fabric of the air was so flimsy and slight that at any moment it might rip apart and leave us staring into a gaping black hole, into which everything around us might suddenly be dragged.

It was then that my brother began to scream. At first I thought he had also seen the quivering heat lines distorting the track before us and was reliving the paralysing



fear he had felt the first time we visited a fairground and wandered together amid the hall of mirrors – he had glanced into one of the panes of convex glass and thought that by some malevolent carnival magic the whole world had suddenly been transformed. My second thought was that once we rounded the corner he had seen how far the path wound down between fields and hedgerows before it sank into the valley where our campsite and our toys were waiting, and at the thought of walking that much further through the blazing sun something within him had snapped. When we were finally able to decipher the words he was babbling between sobs and sniffles, however, we recognised a familiar childish refrain, bawled over and over: I want to go home.

He simply would not move, and so we stood still for ages, the minutes made endless by the heat and the baleful urgency of his wails. At seven or eight years old, even I could see that his refusal to budge from the spot where he had set down in the middle of the dusty country track was completely at odds with his repeated desire to be taken back home – though I was careful not to point this out in front of him. I knew better than that. Eventually, my parents calmed him down with the promise of sweets and ice-cream and he was coaxed up onto my dad's shoulders. Even then he continued to assert that he wanted to be taken back to England: to his own home, his own boglins, his own cats, his own beanbag. He did not cry again, though he remained withdrawn and restless for the rest of the day. We tried to distract him with Frisbee games, then with a trip to the small river beside the campsite where we tried to catch minnows and other tiny fish in our wispy nets, but nothing worked. He abandoned each activity after only a few minutes, only to reiterate his longing to be taken back across the channel. My parents repeatedly assured him that we would be leaving France the next evening, but it was clear he did not believe them. He suspected that

they were making this up simply to placate him and cover the fact that we would never return home.

I have not witnessed such profound homesickness since. My brother acted that day as though his desire to go back home had taken the form of a physical ache that grew more unbearable with each step he took. Homesickness, they say, is a kind of dislocation, founded in a sense that who we are and where we live are somehow deeply intertwined. If so, then, it springs not from the memory but from the body, and is not only the wicked cousin of nostalgia, but also a sibling of vertigo: that dizzying sensation whereby the body seems suddenly at the mercy of its surroundings.

Where did my brother's acute distress during that first holiday abroad come from? His homesickness reminds me of stories I have heard about English soldiers and sailors so sick for their native land that when they finally return to these shores they take whole fistfuls of earth and fill their pockets with clumps of crumbly English soil so that they might never again be overcome by that nauseating sensation of being desperately far from home. I wonder, though, whether any of these homesick men once back in 'Blighty' were like my brother who, as soon as he got back home, neither whooped or shouted, but simply pretended that his episode of homesickness had never happened.

He seemed somehow bound to this small part of the south coast, and that is why it is impossible, even now, to imagine him somewhere else. Even today, here among the faded wreaths in the back garden, and as I make my way back up to the house, I am still unable to believe he is not somewhere close by. He cannot possibly have gone far. At any second his car must surely appear in the driveway, or he himself come strolling nonchalantly into the kitchen and order whoever is in there to make him some food.

I reach the backdoor but feel as though I am being pulled back, and so I wander down the garden again to quickly straighten the hockey stick, and to pull a couple of wizened petals off the adjacent spray. Like everyone else in my family, I do not want to be the one who clears away the flowers and so gets rid of the evidence that Luke remains alive in our memories. Yet the desire to keep the flowers out on the lawn goes further than that. If it is true that grief has five stages – denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance – then instead of pushing through them, we are desperate to stay where we are: to let the anger and rage pulse through us and numb us to all else. Throwing out the wreaths and bouquets would be a sign that we have accepted there is nothing we can do but get on with our lives.

I have never had much time for these five stages. Where is panic, where guilt, where vertigo on the schedule? Nostalgia too, for that is the emotion that most often knocks me sideways at the moment. Looking back with the warped perspective of hindsight, it is peculiar to think that the word ‘nostalgia’ itself was coined in the seventeenth century by the physician Johannes Hofer to describe the feeling of extreme homesickness suffered by Swiss mercenaries gone to war far from their homelands. Perhaps, then, I have inherited Luke’s homesickness, but instead of yearning for that little house and familiar bunkbed where a host of boglins and toy guns and nunchucks and leather jackets are ready and waiting, I yearn for the past. Hofer suggested that the Swiss were particularly susceptible to nostalgia because when they left the Alps and descended to fight in the wars of the European plains, the change in atmosphere caused blood to rush from the heart to the brain. The nostalgia can be noted, Hofer went on, by his melancholy air, and by the general wasting away of his person.

I put the kettle on and wait beside it in the kitchen, my mind circling back and returning once again to that holiday when my brother was five or six. I recall him wrapped snug in a sleeping-bag back in our tent that night, still mumbling in his half-sleeping state that he had to get back home as soon as possible. His words were murmured with such worried urgency that I feared he had done something awful like leaving a tap on back home. I fell asleep worrying about returning to England to find all our toys and books submerged under a flood. Of the following day, which was the last of our holiday, I remember little. We must have reached the port early after leaving the campsite, for my sole surviving memory of that afternoon is of sitting outside a small café near the sea and eating omelettes. I can see it now as if it were only moments ago that we had eaten: the greasy yellow omelette sitting slick on a blue-and-white china plate. Yet why my brain has held on to this incongruous detail at the expense of everything else that happened is a mystery. There is no logical way to explain why certain images travel effortlessly from the short-term memory to the dull and murky depths of the long-term memory while others, just as vital and worthy of memorial, are lost somewhere along the way and cannot be reclaimed.

We did not get on the ferry until late that night. I have a dim recollection of waking briefly in the car as we drove up the rattling metal ramps and into the great belly of the ship. Later on, I remember being led sleepily up a flight of criss-crossing stairs until we reached the stern and settled on one of the cold, nailed-down benches to watch the continent grow smaller and smaller behind us. We soon made our way inside and staked claim to a row of soft seats where my brothers and I could stretch out under the blankets we had lugged aboard. Then I must have fallen asleep again for an hour or two for the next thing I remember is being woken suddenly by panicked

shouting, and when I opened my eyes I could see Mum hurrying towards the door that led to the deck.

My stomach realised what was happening before my brain could catch up. I felt the ferry lurch and heave, and I found myself instinctively leaping up and running after Mum out onto the deck. Rain stung my face as I made my way to the railing; there countless passengers were leaning over and retching into the pitch-black ocean. The storm threw the ferry from side to side against relentless waves. Despite the nauseating seasickness brought on by the rough passage and the strong smell of vomit, I found my stomach calmed by the bracing sea air and the cold rain hammering down on us. Nevertheless, for some time I dared not move, and I was put off heading back inside by the talk I heard among some of the passengers about the rancid state of the toilet floors now overflowing with sick. I felt as if I had been asleep for days: the sky had been all but cloudless when I closed my eyes, yet I had woken to find that we were in the middle of some dark tempest that appeared to have laid claim to the whole channel.

I huddled close to Mum to save myself from getting soaked by the rain. I think I asked her what had caused such a terrible storm to appear so suddenly and unexpectedly. She did not reply. As the ferry swayed and bucked against the crashing waves, I turned around to see the passengers inside the cabin staggering around between the seats, uncertain as to which way they would be thrown next. It was as if we were inside one of those glass bottles sold in seaside gift-shops along with sticks of rock and bawdy postcards, the ones in which a tiny ship sloshes around upon a little blue water. No matter how much you shake the bottle or tip it from side to side, somehow the little ship always manages to stay afloat.

Again and again I asked Mum how much longer it would be until we were able to see England. Her answers were of little comfort, however, and only served to confirm that the storm had caused time to slow down. Each seasick minute lasted months. The ocean was conspiring to justify the fear that lay behind my brother's homesickness and his dislike of travel: namely that it is easy to leave a place but far harder to return. The rain coming in was almost horizontal, and the decking was soon slick with water. The successive swarm of passengers who hurried out to calm their nausea ended up looking like dancers in some manic ballet as they slipped and glided into one another in the darkness.

Or perhaps none of this is true. There was a boat, and there was a storm, and really that should be enough. But it is not. Because over time the stories of that night have become tangled in ways I can no longer unpick. My parents have talked about that ferry trip so many times that over the years their memories of the evening may have become confused with my own, and mine with theirs, until it is quite impossible to say whether the deranged ballerinas sliding around the deck were seen with eyes other than my own. There is a good chance my imagination relies on all our shared stories about that trip, and so has borrowed images from disaster films and television melodramas to clothe those stale old anecdotes. Moreover, each time someone talks of that terrible journey, it takes on still more mythic proportions, until none of us can say which is accurate and which hyperbole and fantasy. The only certainty is that once again my history is not my own.

Eventually the fierce waves began to settle and the sea grew calm around us. The rain kept on unabated and the immense distance ahead, where I kept hoping to see the harbour lights that would announce the end of our journey, remained as shadowy and dim as the midnight sky above. One by one the seasick passengers made their way

inside, to settle back into their warm seats or else wander around the small arcades and duty-free shops that filled the ferry. Dad was standing near the doors, taking a long drink from a bottle of water. As soon as we saw him, Mum and I were both seized by the same fear: what on earth might have happened to Luke during the confusion if no one had stayed with him. The list of terrible possibilities was endless. Who knows what a small, homesick child might do if he suddenly found himself abandoned during the most frightening of storms?

There was, though, no need for concern. Dad had been keeping an eye on Luke the whole time. All had been well and all was still well. For there was Luke exactly where we had left him, lying in the same blanket, and still sprawled out between two seats. Despite the hour of nauseating gales and heavy rain, despite the almost constant shouts of panic and the other children crying while the ferry pitched and rolled, and despite the stink of vomit that now filled the cabin, he had not woken since we came aboard. Though all my other memories of that night may be open to doubt, I am certain I have not invented that image of him asleep on the ferry. I can see it as clearly as if he were still in front of me: a little red-headed boy wrapped tight in an old blanket, made safe by the dream of going home.

19. *Instinct*

The human brain, unpotted and scooped free from the skull, is a swollen mess of clotted jelly; delicate, fragile, easily bruised. And I am convinced that it is for this reason that today, with my trip to Eastbourne still fresh in my mind, I am beset by the most unrelenting migraine. It is in fact so acute that I have abandoned my preparations for returning to work. I collapse upon a darkened bed. The more I work my brains for memories of my brother, the more unbearable the headache becomes. I lie with the curtains closed and my temples thudding out a dull beat in time with my pulse. It feels as though I have spent the last few days wandering around a maze inside my head, never certain how many times I have passed and revisited the same spot before.

It is the same disorientating sensation I felt when, as a child, I visited actual mazes with my brother. Neither of us had much of a sense of direction, and so nine times out of ten we became hopelessly lost. We would wander down the same blind alleys again and again, following each twist and turn and doubling back on ourselves countless times. I used to end up thinking that the world of the senses was out to trick me, and so could no longer be trusted. Nevertheless, even as I lie here in my room with my eyes pressed shut, I cannot stop myself starting down yet another track, following each memory doggedly in the hope that it might lead me to some undiscovered fragment of my brother. Yet, unlike Theseus with his ball of thread deep within the Cretan Labyrinth, I am unable to retrace my steps and escape. My thoughts range round in endless circles.

Each tick of the clock on the bedside table echoes and rebounds through my skull, and every sound increases my conviction that my memory is a labyrinth. It is not, though, like those unicursal prayer labyrinths, once found throughout Europe,



which served as symbols of the sinner's torturous journey towards grace; but, rather, like one of those intricate garden mazes at the back of country houses that my brother and I used to visit on holidays and school trips, at the heart of which there was nothing. At the centre of my thoughts too there is nothing – no answer or prize, but simply another path leading back into the labyrinth. My brother is nowhere to be found. And not only can I not locate him now but I am sure that over time the few unrecovered memories that remain inside me somewhere will slip further from my reach. These relentless thoughts are so discomfoting that, despite the throbbing ache behind my eyes, I can no longer bear to stay in bed, and so I force myself up and out of the room.

There is only one place left I can go. I make my way downstairs, ignoring the pile of papers stacked on my desk, evidence that soon I must return to work and at least make a show of getting on with my life. Outside I hurry to the garden shed with my hands held up over my eyes to fend off the sun. I am like some nocturnal creature for whom the startling clarity of daylight means only stupor and distress. I take out the stepladder as quickly as I can before fleeing back inside, my head stinging with each hurried stride. It is only much later, once back in the house, that I register that the funeral bouquets are gone. Everything is already attempting, against my wishes, to return to how it had been before.

I carry the stepladder up the stairs and set it down beneath the trapdoor in the ceiling. As I begin to climb the shaky steps I recall the stories my brother and I used to invent about the loft. It was a strange and mysterious place, another world sitting just above our own. Sometimes at night we would trade tall tales about a race of hunched and shrivelled beings who lived in the attic and fed upon all the old possessions we left up there. Our stories at least explained why the cardboard boxes in the attic grew

dog-eared and torn, and why some of the old clothes stored there were later found to have been chewed to tatters. My brother insisted that the creatures up there grew fat on the memories they sucked, like vampires, from the toys, books, board games and ancient teddy bears we had long discarded.

After pushing away the trapdoor I wriggle up through the gap, heaving myself onto the first wooden beam at the edge of the loft. My headache stops me from turning on the naked bulb which swings precariously from a cord looped round one of the rafters. I remain motionless for a few minutes as my eyes grow accustomed to the gloom. I am amazed at how soon the owl-like senses kick in, how quickly the darkness begins to take on various contours and shades, until it seems as if it has as many tones and hues as light itself. Why have I not come up here sooner? After all, my brother had always suggested camping out in the attic in order to get a glimpse of the strange ghouls and monsters who make their homes there. They will be glad of our company.

Crouching down to avoid the slanted rafters, I start across the rough wooden slats set out like train tracks over a sea of woolly yellow fibreglass. Soon the piles of boxes and plastic bags ahead come into focus, though in the dark the boundary between where one item ends and another begins is constantly changing, as if where their shadows meet and merge the boxes themselves might be seeping into one another and swapping places. The closer I get to the treasures I am after the more I feel like I have swapped one labyrinth for another. I cannot believe how much clutter we have consigned to the attic: shoeboxes overflowing with discoloured slides; a slide-projector with a shattered lens; black bin bags full of shellsuits, pastel leggings and crumpled denim jackets; piles of scratched vinyl discs beside a record player missing an arm; a few pairs of outgrown sports shoes and football boots; neat plastic

boxes filled with all our old homework books, test papers, lecture notes, course folders and essays; great heaps of old Christmas and Birthday cards bound in elastic bands; a huge tangled knot of wires, plugs, chargers and extension cables that resemble some metallic bird's nest; old gaming consoles that my brother and I used to stay up all night playing; a chocolate box filled with oddly-shaped seashells stolen from the beach; an assortment of spare buttons; the battered skeleton of a string-less guitar; a cardboard box stuffed with trophies, medals, sashes and certificates; old video cassettes taped over countless times; walkmans that can no longer fast-forward or rewind.

I have crossed the border into some ruined country that refuses to believe in the passing of time. Almost all the musty items I come across look as if they have only been kept in the hope that they might yet shrug off their cobwebs and insist on a second chance at life. It takes a few minutes of opening boxes, unknotting tightly-bound bags and peeling back lids before I find something that holds my interest. It is a bundle of my brother's childhood toys, among them several tatty-eared monsters with grubby fangs, a furry lizard missing an eye, and a couple of trolls with matted hair. Then, hiding at the bottom, I uncover four dumpy bears he had been given as a toddler and which he used to organise into a ragtag army that would follow his orders. The bear has always struck me as a strange beast to choose to give to children. It is neither easy to tame nor particularly renowned for its kindness or wisdom. It is not an animal anyone would choose to pet should they stumble across one in the wild. Something unsettling about our relationship with the world around us is revealed by the fact that we encourage children to pretend these wild animals are akin to Pooh and Paddington, tubby and bumbling and full of good humour. Real brown bears are, of course, among

the most agile and aggressive of predators, equipped with huge claws and keen-edged canines designed for ripping through flesh.

The only bears around us as children were our collections of stuffed animals that we pitted against each other in epic battles, but thousands of years ago real bears could be found throughout this island. More than that, their savagery was once celebrated. It is no accident that Artio, goddess of wildlife and fertility, worshipped by some of the peoples who inhabited these isles before the Roman invasion, was often represented as a bear – the female of the species is known to be fierce in its protection of its young. Moreover, the bear's capacity for hibernation took on a symbolic and mystical significance for druids and pagans. It is perhaps only in the darkest of winters that we dream of a sleep from which we might wake reborn.

Things were different by the early Middle Ages, when much sport was made of hunting bears. Parties of men on horseback would follow them to their winter lairs or else harry them into pitfalls before setting upon them with pikes, clubs, arrows, daggers and javelins. In later years, hunters trained boarhounds to attack the bear so that when the animal rose up to struggle with the dogs a spear might be more easily driven through the exposed neck or chest. The Domesday Book tells us that in the early eleventh century the city of Norwich gave Edward the Confessor an annual tribute of one bear and six dogs with which to bait it. Long after the last wild bear had disappeared from the forests of England, great herds of domesticated bears were still being bred and reared for fighting, a pastime that remained popular in the bigger cities well into the nineteenth century.

Despite all our attempts to civilise ourselves, the human fascination with blood might be explained as a relic of our own animal natures. Perhaps people took comfort in the torment of other creatures because this made their own sorrows small in

comparison. Perhaps there is even a little truth in the horrifying idea that running deep within our natures, like a river hidden beneath the earth, is a dormant cruelty that is nourished by the misery of others and that delights in any suffering so long as it is not our own. At any rate, bear-gardens, in which spectators crowded around a pit where a bear was chained to a stake in the ground, were frequently packed and saw outrageous sums of money change hands as onlookers waged bets on whether the animal would be mauled to death by the vicious dogs set upon it or whether it would kill them first.

In a letter to a friend back in the capital, Robert Laneham, a junior official in the court of Elizabeth I, described the bear-baiting the Queen herself watched in 1575. This popular sport was part of the show put on by Lord Leicester for the royal visit to Kenilworth. *The pink eyes of the bear*, wrote Laneham, *leer at the hounds* as they circled him and waited to attack. Laneham recounts that it was *very pleasant and a goodly relief to see the bear fight back. If he was bitten in one place, he would pinch and struggle to get away. If he was set upon then he would respond with biting and clawing, and with roaring, tossing and tumbling until he had fought free, and when he was finally loose would shake his ears twice or thrice and send blood dripping down his fur*. Laneham goes some way to explaining why people were drawn to those spectacles: we are, it seems, fascinated by the spirit that gives man or beast the strength to fight on in those moments when they ought logically to lie down and accept their fate, their death.

These days, though, we do our best to keep death hidden, perhaps thinking that by making it disappear from view we might somehow make ourselves immune to it. Bears and dogs are no longer made to kill each other for popular amusement, abattoirs are no longer found in the middle of cities, and criminals are no longer hanged on gallows erected in city squares and at crossroads. Yet only a couple of centuries ago it

was believed that one had a moral duty to bear witness to public executions and that the soul was made strong by watching the meting out of corporal punishment. That is not to say, however, that a number of people did not take as much pleasure in the macabre spectacle as they did from bear-baiting or cock-fighting. When the condemned were led through the streets towards the gallows the huge procession that followed behind were to be found shouting and joking, as though they had learned to laugh in the face of Death himself. When the famous gallows at Tyburn were moved to Newgate in 1783 to curtail the gathering of huge crowds, Samuel Johnson noted that the idea of a hanging without an audience was ridiculous: *if executions do not draw spectators, then they do not answer their purpose*. Death is a performance. It has to be seen.

Among the many who came to jeer and heckle and the few who came to clamour for the corpse once cut down, there were some, apparently, who returned to public executions time and again to try and observe the exact moment of death, the instant when the body stops moving and the soul departs. But death will not yield up its secrets so easily: at the vital moment we lose sight of it. This thought reminds me once again of labyrinths. I have been wrong all along. No one enters a maze to find something vital hidden at its centre. They are not designed to help us discover something. We step inside them for one reason, and for one reason alone: for the pleasure of losing our way.

*20. Museum of Curiosities*

With a sense of both hope and wonder I continue my journey across the loft. I step carefully over a stack of old suitcases and countless taped-up cardboard boxes, making my way towards the wooden chest I have spotted in the farthest corner where the roof slopes down to meet the rickety beams. I recognise it from my brother's old bedroom. He had told us it contained a stash of pirate's treasure he had hauled back from some distant island that could only be reached via a secret passage in the shed that only he knew about. I release the rusty buckle and flip the lid, and feel a rush of disappointment when I see it is completely empty. The past, it seems, has been stolen from under my nose. My head begins to throb again, and now the loft is spinning around me, with all the junk and clutter transformed into the misshapen horses and carriages of a whirling fairground carousel.

I do not dare try to make my way among the rafters while the carousel is swirling lest I stumble and fall into one of the pools of fibreglass frothing up like candy-floss between the planks, and so I begin to pick absentmindedly through the nearest cardboard box. I cannot make much sense of its contents. There is a small metal comb with pin-thick teeth, a toy mouse, a shabby pillow, and a plastic bowl. Ah! I have come across just some of the paraphernalia we assembled for the benefit of the cats we had kept as children. There has always been something about cats that unsettles me. They have a sleek and haughty coldness that can make me shudder and, as a child, I dreaded the gifts of maimed and bloody baby birds, dead field mice clammy and warm, or voles still twitching in agony that our cats would bring to the doorstep each morning. I did not mind sharing my home with them, but I never spent as much time trying to stroke them or tempt them into games as my brother did. He

treated them as though they understood each word he said, and he alone was in tune with their every animal whim. Like familiars, they came when he called, and often sat outside his bedroom door waiting patiently when he was not at home. At the time it did not seem strange to me that each of the successive cats we kept as pets chose to sleep in his room, at the end of his bed or curled up on his chair, while a number of them even took to following him around the house, staying so close beside him that it was possible to believe they had become knotted to his trouser leg.

I must, however, make clear that except for one fat tabby, our history with cats was calamitous.

- Buttons was the first and with us for little more than a year. After we moved house he became doleful and confused, and one day set off in search of his old home. He never returned.
- Then there was Smartie. She was a small Siamese with a milky-white coat and dabs of brown upon the tips of her ears and the pads of her feet. We had picked her up from the local animal rescue centre. She was stunted and never grew larger than the size of a kitten. Timid and shy, she would cower at the sound of car engines and run from the noise of the television. She nevertheless eventually worked up the courage to venture beyond the garden, and so became the first of our cats to be killed on the busy road beyond.
- Next was a black and white ragdoll named Frodo who we lost to a tumour grown rigid and stiff within his stomach. It was as if he had swallowed a hunk of concrete.
- Then came a dark shorthair with zebra markings, superior and sly. She was the second of our cats to be killed on the road outside our house. I cannot remember her name.



- Next up was Smudge, who disappeared after only a few weeks, though we later found that she had simply decided to move down the road to live with another family.
- The last was Mog, a dumpy tabby, and the only one to live out her natural life with us, though I suspect this was only because she was too indolent to ever muster up the energy to force her podgy bulk through the cat-flap in the backdoor.

Other families might have given up on the idea of keeping cats after the first two or three attempts. But somehow each new cat tragedy only made my brother more determined than ever to keep on stubbornly investing his time and love in these capricious creatures. Sometimes they were the only ones who took his side. Sometimes they were the only mammals in the house he felt like talking to. Sitting here now, beside this box of cat relics, I wonder whether my family's feline history had given my brother and I our first intimation of how loss works: it never hits you all at once. It is far more subtle. This summer, death walks among us as deftly and silently as if it has soft, padded paws.

If my brother was overwhelmed by the loss of each of his pets, he did his best not to show it. Despite his show of indifference, however, I am certain that he missed every cat intensely. He alone among us treated them not as mere pets but as intimate allies, and he alone could describe in detail the distinct characteristics and preferences of each one. In the day they were partners in most of his ragtag plans and schemes, and in the evening boy and cat often collapsed together in one great heap. Almost every one of the cats we had was deeply loyal to him. His legendary temper and his dictatorial approach to games of make-believe meant there were many afternoons when he would alienate even his closest friends and so be forced to play alone, and it

was then that he would enlist a cat as brother-in-arms. Occasionally I even thought I saw him engaged in conversation with them. I remember him once stating proudly that he was close to learning how to interpret every glance and movement – from the attentive way they preened their whiskers, through to the diverse ways in which they would flick and roll their tails as if tracing upon his leg a secret alphabet.

There were a few times when I felt a little jealous of the cats. Even during his unruly teenage years, when my brother was with them he appeared to shrug off some of his usual belligerence and hostility. They alone were allowed to enter his private den, and they alone were invited to find a place in his world of weights and weapons. Luke would argue passionately that they were the most intelligent of animals, hunters so fierce and quick that they could catch their own shadows should they ever wish. Indeed, should anyone dared suggest that they were, as Samuel Johnson would have it, simply a domestic animal that catches mice, he would become enraged.

By the way, Johnson himself kept a number of cats throughout his life, including a well-behaved white kitten called Lily and, most famously, an amiable black cat who went by the name of Hodge. In his mesmerising biography of Johnson, Boswell reports that Hodge got much satisfaction from scrambling up his master's chest while Johnson laughed and toyed with him by grabbing for his tail or rubbing his back. As well as displaying unbounded affection towards his many pets, the total number of which remains uncertain, Johnson sometimes acted as though they might be able to understand some of what he was saying and, therefore, made certain not to say anything that might offend or upset them. Years later, when Hodge was dying, Johnson even procured valerian to give him as a sedative to make his final hours as painless and comfortable as possible.

Perhaps we find consolation and companionship in animals for the same reason we once attributed mysterious and otherworldly powers to them: namely that though they share our homes and our lives, we are able to fathom little of what they are thinking and even less of what they might know. Or maybe animals simply remind us of our own animal natures, of all those urges, instincts and fears we cannot escape. After all, although Samuel Johnson affectionately called his pet Hodge *a very fine cat indeed*, he also frequently referred to melancholy as a black dog, lumbering always a few steps behind him.

One of the most notable facts that Boswell reveals about Hodge is that Johnson often fed him oysters. These Johnson always bought at the market himself, as he worried that asking Francis Barber, his Jamaican manservant, to do so might foster some resentment and cause him to take a dislike to the cat. Yet just as bears long ago disappeared from this island, so bad weather and gradual erosion of their beds has meant that the number of oysters to be found around the English coast is now just a tiny fraction of what it was before. Today, they are thought of as a rare and expensive delicacy, while only two hundred years ago there was such abundance that they were a cheap and popular food among the working classes.

My brother, I am fairly certain, never tried an oyster. He recoiled from anything plucked straight from the ocean. Such foods appalled him, and I am sure he would have balked at the slippery texture in his mouth. But who knows what he may have tried, or who he might have become if given a little more time. Unrealised futures are countries for which there are no maps. So perhaps my brother would have grown to love oysters, would have wolfed them down by the barrel-load. It is more likely, however, that they would be added to the ever-growing list he made of things in the world that were rubbish. Just rubbish.

I have to get out of the attic as soon as possible. If I stay under its mournful enchantment any longer I might emerge to find that, just as in many fairy tales, everyone below has aged many years in the few minutes or hours I have been gone. Grief, though, is adept at making the opposite true, and there have been many times in the last few days when I have felt that, whilst the rest of the world goes on much the same as before, I have been changed so much that I am now unrecognisable, even to myself.

As I step over a bundle of my brother's old notebooks, I manage to send a loose page fluttering down toward the fleecy crests of fibreglass. I reach down to retrieve it before setting off across the wooden slats back toward the trapdoor. I am half-way across the loft before I manage to turn the paper the right way up and work out what it shows. It is an unfinished sketch of a beady-eyed gecko skittering up a brick wall, undoubtedly from that phase when my brother developed an obsession with reptiles. For close to a year, he would regale us each mealtime with facts about the brute strength of Komodo dragons or the fearsome appetites of the anacondas lurking in the rivers that wind through the jungles of South America. Indeed, he once harassed my parents from morning to night with endless requests for a pet snake. In the end, they acquiesced.

At the time I was convinced that his sole reason for choosing such a pet was that he knew that they were the only creature of which I was afraid. He certainly succeeded in keeping me far from his bedroom for the year and a half it lived in there. However, my parents remain equally certain that I was never frightened of snakes until I had to share my home with one. There is no way of knowing now which account is true, though I am sure my reaction to the new pet was not helped by the fact that my brother contrived to let it escape from its slim glass tank as often as he could.

I have rarely felt more petrified than the time we were taking it back from the shop and it somehow managed to get loose in the car. For ten long minutes I did not know whether it might suddenly appear slithering up my leg or whether it might drop unexpectedly from behind my seat and wriggle down the back of my T-shirt. For a long time afterwards I could not shake off the conviction that something horrifying might be about to occur at any second.

As far as I am aware, the snake was never given a name. It was always simply The Snake, as if it were the only one of its kind left upon the earth. The Snake lived with us for about eighteen months, though I remember little else about it, no doubt because of my studied avoidance of my brother's room. I am not even sure what type of snake it was (adder? grass snake? corn snake? ball python?). Though it often featured in my dreams I rarely got close enough to get a good look at it. All I can recall is that it resembled a short braid of frazzled rubber, with green scales and pinprick eyes that I never once saw blink. It is tempting to think of the time my brother got the snake as the point where our lives diverged. Never again would our interests and preoccupations overlap as they had when the two of us were young and did almost everything together.

I set the trapdoor into the ceiling above me and climb back down into the daylight, gripping my brother's drawing tight in my fist in case it might try to flutter away. I cannot let it go. Perhaps if my brother had never had the snake then he might never have started down the road that eventually led him to push his body to breaking point in the search to shed his old skin and transform himself into a peerless bodybuilder.

I emerge out into the sun, and the brightness stings me like a sudden slap in the face. I push on regardless, wanting to replace the stepladder above the garden shed

before my family returns home. I do not want them to know I have spent much of the afternoon up in the loft. I rush back inside, my eyes raw from the blazing sunlight. I hurry to my room as quickly as if there is a snake at my heels. I recall the frozen foetuses of baby chicks that were bought to feed my brother's snake and a shudder trickles down my neck. They were furless, half-formed scrags of twirled muscle and paper-thin flesh, frosty and rigid from the freezer. Another shiver runs down the knots of my spine as I picture first the snake with a great swollen lump halfway down its length, and next the hands that had to collect the tiny foetuses, still slick with mucous from the egg, and pack them into an ice box, ready for sale. Back then I could not think of anything more disturbing than those half-formed creatures, never born and yet now twice dead.

I set my brother's drawing down on my desk and lie on my bed. I am unable to shake the image of those sleek, blue-tinged foetuses from my mind. Worse still, they are soon followed by other images of malformed creatures, each more grotesque and disconcerting than the last, a procession of terrible animals loping through my brain until I can think of nothing else. It has finally happened. Just as I feared. Grief and sleeplessness have finally driven me completely mad. And I am on the verge of screaming, until I realise with a jolt that my imagination is not playing tricks on me. I really had seen all of these hideous things with my brother many years before. I lie as still as I can with my eyes clamped shut, and try to coax the dormant memory.

And here it is. And Luke too. He is bounding up a winding staircase that leads into a narrow gallery. As ever, I am following close behind. Yes, I remember now. I cannot say for certain where this strange place is, for I never returned there, and must have pushed it to the very furthest corners of my mind. We must have been on our way home from visiting someone, an elderly relative, perhaps, because we had broken

up a long drive by stopping for lunch at some bistro just off the main road. We trudged inside to find that the restaurant was a dark and airless place with a thick, bristling carpet that almost swallowed our shoes. The hint of disinfectant in the air reminded me of a hospital. From the moment we walked through the door something told me that I would not like this place.

I think my parents felt much the same, but none of us had the energy to get back into the car and search for somewhere better. We settled at a table near the door and looked around. The walls were covered with huge glass boxes filled with stuffed birds and squirrels set out in poses that suggested they had been frozen suddenly while collecting nuts or building nests and were as surprised to find themselves in this grim, stale place as we were. Around one corner was a canteen where people were picking up wooden trays and queuing to collect plates of food before following the line round to a grumpy woman seated at a till. My brother must have been seven or eight, and it was he who spotted the sign that advertised a *Museum of Curiosities* on the top floor of the building. After a little badgering, my parents agreed that he could take a look around while they got us some food on the condition that I went with him. With that, he bolted for the staircase and I ran after him as quickly as I could.

The stairs led up to a narrow gallery with many shelves and glass cases on either side. There was no one up there but us. The room was unnaturally quiet, as though it had been soundproofed to stop the sound of people in the gallery reaching the diners below. Each footstep was muffled. The next few minutes were akin to one of those dreams where, though you know perfectly well that you are dreaming, it is impossible to wake. As soon as I stopped at the first display, I knew that something was not right. Inside a huge glass jar I saw a piglet with two heads sprouting from its pink puckered carcass. At first I was sure that it had to be some kind of fake, an

elaborate rubber puppet designed to scare children. But the longer I stared, the more I began to doubt my initial judgement. Both its pairs of eyes were screwed shut, and its tail was coiled behind it like the tiny, intricate spring of a pocket watch. I remember standing transfixed, unable to move until I heard my brother calling in amazement further up the gallery. I turned to see him grinning wildly as he pressed his face up against another display case. Though I cannot recall what he said to me, the image is burned in my mind of his breath spilling mist across the glass in front of him. As it cleared his reflection appeared to merge with the collection of strange mutations and curiosities preserved within the jars inside.

There are still a few small museums hidden within pubs and inns throughout the country, yet I have never seen one as strange and ghastly as this. The whole gallery, though admittedly small, was crammed with an unsettling assortment of deformations and unusual anatomical specimens. Rows upon row of curios were displayed within the cabinets. It was like some Victorian carnival. I passed countless jars filled to the brim with formaldehyde, and bobbing amid the thick, viscous liquid were an array of pale, malformed foetuses. I saw a toad with an extra set of spindly legs. A hare with an extra eye peering back at me. A stillborn calf with grey, mottled hooves folded up against its chest and a face that was almost human. Then there were rats and rabbits preserved in various stages of dissection, skinned and flayed and with rungs of muscle unwound from their tiny skeletons. Each of the exhibits spelled out the simplest and clearest of truths: that the tiniest of changes is enough to transform the familiar world into something else – something terrifying.

There were many more misshapen creatures on display, each staring at me through the glass with pleading eyes. I remember that I hurried down the second half of the gallery with my hands up around my face, shielding my eyes from the rest of



the jars and cases. By the time we returned downstairs I felt stunned and disorientated, while in contrast my brother had become giddy with excitement. At the table I could not bear to even look at my plate, let alone at the relish and enthusiasm with which my brother wolfed down his food – sloppy halves of grilled tomatoes, browned mushrooms slick in their juices, rashers of sunburn-pink bacon with curled lapels of fat, greasy hashbrowns and bulging sausages so swollen they looked ready to burst. I managed only two mouthfuls before my stomach rebelled and I had to make a run for the toilets, hands clutched tightly over my mouth.

Even when we had left that astonishing place, I felt nauseous and perturbed. Beside me, in the back of the car, my brother was babbling on in gruesome detail about the freakish animals on display in the gallery. I was not, though, able to focus on what he was saying, as my mind was mulling over something that had been said the week before in school. For some unknown reason, in the middle of a lesson about basic arithmetic, one of the girls down the table from me had raised her hand and asked our teacher what being dead was like. Though this shocked the rest of the class into silence, our teacher did not seem in the least bit surprised by this uninvited question. After only a short pause, he replied that death was like a calm and peaceful sleep, and that we would all awake at the end of time and rise from our graves to join God in heaven. Then, as if there had been nothing unusual about this interruption, he returned to the blackboard.

It was this deeply alarming concept that filled my head during the long drive home from that strange pub. For as my brother babbled on, I could imagine nothing more horrifying than the idea that all the creatures in the *Museum of Curiosities* might, after their own long sleep, suddenly come back to life – the rabbits leaping from the bottles, trailing skin and fur and muscle behind them as if they were the trains of

bloody wedding dresses; the grey-tinted calf breaking free from its jar and starting to low; the toad dancing on all six legs; and the two-headed piglet starting to blink, beginning to see the end of the world in perfect double.

21 *Keeping a Tally*

I have become bogged down in time. I can almost hear it slurp and gurgle as I sink deeper in. And the worst thing is that it is all stolen time – time that belongs to him, yet cannot be returned. I am fixated with trying to piece together my brother's last days. I am obsessing over every detail, no matter how much they bother me. But there is not much to go on. Most of our working days follow the same pattern, and are easily forgotten. There are few among us, for example, who can recall what happened on each day of the final week of January last year, or can recollect with clarity the minutiae of every Tuesday in April. Almost as soon as each day is finished it is cast aside and lost forever. Songwriters tell us that time is an ocean, and if this is true then it is one we plough with broken and tattered fishing-nets, catching only a few fleeting moments. Of the tens of thousands of days that make up our lives, we remember only the tiniest fraction, and the few days we can recall are outnumbered thousands to one by the shadowy mass of the weeks, months, years, even decades that we have forgotten.

I sit at my desk and attempt to total up my brother's allotted time. I estimate that his life amounted to only 8,923 days. Of these I can account for perhaps two or three hundred at best, though admittedly most of these are woefully incomplete and full of holes. I try to add to this deranged arithmetic the new experiences he never got a chance to try, the places he never visited, the hours wasted on sleep, the lost opportunities, and even the percentage of his life the two of us spent fighting, arguing or simply ignoring each other. Soon I am standing at the edge of an arithmetical abyss, with nothing below but an infinity of lunatic calculations.

The most crazed calculation is, of course, how much time do I have left to live. The next most demented calculation is how much more time does the world have? Throughout history there have been countless groups who have decided all such calculations point to the fact that time is about to run out. Some of the first Christians, living two thousand years ago, were certain that Christ would return within their lifetimes, and thus made ready. Since then, many more have proposed that the end of the world is close at hand, that the Second Coming will occur any day now: a hundred years after the birth of Jesus, at the dawn of the first millennium, during the Reformation, during the Enlightenment, and again in the approach to the year 2000. Time and again, thousands have believed that the world as we know it was about to be obliterated. I have myself been accosted by both Jehovah's Witnesses and evangelical Christians who have assured me that we are living in the last days, that everywhere are signs that the time of revelation is near, and that any week now the clouds will rain fire and the clamour of angels and trumpets will be heard spilling from a deep fissure cleaved in the sky.

Some, though, look the other way, spending their lives with one eye trained over their shoulder, looking longingly back to a golden age. The further the past slips from them, the stronger they feel its pull. It is no surprise that almost every culture in the world has a concept of a golden age – a time of peace, prosperity and wisdom, that has now been lost forever. Yet the idea of a golden age is by its very nature mercurial and ever-changing. The playwrights and historians of the later Roman Empire looked back to the reign of Augustus as the pinnacle of civilisation – when literature flourished, the *pax Romana* spread almost unimpeded across the Mediterranean, the city and Senate were stable, and the old gods still answered the calls of the augurs. But the poets living at that time of Augustus would not have agreed, for they were

busy looking back still further and lamenting the loss of a still more ancient age when men had lived in peace with nature, and untroubled by gods or the fates. There is always further back to go.

Our own golden age is equally hard to pin down; indeed, a hundred of us might give a hundred conflicting accounts. Some might hark back to those distant days when these islands crackled with druids whispering their secrets amid caves and forests. Others, though, might cite the fierce unity of the tribes joined under Boudicca; or the Elizabethan age, with its poetry, drama and armadas; or England's fleeting Commonwealth; or those several decades when the British Empire dominated the globe. In parks and pubs up and down the country, it is never difficult to find an old man who will happily tell you how things were better back in his day. The present, in comparison, is dismal and dreary; its people have lost their way. There is, it seems, something peculiarly human about the enduring belief that the world is slowly turning to ruin, its glory and grandeur crumbling to dust.

As for my brother, perhaps he too felt the world was failing; and perhaps that's why he focused all his attention inward, on his body. In the eighteen months before his death he worked out with an astonishing intensity. He suddenly decided that everything about his life was too slight. He wanted weight, size, heft. He wanted to fill the whole room with himself. Every day he followed a zealous bodybuilding routine, driving straight from the building site where he worked to that body-building site we call a gym, stopping only briefly on the way to wolf down a huge plate of pasta. Then, about six months into this intense new regime, he denounced as inadequate his daily schedule of protein-shakes and assorted vitamins and supplements and his diet of raw eggs, bunches of bananas and piles of bland carbohydrates. What he needed was anabolic steroids. These he began to procure from a contact at the gym.

What hand did the drugs have in his death? Even the coroner admitted that it was impossible to say. Did they help push his heart past its limit, exacerbating the genetic mutation none of us knew about until it was much too late? Or did they keep him going, giving him the extra strength to carry on while his buried disease grew worse and worse? The only thing that is certain is that he was careful to keep his secret well-guarded, and only a few of his closest friends knew about the drugs he took each week. That did not, however, stop many more from correctly guessing what he had been doing. It's far from usual to gain more than three stone in little more than a year. His chest turned into a huge barrel of strained muscle, his biceps threatened to rip every T-shirt he stretched over his head, and his neck became a bulging tree-trunk knotted with swollen veins. Somehow, though, we his family neither asked whether drug use played a role in his sudden metamorphosis nor even suspected it. I cannot help wondering whether this blindness was accidental or whether we willed ourselves not to see what he was doing to himself.

Did he, then, think only in terms of size, of the effect his great hulking presence produced, of the looks people stole at him, of the comments they whispered? Did he think the larger he grew the more threatening his appearance might become, until no one in the whole world would dare to challenge him? Did he ever believe he had achieved his goal? Or did he dream of growing even bigger, of outgrowing everyone else in the local gyms until he was the undisputed colossus of the south coast? Though it is impossible to second-guess the strange mechanics of his interior life, I am certain that his mind returned to his obsession again and again throughout his final weeks. None of us had ever seen him as focused and determined as he was over the idea that he might remake his body completely. The project consumed him: the harder he trained, the more fanatical he became. For the best part of two years he

was absolutely relentless in his bodybuilding, in his singular project of slowly transforming himself into something new. Or someone new.

I cannot say exactly what impelled him to such extremes. But then perhaps none of us can pinpoint with certainty where our longings are born from, nor where our dreams might lead us. I think of my brother as akin to a giant panda or a dodo, creatures whose inner nature has somehow driven them towards destruction. Pandas were once carnivorous and, equipped with great speed and ferocity, were able to hunt down any number of smaller mammals on which to feed. Yet for some unknowable reason they have long since evolved into herbivores who survive almost solely on bamboo, though their stomachs and digestive systems remain those of meat-eaters. This means they are condemned to spend more than half their waking hours eating and, in order to conserve the meagre nutrition gained from their new diet, spend most of their lives in a slothful and sleepy state. This strange and gradual adaptation means that the few thousand wild pandas still living in the mountainous forests of Sichuan Province are now facing extinction. It is as if something deep within the species is urging the pandas towards annihilation.

The evolution of the dodo appears equally reckless. Its ancestors were both graceful and capable of flight, and yet somehow they were, over many millennia, transformed into dumpy, waddling birds with stubby, useless wings, a top-heavy gait and a truly monstrous bill. These mutations meant that, when predators were introduced to their island paradise on Mauritius, they could do nothing to avert their fate. At the end of the sixteenth century a group of Dutch sailors accidentally landed on the island, bringing with them dogs, cats, rats and pigs, and the dodo's days were immediately numbered. The last recorded sighting of the bird came less than eighty years later, in 1662. It is interesting to note that this final sighting was made by a

Dutch sailor who had also turned up on the island unintentionally, having been shipwrecked there by foul weather and tempest. Just like the giant panda or the dodo, my brother had no way of knowing what the results of his transformation might be; nonetheless every day he pushed himself further and further away from who he once was. It has been suggested that within each of us there is a tiny part that longs for nothing more than to be completely erased from the world. My brother, though, would have had little time for such a theory.

But maybe I am being too hasty, for he would often remark that people seemed to do their best to wreck everything decent around them. I heard him say once that the reason he never bothered with the news was because it only ever showed *idiots smashing each other to smithereens or fucking knobs arguing over how best to screw up the country*. In that sense, he did think that everything was heading to the dogs, the world inching thoughtlessly towards an annihilation of sorts.

But there must be some way to cheat history. I wish that instead of resembling a hapless dodo, my brother could have been more like those so-called Lazarus species: creatures once thought to be long extinct but that, against all odds, are suddenly rediscovered. One such species is the Cuban Solenodon, a tiny nocturnal animal that resembles a cross between an overgrown shrew and a bug-eyed mole. It was thought to have disappeared more than a hundred years ago, but was instead simply hiding from history deep beneath the earth in its labyrinthine burrows. Another of the Lazarus species is the fearsome Serpent-eagle that lives in the dense forests of Madagascar and passes the time by forever darting down from amid the branches to hook a snake or frog with its talons and bear them up to its nest for a feast. It was thought lost in the 1950s but was recently spotted once more. Then there is the Cahow of Bermuda, an ashen-featured seabird with a dark nape and patches of sea-spray



white on its underside – it was thought to have been driven to extinction in the 1620s when colonists introduced dogs and diseases to the island, yet somehow survived unseen. More than three hundred years later a number of Cahows were spotted on a rocky cay nearby, unconcerned by the passing centuries. I cling to the hope that Luke might also have found a way to escape death, that he has somehow managed to fool us all and is in reality hiding somewhere nearby.

These species that appear to come back from the dead are, of course, named after one of the most famous passages in the New Testament. Lazarus was a follower of Jesus from Bethany, near Jerusalem, and his story is told in the Gospel of John. When Lazarus fell sick, the evangelist tells us, his sisters Mary and Martha sent an urgent message to Christ, begging him to come to them as soon as he could. Yet despite receiving the missive in good time, Jesus does not ask his disciples to hurry with him right away, and in fact they remain where they are for two more days before starting the journey towards Bethany. In light of later events, this delay appears both monstrous and incomprehensible. By the time they finally make it to the house, the disciples find that Lazarus has succumbed to his illness and that his corpse has already been placed in the grave. Both sisters are distraught. Each in turn approaches Jesus and, between sobs, appear to rebuke him saying *Lord, if thou hadst been here, my brother had not died*. It is a startling indictment, and one that Jesus seems to tacitly accept, for in the verse that follows we read that *Jesus wept*. Nevertheless, Jesus and the two sisters then make their way to the cave where Lazarus has been buried. As they walk, the crowd that has gathered around them starts whispering that surely this man who opened the eyes of the blind could have cured our friend had he hurried a little and got here a few days before. Once at the cave, Jesus demands that the stone covering the entrance be prised away. He then calls out for the man inside to come

forth. According to the evangelist, Lazarus obeys the command and emerges from the darkness, his hands and feet bound in the clothes of the grave, his pale face still covered, yet his lungs full of breath once more, and his eyes full of tears.

Of what happened to Lazarus next and what he did after being raised from the dead, the apostle tells us little. Of what the man himself has to say about his four days in the grave, we hear nothing at all. No doubt he is grateful, as are his sisters. But should they be? This part of the gospel is deeply unsettling, for Christ's decision to wait before travelling to Bethany makes the resurrection of Lazarus seem little more than a calculated trick designed to impress those around him. The account even ends with the assertion that many who witnessed the astonishing events became Jesus's followers that very day. That the pain and suffering of His follower and his family might have been spared is treated as though it is beside the point, and no one asks why this one man has been given a second chance at life while the rest of us get only one. I find the story troubling. It suggests that we are all at the mercy of divine whims that we cannot hope to comprehend.

My brother, I suppose, was not the victim of divine whim, but more precisely genetic whim. It was the random caprices of genetics that did for him. I am thinking not only of his death, for his DNA made him both prone to cardiomyopathy and red-haired. Moreover, from birth he was cursed with allergies. And then, of course, there was the dyslexia. We do not need to believe in God, or in abstract concepts such as fate or destiny, to see that, like Lazarus, our lives and deaths are dictated by forces well beyond our control. My brother's whole trajectory was mapped out for him, set in motion by nothing more than a few random mutations of his genes. The panda, the dodo, my brother.

*22 My Word Against His*

It is around about now that Luke butts in. *No. You've got it all wrong. It wasn't like that at all! No way. You've screwed up my words. Fucking twisted the past. All this fucking grief. Its a fucking joke!*

I protest but there is no response. Nothing. I am talking to myself.

These days I long for his voice. Not to see him, or to hug him or hold him close, but to hear him. It is as if I understand that seeing him again is impossible but cannot let go of the possibility that late one night I might still receive a drunken call on my mobile. Just a quick call. Just a call to let us know that he's all right.

I listen for his voice everywhere, and on the verge of sleep I almost hear something. It is the sound of his childhood voice, the curious and cheeky storyteller, whispering in the dark.

What galls me, you know, is the suspicion that all this grief, all this fucking grief, might merely be a trick of evolution. Consider how animals in a pack protect the youngest, the smallest, even though these helpless creatures are useless to them. The desire for the group to survive is somehow hardwired into their instinct. Love, and the pain that is its twin, is nothing but a ruse to ensure the survival of our species. We feel for others so strongly because millions of years of evolution have programmed the human animal to put the group before the individual – or, to put it another way, because on our own we don't know who we are. Without Luke, I don't know who I am.

I am alone in the house today. I make my way into the garden and stalk across the grass to the bottom hedge where I am hidden by the trees, and there I shout. I

holler and roar until my voice is sore. *Come on, you dickhead!* I shout. *Come back!*  
*You selfish prick!*

I feel guilty. But it isn't enough to stop me doing it one more time. I want him to answer back. Like those arguments when we were teenagers, I want to goad him until he cannot help but explode. Anything to make him speak. This same impulse soon drives me to my dad's study to search, amid the ancient creaky filing cabinet, for any remnants of my brother's words. I find a couple of notebooks from Luke's schooldays.

The reading, however, is unsettling. In one blue binder I find some brochures and certificates, such as documents about his work experience with The Princess of Wales's Royal Regiment, some cuttings from the local newspaper about hockey matches he had taken part in, and his notes from the course he had taken after he finished school on Sports Medicine First Aid. I find a great number of worksheets and photocopies, among them the *Seven Essential Components of a Healthy Diet*, plans for *Endurance Workshops* and *Muscular Endurance Training*, and a handout on *Care for Your Body* – this, I feel, he should have read more carefully. However, the page that catches my eye is one he had written in pencil on a piece of A4 lined paper. The words 'Lesson Plan' are underlined at the top of the page. The aim of the lesson is "to climb a rope". There is nothing unusual in its contents – the list of objectives, the development game, the concluding warm-down stretches, all measured out in 5 minute blocks; but it makes me think of the Indian Rope Trick, where some skilled mystic or trickster throws a rope into the air then climbs up until he disappears, far above the heights the eye can follow, only for the slack rope to fall suddenly back to earth.

Meanwhile, in a crusty yellow notebook I find what must have been some of his earliest writing. It appears to be classwork from primary school. The exercises are almost certainly answers to questions the teacher had set about the lessons that day, but I grow increasingly unnerved with each page I study. Much of it looks cryptic and sinister to me now, as if subsequent events have worn away the original meaning and uncovered something hidden beneath.

One page simply reads:

*Tuesday 5<sup>th</sup> February*

Louis Braille was the four child at his family.

His house was made of brick.

The following page contains a picture of a man riding a bright green tank done in garish felt-tip, and towards the end of the notebook there is a pencil drawing of a family (or, at least, a collection of people of mismatched sizes) walking up a hill. It all has a strange hallucinatory quality to it, and the more I flick through the pages the more I feel myself sinking into some inescapable dream where all logic is suspended and nothing is quite as it seems.

Another page contains this story:

*Thursday 12<sup>th</sup> January*

Ozzie Watson found a note on the brick it said get out of town and don't come back Mr Grant went to the sweets shop to get sweets for his dog and his dog had gone it was in the caravan.

Who, I wonder, had thrown the brick? Did Ozzie Watson harbour some dark secret? Who is Mr Grant, and why does he feels it is ok to feed a dog sweets? And why had the dog gone to the caravan? Why? Why?

On the facing page are no more riddles – instead, my brother's attempt to account for what he had done in the school holidays:

At Christmas I got a boxing set and a skateboard and a boglin.

I was skateboarding on my skateboard with boxing gloves.

Beneath this the teacher has written, in red pen, *Was that very difficult?* Yes, yes it was. He so often made things difficult.

Beside the school notebook is a half-finished scrapbook from one of our holidays on the Isle of Wight. It is mostly filled with pictures: a drawing of a ferry leaving the port, another of dinosaurs munching clumps of grass, one of a lizard climbing a branch and one of a tarantula building an ornate web as intricate in its crisscrossing design as a snowflake under a microscope.

But none of these fragments is enough. None of them are 'him', no more than the diary I kept for a few weeks when I was thirteen is 'me'. I am left trying to piece together what he really thought from guesswork and conjecture. I would love nothing more than to believe that all our thoughts exist beyond us – that they travel from our minds out into the ether, where they drift invisibly among us, like radio waves that we might tune into at will. Yet even if this is the case, they would surely fade eventually, grow faint and indistinct. And all that would remain would be static.

To memory alone I am forced to turn, but that is worse. I do not know where to begin. I sit at my desk and try to dredge up all the conversations we'd ever had,

everyone we had chatted about, all the arguments and minor disagreements, all the jokes and plans, all the banal chit-chat, just so that I can bring back the timbre and catch of his voice. Before I know it I am overwhelmed by a host of Lukes: Luke as he was just a month before, ripped and strutting; scrawny teenage Luke, all lip and grit; Luke reclaimed from childhood, a freckled whirligig thing with his feline allies, his leather jacket and boxing gloves; bouncer Luke in his black suit and stern expression; practical-joker Luke crouched inside a cupboard waiting to leap out; Luke who would argue with me until he was blue in the face; toddler Luke who used to follow me around and copy every word I spoke; and then all the half-glimpsed Lukes of the years we spent in different cities; all the might-be could-have-been Lukes; all the possible Lukes that would be living out there still if it wasn't for that one day. And each of these Lukes speaks with a different voice, and together are so loud in their banter and mocking giggles that I can no longer hear anything else amid the din, the din, the din. I clamp my hands around my ears.

At last, silence. He is speaking no more. Just like him. It is as if I have finally asked him to tell his side of the story, and all he has to say is this:

And this:



And this:

*23. Last Day*

‘And then I woke up, and it was all a dream.’ That is how every story the two of us wrote together as children ends, with the past wiped clean and the world returned to how it ought to be. My first hope on waking is to find out that some such miracle has occurred and that the week has been nothing but a hallucination. Yet I find the world unchanged from the day before. The same dull summer draping the house in sickly light, the same suffocating numbness and torpor, as though all my senses have been made drunk, and the same conviction that time is as thick and heavy around me as quicksand. Every day we come closer to the moment when we must return to our jobs and pick up our lives where we have left off, every day the words of comfort and consolation grow fewer and fewer. And yet the more time goes on, the more my mind returns to the 24th of June, and the longer I spend trying to figure out what might have happened that day.

He wakes up groggy and unrefreshed. Of that much I am certain, since for many weeks he complained of being unable to sleep. He was, though, both absurdly stubborn and untrusting of doctors, and so he had laughed away all suggestions that he might visit the local surgery or else stop by the pharmacy on his way home from work. He was convinced that his sleeplessness was the result of too many hours on camp-beds and fold-out settees, and that he would return to his normal habits once he moved out of borrowed rooms and into his new house. He set up a large fan beside his bed, but still spent the nights sweaty and restless. We frequently poked fun at his appearance in those last weeks – his face often glowed as red as a Chinese lantern, which we jokingly attributed to some experiment with fake-tan gone wrong or overexertion upon the bench-press. In the days since his death we have been poring

over a thousand details like these again and again, and if we learn anything it is that to think the world travels ever forward is nothing but an illusion, and that in truth we live our lives backwards, always retracing our steps in desperate search of the things that slipped our notice the first time around.

Like an infectious sickness, Luke has passed his insomnia on to us. None of us can sleep a full night through. The normal pattern of our lives has been reversed, and we move through each day as if sleepwalking, dazed and disorientated, and awaken to the shock of clarity only in the silent hours that precede dawn.

On his last day, my brother climbs out of bed feeling tired and unsteady after another sleepless night. He wanders slow and bear-like to the kitchen to turn on the kettle, certain that this working day will be no different from the one before or the one still to come. He sets a pot of water on the hob, places in three or four eggs and leaves them to rattle together as the water begins to bubble. While they boil he drinks a glass of orange juice. Then he jogs back up the stairs to his room. He bounds up as quickly as possible, for though he feels his great, lumbering body to be sluggish and slow after such a troubled night, he cannot resist testing himself, to confirm that, with a little effort, he can blot out any ache or discomfort and carry on as ever. He throws on the light blue jeans and tight-fitting T-shirt at the top of the pile of creased and rumpled clothes that is spreading, like an unstoppable flood, across the room and slowly obscuring more and more of the carpet beneath. He pushes his feet into scuffed-white trainers. And yawns. He passes over his collection of fake Rolexes, chunky sovereigns and silver chains, which would only get chipped and dented at the building site, and

retrieves his mobile from under his gym bag – actions, all of these, from which the brain is disengaged. His mind is elsewhere.

Back in the kitchen he juggles the hot eggs between his hands. He peels them slowly, as if unwrapping a fragile gift – trailing the shell and membrane clockwise round the egg, concentrating on getting it done in one fluid movement without tearing the soft white hidden beneath. He eats around the yolks, and then discards them: four doughy yellow ping-pong balls that he sweeps across the worktop and into the bin. By now his thoughts are ahead of him, racing on out of the door and cataloguing all the jobs that need to be done, considering where he might go after work and whether to text his friends about that drink tomorrow night. I would like to think that he stops, in the middle of his hurried morning routine, and registers something unusual about the day. Perhaps the shards of warm light breaking through the grey clouds and spilling golden puddles on the rooftops, or the call of dogs barking coded messages to each other from distant gardens. This is unlikely though. I suspect that instead he rushes on, grabbing his lunchbox from the fridge and trying to recall where he left his car keys.

Next, because he knows instinctively that the best way to stop the clouds from opening is to carry an umbrella, and the most certain way to ensure grey and murky weather is to leave the house in sunglasses, he doubles back for his jacket. He hopes thereby to change the day. Cantering back through the kitchen one last time he thwacks into a chair he does not remember being there. The world for him is never as it ought to be. Even long before his body grew to such a hulking size he was clumsy, as if uncertain of the space he had been allocated. He half-stumbles, cursing, but has forgotten it by the time he is out of the door. Yet it will leave a dull green bruise, the colour of dun emeralds, on his shin. This is not unusual. Ever since he was tiny his body has been mapped with an assortment of scars, scrapes, wounds and contusions

whose provenance was somehow always a mystery to him. There were a number of occasions when he was unable to recall how he sustained injuries that had been inflicted only a matter of hours before, and even when reminded he would listen to the details with his brow scrunched and his eyes half-closed, as if he was hearing a story for the first time and the events described had all happened to someone else. At other times he gave the appearance of sleepwalking through the day, bumping into furniture and other stray objects in his path as though he was oblivious and unaware of the world rushing by around him.

He drives a purple, second-hand Ford Galaxy, a great hulking people-carrier that is often cluttered with the tools and equipment he ferries to and from building sites. Today, though, it is empty save for the few hip-hop CDs scattered across the passenger seat and the tin of extra strong mints that slides across the dashboard every time he turns a corner. Last month he forgot about the protein-shake he had taken with him and, after seven hours in the sweltering car, it exploded all over one of the seats in the back. Now the stomach-turning reek of rotten eggs and putrid milk hangs over the whole car, impossible to dispel. He is forced, therefore, to drive with the windows down. But despite the cool breeze he remains sweaty and flushed.

He takes pleasure in the size of the vehicle, being raised so high that he can look down on the rest of the traffic, peering over the roofs of the smaller cars below as though he is floating far above both them and their mortal concerns. So far he has written off four cars. It is with some pride that he recounts to his friends how much car insurance he must now pay each year, and though during one crash he even managed to destroy a motorbike, each time he comes away with no more than bruises. His driving alternates between reckless arrogance and the most tentative caution. Half of him believes that he is immune to misfortune on the road, while the other half

thinks that the next time he gets into an accident the guardian angel of the asphalt may finally be looking the other way.

Despite the early hour and the bass-heavy beat of the CD, he hears the building site before he turns the final corner and faces it head on. The commotion there is overwhelming. The site seems to have an insatiable appetite for tumult and to thrive on the cacophony of clanking tools and hoarse shouts, as if prey to the superstition that if it falls silent for even a second then it will descend into a torpor from which it will never recover. All here is noise: from the trailer and portaloos near where he parks his car, across the level stretch of mud and dust, past the half-finished steel framework surrounded by pyramid-like piles of hollow metal poles, and as far as the mixture of hedgerow and traffic cones that marks the border of the plot. Noise. Noise. Noise. And once everyone has arrived and heard the foreman's few morning mumbles, the site grows even louder, until it is an orchestra of demonic percussion, with every corner clamouring to be heard: the sonorous moan of the cement-mixer, the purr of turning cranes, the gripe and scrape of handsaws, the high and insistent screech of drills and circular saws, the rustle and crunch of work boots wading through gravel and dirt, the scratch and scrape of steel girders being dragged upright, the cymbal crash and whip-cracks of metal sheets being whacked by the wind as they are lugged higher up the framework and, above it all, the persistent holler of jokes, orders, and insults, each one affirming the ceaseless rhythm to which the universe works.

He is a steel erector and, as ever, he moves among the other construction workers, joking and clowning. He is red-faced and dog-tired, but is grinning and happy to be here. Just the previous year he was forced to take time off work after first breaking his wrist on site and, then, after an operation on a hernia in his stomach. The

relentless strain of work and weight-lifting took its toll. And during those long months of inaction he had found it impossible to rest, forever prowling round his house and garden like a captive tiger.

He now eats his packed lunch with a few of his workmates, the group of them sat out in the midday sun in the trailer of a shoddy work truck. The conversation follows the familiar pattern of gentle ribbing and reheated jokes, a competitive volley of friendly taunts and mild mockery spun out from mouths stuffed with sandwiches. Then back to the job, the afternoon much as the morning. He gives in to the stringent rhythm of his work, piecing together the metal decking as though assembling some huge industrial puzzle, welding the joints of the great steel frame reaching up towards the sky, and soon his thoughts are venturing further and further into the vast hinterland of daydream and fantasy.

As soon as the last hour arrives, he follows the others and tosses his dented yellow hardhat on the pile. He helps load away the tools, roll up the engineering plans and set out the traffic cones and, since by now almost everyone on site looks sunburnt and dappled with fat beads of sweat, no one notices that his face is unusually blushed and blotched, nor that he is struggling hard for each ragged breath. He is probably as heedless to that big, dumb mess of distended muscle going berserk in his chest as the rest of them, and so trades the usual friendly insults with his mates as he makes his way back to the car, and gives in to guffaws when one of them trips over a stack of unused girders dumped beside the trailer. On the drive back he weighs up the choices for the evening and, for once, too worn out to contemplate the regular trip to the gym, and with no doorman work until the weekend, decides to make a trip to the house he has recently made the first payment on. After all, he has to go somewhere, do something. Anything other than be at home.

His new house is a wreck, and it will take him many more weeks – perhaps even months – before he can finally move in. But is there anything more exciting than the start of a new project, when all is promise and potential? Once again his mind rushes ahead through his plans. As soon he has done up the derelict building he has bought, he wants to build another small house in the empty plot beside it. He has the basic knowledge, access to discounted equipment, friends in the trade, and a near certain chance of getting planning permission approved. He smiles to himself as he drives, shouts along to the CD, and slaps one hand against the steering wheel in time to the beat.

Now he forces himself to slow down, to think about the house. His house. Only a day or two before he took up the carpet, a length of what an estate agent might call ‘chocolate-fondue’ brown, though dotted with cigarette burns and stiff, matted patches where the colour has faded. He needs to do something about the floor beneath. Or should he leave that until he has stripped the last of the wallpaper from the walls? Either way, he is so wrapped up in his projects that he barely notices the high layers of thin cirrostratus spooling out in wisps around the early evening sun. The whole sky is slowly coming unravelled at the edges.

Without warning, he changes his mind and decides to head first to our parents’ house. Once there he wanders straight to the kitchen and calls out a cursory greeting, waiting for anyone nearby to come to him. He opens the fridge, roots around for something that might take his fancy, but closes it again empty-handed. He says little. He does not mention the sleepless night, the trouble breathing, the spasms and numbness in his back and left side. He asks to borrow my mum’s new car, a sleek black convertible that he takes great and unashamed pleasure in driving around. It is a gleaming new toy. Our parents are used to him being surly and uncommunicative



when he is tired or preoccupied, and they have also learnt that the more he is pressed upon a subject the more likely he is to close up or grow irritable and ill-tempered. They do not, then, try to force him to speak about his obvious discomfort or the bags beneath his eyes. Instead, they simply lend him the car for the coming weekend. For a while he pauses to talk about the tools he might need to borrow from the garden-shed for working on his house. He then waves away mum's offers of food and heads out to the sports car.

I would like to imagine him now taking a few strides across the gravel drive and then turning, pausing midway between the car and the front door as though his body and mind are pulling in different directions and for once he does not know which to follow. Perhaps he does. Perhaps not. Either way he is now in the car, his enormous bulk wedged tightly into the compact vehicle. A colossus in a convertible. Then he drives away without, I believe, a second thought. It is always here that I long to step in, to call out to him that it is not too late: that there is still time for him to return inside, to admit that he is not invincible, and to tell someone about all the pains and aches and irregularities that have been plaguing him now for weeks. *It is not too late, even now, I shout. Go back inside. Or drop by the doctor's. Do anything, anything else. But just don't drive away.* He does not listen.

Instead he heads east. The little black convertible makes its way down past Littlehampton and the beach that for many years marked the end of the known world for the inhabitants of these isles. He turns early to avoid looking too long at the limitless cobalt blue. It gives him the creeps. He takes the longer, inland road. He focuses on the jobs he needs to get done this evening. He is shifting restlessly in the driving seat, unable to settle. He must think about the new house – think, think, think. His mind rushes through each room in turn, transforming it as he goes: the mildew,

the dry rot, the rising damp, the cracked windows, the splintering frames, the peeling wallpaper, the stained carpet. At last, as if by the wave of a magic wand, the whole house is radiant and new. His house, his place is ready. Ready for him.

There are a trio of roundabouts between Littlehampton and his home-to-be. They are spaced with such regularity that from the sky they must look like a giant ellipsis marking out an unfinished thought or the point where all speech trails into silence. He goes round each one before entering the seaside town of Worthing. Soon he turns left onto the narrow road that leads to the ruined building that is awaiting him. He passes a primary school and church in quick succession. By now the sinking sun has turned as red as his hair once was and is covering the office blocks, railways station and the shorefront pubs where smugglers once hid their stashes in a blazing light. It is as if the car is being chased by fire. It is here that time slows down, and each second takes on an almost unbearable clarity. His left hand reaches for the gear stick, changes down into second before he flicks the indicator and takes the corner, turning right onto Poulter's Lane.

As he passes a solitary red postbox he struggles to draw a loud, wheezing breath, and his hands fumble on the wheel as he suddenly pulls over. Onto the verge. Beyond the short stretch of grass where he has haphazardly parked is a Day Nursery and a tiny newsagent already locked up and shuttered for the evening. Across the road, in amid the countless semi-detacheds with pristine gardens, is the Old Guard House, a family-run Bed and Breakfast. Further up, there starts a line of lampposts each with its head bowed.

If this were a film, at this moment the cameras would pull back and pan out from the sleek black car. We would watch the car slowly grow smaller as we ascend, rising far above until it becomes a tiny black dot on the empty residential street; until

the street itself becomes lost in the interlinking web of roads, lanes, terraces and alleys that make up the town; until the town too is dwarfed by the great stretch of yellow-brown fields and churning sea that surround it; until everything is obscured by clouds and we are far above the earth with nothing to attend to but the beginning of minor piano chords, perhaps a swell of maudlin violins, and then the final credits.

But this is not a film, nor is it real – for we are not there, and neither is he.

The street is empty. The sleek black convertible is gone. The sirens have long since faded into the distance and, by this hour, the streetlamps are crying light. It is deep into the night by the time the car finds its way to my parents' home but every light in the house is still on. The convertible appears as if of its own will, like a migratory bird whose knowledge of the route back is written deep within. The car has made its own way back without its driver. Or almost. For wedged up against the accelerator is a single scuffed-white trainer.

*24. All the Eye Mistakes for Light*

The frost has gathered upon the ferns by the time I return to the Bracken Woods, and the path between the outstretched fingertips of needle and frond has become a ragged patchwork of ice. I follow it though the forest, the crunch of frozen leaves and twigs beneath my winter boots echoing louder with every step I take. Every so often spears of light break through the canopy, and in those hallowed spots the glint and spark of the frost makes it look as though it has been spun by a thousand silver spiders, their work so intricate that it must have taken centuries. Despite this, I feel as though next to nothing has changed since the last time I visited the forest, and for a few moments it is easy to believe that the whole world has fallen under some strange spell and is now trapped in a state of drowsy hibernation.

Already close to six months have passed since my brother's death, yet it might as well have been a single day or even an hour, so fresh is the sting of it. We have gone back to our jobs, our homes and our familiar patterns, with the unspoken hope that the world might return to how it once was. Grief has gradually calcified and sunk to the pit of my stomach. Here it sits like a stone. Sometimes I can almost forget it is there.

I brush too close to one of the beeches and feel it shudder drips of ice onto my head and shoulders. Thousands of years ago the whole country was covered in a dense pelt of forest and woodland that reached from coast to coast. The Wildwood, as it has been called, was in all likelihood made up of a thick mass of knotted and interlaced shrubs and branches, a host of dead trees tangled amid the living. This great expanse of wilderness existed for some seven thousand years, from the end of the ice age through to the Middle Ages, with hazel, elm, oak and lime predominating for

much of that time. The forest contained many fens, swamps and bogs, as well as open patches of scrub and heath, and was inhabited by ox, elk, bison, boar, wolf, bear, deer and hyena, among others. Even thousands of years after Stone Age man began clearing small areas for farms and smallholdings, the Wildwood continued to be thought of as a place of mystery and danger, a chaotic landscape of dark spirits and enchantment.

My brother loved the woods. Whenever trips or days out were proposed, his suggestion would always be the forest. Once we arrived, he would be the first to start gathering twigs and shoots to construct a wigwam, the first to shimmy up the trees to throw pinecones or clumps of leaves at people passing below, and the first to dig tiger-traps and then cover them with foliage. He would usually be dressed in camouflage gear, with a penknife and length of string in his pocket in case he needed to fashion a bow and arrow in a hurry. And, after a whole day of running wild, he would be the first to fall asleep in the back of the car.

From somewhere up ahead comes a birdcall I cannot place, and I draw my coat tighter around me. I dip my head and focus on the track. If I do not give the forest my full attention then I will lose my way. The deeper I venture between the trees, the more I am reminded why I have kept putting off returning here. The woods are doing their best to wrong-foot me; both the spindly branches of the ferns and the matted spurts of bracken are constantly flexing and stretching around me. If they continue like this the whole forest will change shape and I will never find my way out. But perhaps that would be no less than I deserve, a fitting penance for having left it so long before coming back.

I pass the scattering of silver birches and start down a rough slope made slippery by patches of ice gilding the mud. I stumble towards the bottom, dodging

several gnarly stumps of hardened roots that have raised their heads from beneath the earth as if in hopeless and premature search for spring. Nonetheless, I am moving far more quickly and confidently than on my last visit. I cannot shake off the suspicion that my brother might be hiding behind any of the thicker trees, and so move faster, not wanting to keep him waiting. I keep on at such a speed that it does not take me long to reach the clearing at the top of the hill where we scattered his ashes half a year before.

The heather, all spread across the hillside, looks as if it has been topped with birthday-cake frosting, though there are short strips, where deer have no doubt been nibbling, that still glow lilac and mauve. Save for the glacial ling and the grey skies, nothing has changed since my last visit and, though I had not really expected anything else, I still feel oddly disappointed. I wait for something to happen. For the rustle of leaves in the woods below to turn into something more definite, or for someone to emerge into the clearing. Why have I come back? It is hard enough saying goodbye once, so why do it all over again?

Thick spools of mist spill from my lips with each breath. I am no longer sure what I am doing. Then I hear, for the second time, the call of a bird I do not recognise. And time starts up again. I feel suddenly exposed at the top of the bare hillside, with no idea how many thousands of little eyes might be watching me from amid the trees below. I search across the uncovered slope, wishing for the snow that has been forecast for this evening, for a great fall of sleet that will render the whole world invisible.

Each winter we would pray for snowstorms, though my brother and I could never agree upon the strength of the blizzards we required. He was more particular about the amount of snow he wanted: not enough to stop the bus taking him to school,

but too much to allow the day to continue as usual. His perfect winter day was one where the fearsome weather would prevent most of the teachers from making it to school yet, somehow, would not obstruct his friends from making their way to the huge playing fields beside the classrooms, where the lot of them would spend the day engaged in one huge snow-fight. He dreamed of epic battles involving not just a few snowballs tossed at opposing armies but elaborate operations involving digging trenches, plotting out complex tactics of attack and counterattack, and drawing the enemy into sudden skirmishes in which they would attempt to bury one another in missiles, bombs, rockets, grenades, cannonballs, shells, shrapnel and torpedoes, all fashioned from the greying slush covering the ground.

While he was hoping for a modest amount of snowfall, I was longing for as much as the clouds could carry. I wanted a colossal flurry of fat, cotton-wool snow to cover the streets and cars and hedgerows in a ghostly white shroud. I wanted the roads to become utterly unusable, for everyone to be obligated to stay home, for the whole world to be forced to stop. In short, I craved something spectacular that might effortlessly transform every aspect of our lives. I liked the idea of never having to go to school again, and as a child believed I could live happily enough cocooned forever inside our house. In the great blizzard for which I hoped our house would have been turned into a tiny lone freight drifting through an ocean of snow. When I told my brother of the storm I was longing for, he was perplexed and, instead of joining in and adding details, he would shake his head, unable to understand how anyone would be able to enjoy themselves if they were not certain that in time everything would go back to how it was before.

But nothing ever goes back to how it was before. Unless of course it is true that once our lives are over, we live them again backwards, from the end right through

to the beginning. It is at once both a horrifying and bewitching idea, for not only would we see all the people we have lost once again but we would also relive all our heartbreaks and mistakes. We would awaken from our final hour and begin to shrink until eventually we disappeared from sight. Forgotten words would come tumbling back into our mouths and memories would gradually emerge from the fog and grow clearer and clearer until they were hurried into action. As a child, after overhearing my parents talking about the day they met, my brother had asked why it was that he couldn't remember any of the things that had happened before he was born. Neither of them, as I recall, could come up with an answer that satisfied him. Nothing any of us said could convince him that our memory stretches only so far back. In fact, this answer only frustrated him more. If that's the case, he demanded, then why can't we remember the future?

I make my way down amid the stretch of heather. The weathermen are all saying snow is on its way but it is not here yet. Instead, the beginning of a cold breeze stirs the needles of the evergreens at the foot of the clearing, and soon the branches too start to rustle, as if trying to shrug off their own haunted shadows.

And if they are haunted I know who is responsible. Luke, you see, would have quite liked to be a ghost. He often pretended to be a poltergeist. As a little boy he spent countless hours chasing us with a ghostly white sheet clutched around his shoulders. Even as an adult he spent a disconcertingly large amount of time hiding in wardrobes, behind doors or under beds, waiting for friends or relatives to arrive home so that he could leap out, screaming like a banshee, and watch them reel backwards in surprise. What had he been practising for? Wading down amid the frosty heather, I realise I am still waiting for him to jump out from behind some tree just so that he



might laugh at my reaction. He is so close that I might almost reach out and touch him.

The icy grass is patchy and worn upon the slope. I take slow, tentative steps as I work my way down over the chalky scrub, trying in vain to find the exact spots where the ashes might have fallen. On the crest behind me a lone tree is silhouetted against the clouds, and it is impossible to tell whether its bare limbs are held out in welcome or warning. Below me, the huddle of beeches is growing agitated in the wind. I slip off one of my gloves and crouch down to run my fingertips through the heather, as if by petting it I might lull it into revealing its secrets. It will not tell me anything. My brother's ashes must have been borne off by the breeze, or devoured by the omnivorous roots of the trees and plants. Or perhaps they linger still, too small now for the eye to recognise, upon the bracken and the shrubs. Though my fingers are soon numb, I stay in this hunched position for as long as I can bear it. When I rise again I find the last evidence of daylight has been lost among the billow and brume. Every instinct tells me to turn around and start walking in order to get back to the car and make it home before night falls. I remain rooted to the spot.

The wind is tugging at my clothes as urgently as a little child. Out of nowhere, I am overcome with the strangest of sensations – I am convinced that everything that has occurred in the last six months happened to someone else and not to me at all. I raise my gloves in front of my face and begin to flex my hands, to make sure that this body still belongs to me and is acting on my orders. It is still mine, and so are these memories. They are mine.

They are mine.

I feel a sudden kick of adrenaline, and before I know it I have started down the hill, intent on finding another way back to the car park. At the bottom of the slope I

spot a rough track meandering between the trees. There is no need to retrace my steps. Not now. I follow the track round, ducking and sidestepping to avoid a posse of crooked, malformed shadows, until it opens into an expanse of bracken. I hurry on, believing that somehow the thin path winding through the middle of the ferns will eventually lead me back to the beginning.

As I walk on down the new route, it occurs to me that this is the first outing in many months when I have picked a new path instead of automatically repeating one I have been down many times before. The feeling of being freed from my habitual self is one I have not felt with such intensity since the winter some fifteen years before, when a heavy early-December snowfall had forced all the local schools to close and so grant the day's grace my brother was always praying for. I was in my final year of primary school and already dreading what might happen when the summer term finished, while Luke would have been a few months short of nine. It was no doubt his repeated pleas that morning which finally led to our parents allowing the two of us to head out to a nearby hill where many of our friends were gathering. We threw on our coats, hats, gloves, scarves and boots in record time and took from the garage the sole toboggan (its twin had been wrecked the previous winter) before rushing from the house. Since the whole village was covered with a carpet of thick, fluffy snow, we were able to walk along in the middle of the deserted road. I recall that I was stuck pulling the toboggan while my brother charged ahead. At times he would turn towards me and jog backwards, though every time he tried this he would invariably end up tripping and tumbling into the buttress of snow, where he would lie perfectly still until I approached, only to then leap up laughing and race on once again.

To reach the hill, we had to follow the road past the village school, the Holly Tree public house, the vicarage and the parade of small shops – newsagent, laundrette,

dentist and post office. We then turned off onto a scraggy footpath that followed the border of a barren field, now hidden under the heavy layer of snow. We walked in single-file, and I have the most vivid memory of turning to see the deep footprints we left being cleaned away, one by one, by the trail of the toboggan we were dragging behind us. Halfway across the field my brother began to speak. He did not, though, turn his head at first, so I could not tell whether or not he was speaking to himself. *If things get really cold, they freeze. So if we get cold enough, we'll turn to ice too. And if we turn to ice, then we might stay frozen for a hundred years. After all that time, we'll wake up in the future – and there'll be cars flying through the sky and robots who'll wait on us hand and foot.* He spoke as if this were all incontrovertible fact, and so I did not at any point attempt to interrupt his train of thought. *But*, and here his voice took on a note of anxiety, *what will it feel like to be frozen? Will it be like having a really long sleep, or will we be awake all that time? What if my nose itches but my icicle fingers can't move to scratch it? What if I am stuck like a statue for years and years, looking at the world around me without being able to join it?*

I waited for him to continue, but he said nothing more, and I cannot now recall whether either of us spoke again until we had squeezed through the kissing gate at the end of the path and made our way down to the frozen stream at the foot of the hill. Perhaps he was thinking of some science-fiction film or story that had lodged deep in his mind. I can't recall how I responded. I can only remember that, as we left the frigid water behind and started up the side of the hill, our progress was made arduous and slow by our not knowing where the dense slush ended and the firm ground beneath began. After a while we were able to make out many of our classmates sprinting to and fro upon the summit. The sharp rays of sunlight flickering on the snow, however, made it impossible for us to glance upwards for more than a few

seconds at a time. Our ascent soon resembled a dream in which with every step you take your destination moves further away.

When we finally made it to the top we went straight into action, pelting our friends with snowballs and running to join a group rolling a lopsided head for a giant snowman. And it is here that the memory becomes fitful and uneven. I am certain that we stayed there for many hours, not returning home until the sun was low in the sky, but the details are foggy. I remember only that playing upon the snow-covered hill I lost all sense of my own life and felt temporarily unloosed from time. No winter day since has ever been able to compare. Or is that because my recollection is untrustworthy – the snow conjured up by my memory whiter and more akin to candyfloss than it really was at the time, the sunlight brighter and more dazzling, our laughter louder and more intense?

As I trudge back through the Bracken Woods, I find that for once this uncertainty does not bother me. I had been afraid to return to the forest, that much is true – afraid to surrender my forward-motion to ghosts, to get pulled deeper into the past and find my life overturned once again. But this has not happened. The muddy track winds to the left, and as I take the corner my foot catches on a tangle of roots. I almost stumble, but steady myself against a birch and see, up ahead, a glimpse of the car park between the trees. I can't help but break into a grin. I've nearly made it. I have found another path back.

And so I let myself be carried away by the memory, as my mind keeps returning to the part of the afternoon when the whole group of us decided to race down the slope. Exhausted by hours of snowball fights and war games, we all carried our sledges to the edge of the summit and arranged ourselves into a rough line. It would have been at this point that my brother and I began to argue, first about which

of us would race on our solitary toboggan and then, after we had finally agreed to both squeeze on together, about who would sit at the front and steer. It was a pointless discussion, since we were both well aware that the toboggan always chose its own unpredictable course, regardless of how much we leaned and swerved. In the end I agreed to sit behind him, not because of the disparity in our sizes, nor because of any lingering brotherly affection, but because of his threats to kick me off halfway down if he was stuck at the back. Once my brother had settled at the front, I wedged myself in behind, looping my arms around his waist while we waited for the other racers to make ready. One of our friends began counting down in a shrill, reedy voice that echoed out around us and carried off into the valley below. Luke and I were pressed so close together in the small tub that I could feel him draw in breath as the countdown approached zero. Then a pair of hands pushed against my back, shoving us forward onto the slope.

A few bumps and jolts shook us as we started over the ridge, but within seconds we were hurtling down at terrifying speed. The hill was far steeper than I had thought, and it felt as though we were ploughing almost vertical towards the valley below. But then, all of a sudden, we were flying. My stomach lurched, and I lost all track of the other sledges and toboggans carrying our friends. I remember frantically clasping onto my brother. He was gripping the handles and attempting to pull us left, then right, then left again, so that we might dodge the silvery streaks of blinding light that were reflected in the snow and rose up around us like hairline cracks in the very fabric of the air. He urged us on faster and faster. I was not sure we could gather any more speed, but still he urged us on faster. On and on, down and down, into the blinding light.

What is curious is that I have no memory of us ever reaching the bottom of the hill. My brother had once told me that if you dream you are falling from a great height, it is vital to wake up before you hit the ground, or else you might never wake up at all. I know only that I wished our ride together would never end, that we might go on racing through the snow forever, both past and future simply slipping away as we continued our descent. For those few moments, as my brother whooped and bellowed on our shared toboggan, I felt as though we really were gliding through the sky, shooting straight toward a blur of billowing white cumulus through which we would soon hurtle. And as we soared towards the great expanse of endless white, I held my arms tight around his stomach, determined more than ever not to let go.

## How A Personal History is Constructed: An Annotated Index of the Past

### A. Aberdeen Bestiary, The

Towards the end of December 2013, I began researching the legend of the phoenix for the fourth chapter of my memoir. I had come to believe that the myth of a creature able to rise again from the ashes would provide the ideal metaphorical counterpoint for my memories of scattering my brother's ashes upon the hillside at Hesworth Common in early July, 2008. I was confident that this trope would provides a clear parallel between the reality of the situation, namely the family gathered in Fittleworth with a full urn and plastic cups to share a last toast, and the 'magical thinking' this gave rise to, most clearly in the form of impossible hopes and fantasies that we would still see my brother again. The inclusion of the familiar story would, I hoped, allow me to show the dialectical movement that is typical of a mind dealing with sudden and unexpected loss: a mind that is always ricocheting back and forth between the difficult present, the idealised past, and the now-impossible future.

To research the phoenix, I turned almost instantly to the Aberdeen Bestiary. I already had much experience of reading and studying this rich and marvellous historic text, and had used it as one of the main sources of inspiration for my poetry collection, *The Bestiary* (2008). Moreover, as a historical novelist with an undergraduate degree in history, by training I instinctively sought out a 'primary source'; that is, a document supposedly free from the bias, mediation and selective interpretation of later ages.

As the historian Steven Mintz suggests, 'Nothing brings the past back to life quite like primary sources. Letters, diaries, trial transcripts, and other original

documents allow us to hear the living voices of the past.’<sup>1</sup> In principle, this ought to be self-evident. By reading a book created in the twelfth century as opposed to a contemporary interpretation of twelfth century beliefs, we should be able to see directly the ideas and views of people who lived at the time. Yet this is in fact a simplification, for each source brings with it its own problems. It soon became clear to me that primary sources invariably have their own ambiguities and inherent difficulties. The Aberdeen Bestiary provides a clear example of this.

For my research in 2013 I turned, as I had in 2008, to the online digitisation of the original medieval manuscript that was created, edited and maintained by the Department of Special Collections and Archives at King’s College, University of Aberdeen. This project was begun in 1997, and was not without its own difficulties – its editors write that the ‘complex nature of the challenge resided in the facts that we were to digitise a book in vellum...some 800 years old, that there were legitimate concerns over the vulnerability of the original...and that it was not particularly intelligible other than to a limited number of specialists.’<sup>2</sup> Setting aside the physical constraints and limitations of the text, the issue of intelligibility is crucial: in digitisation, the Latin work had not only to be translated but also, as a logical corollary of this, interpreted by specialists. The account I read of the phoenix, then, was hardly ‘primary’ in the traditional conception: it was one mediated and filtered by modern scholars. In much the same way one of the biggest challenges I faced with my own ‘primary sources’, such as my diaries and memories, and the recollections of family, acquaintances and neighbours, was that they were undoubtedly influenced by hindsight, and thus the re-telling of familiar tales changed in the context of the funeral

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<sup>1</sup> Steven Mintz, ‘Using Primary Source Documents’, *OAH Magazine of History*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (2003), p.41

<sup>2</sup> Ian Beavan, Michael Arnott and Colin McLaren, ‘The Digitisation of a Medieval Manuscript’, *Computers and the Humanities*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (1997), p.62



and all that had led up to it. John Tosh suggests that, for this reason, the very idea of an unmediated voice from the past is impossible: ‘Whatever the evidence it rests on, the notion of a direct encounter with the past is an illusion, but perhaps nowhere more than in the case of testimony from hindsight. The “voice of the past” is inescapably the voice of the present too.’<sup>3</sup> I seek, then, to make this tension explicit in my work, by drawing the reader’s attention to the doubts and questions I had over how memory had warped and changed events, and thereby forcing the reader to share in the uncertainty.

One of the ways of highlighting this uncertainty is in describing the changes enacted on seemingly benign everyday objects. I seek to show that each object I describe and depict in my work had its original meaning renegotiated by how I approached it in the aftermath of my brother’s death. I aim to demonstrate how objects such as bottles of mouthwash, old toys, faded photographs, teddy bears, cat combs, and so on, all gained potency strictly according to how they stood in relation to my brother: how many games he had won with that hockey stick, how many fearsome tricks he had played with those boglins, how many hours he spent labouring over one of his drawings. In this way, I intend to show that the way we ‘read’ the world is similar to the way we read a text: namely, by colouring it with our own individual psychological makeup and thus changing its very meaning.

The issue of how any source is affected by its subsequent history and its immediate context is a question of how much information to include and how much to leave out. This is a question I resolve by attempting to focus solely on those aspects that shed some light on either: a) my brother’s character or ideas and beliefs (however contradictory these may often have been); or b) my own relationship with my brother

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<sup>3</sup> John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Harlow: Longman, Second Edition, 1990), p.214

(including after his death during the summer of his funeral). In this way, each source and event is refracted through two different prisms, and these limitations I seek to communicate within the text. This I do by explicitly questioning the reliability and veracity of my recollections by frequently prefixing them with modifying adverbs such as ‘perhaps’ and ‘maybe’. In this way and also by drawing attention to the gaps in my memory, I seek to remind my readers of the artifice involved in my project and to challenge the notion that the past can ever be faithfully represented without bias on the page.

Prior to its arrival in the Royal Library, the Aberdeen Bestiary was likely housed in the monastery where it had been created in the twelfth century. As I observe in my memoir, the creation of this illustrated manuscript – including pain-staking calligraphy carried out with quill and ink by candlelight, ornate ink-drawings and gilded borders – all onto several hundred pages of vellum, would have taken several years (pp.32-33). That is not all. Johannes Fried has noted that ‘to make a single book in vellum required an entire flock of sheep...for large-format luxury tomes, huge numbers of animals were slaughtered.’<sup>4</sup> This puts me in mind of Walter Benjamin’s claim that ‘There has never been a document of culture, which is not simultaneously one of barbarism.’<sup>5</sup> And this might just, of course, be true of my memoir – if only because it does, in some sense, come to replace my own brother. He does, therefore, die a second time in and through my writing.

I work to make my anxiety about this a feature of the text itself by returning time and again to the idea of replacement. Note how I stress that the original often becomes ‘lost among its countless simulacra’ (p.54), and how there is ‘a doppelganger of my brother somewhere in the world who has managed somehow to circumvent his

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<sup>4</sup> Johannes Fried, *The Middle Ages*, trans. Peter Lewis (Cambridge: Belknap, 2015), p.54

<sup>5</sup> Walter Benjamin, ‘Theses on The Philosophy of History’, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), p.256

fate' (p.56). Note also that the 'brother' I track in the supermarket is a figure conjured by memory that I admit bears little similarity to how my brother really was when I last saw him – in fact, 'He is nothing like my brother' (p.55). The real figure is here temporarily replaced by a most un-like "doppelganger". This is, of course, in one sense an image of the inadequacy of my textual representation of Luke.

Jonathan Taylor's *Take Me Home* (2007), like my own project, is concerned with remembering, reassembling and reclaiming the life of a recently-deceased family member, and Taylor writes that 'In remembering my father, I can't help also remembering things which aren't him, which are inadequate substitutes for the real person. I can't help remembering books, records, films, which have survived him, and now stand in his place'<sup>6</sup>. Like myself, Taylor fears that the act of writing and remembering may be an act of inadequate replacement, and very often works by focusing on texts or cultural fragments associated with the bereaved. In Taylor's case, these include Shakespeare, Stravinsky, Blackadder and Disney; but, for Taylor 'none of these works quite work. None of the texts...manage to understand him entirely. They don't even understand my understanding of him'<sup>7</sup>. Cultural substitutes fail, and they also fail in my own text. I note that our childhood favourite, *The Princess and the Goblin*, has disappeared with my brother and seemingly been 'spirited to the kingdom of the goblins' (p.13), and when I transport my brother into the familiar world of the stories of Sir Arthur Conan-Doyle, it is not long before 'all trace of him is lost amid the thick pea-souper' (p.101). Thus each text and cultural fragment leads inextricably back to the idea of loss.

It is not only culture that is a poor substitute for an understanding of a person, but memory itself. We do not remember original events so much as recall the last time

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<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Taylor, *Take Me Home* (London: Granta Books, 2007), p.113

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p.125

we remembered them. We remember a memory of a memory. Furthermore, each memory is influenced by the way in which we remember. I discuss this problem explicitly in chapter 6 of my memoir in relation to a memory of jumping from a jetty, which is undoubtedly influenced both by having looked often at the photographic record of the event and of listening to my parents tell a (doubtless exaggerated and heavily edited) version of the story themselves many times since (pp.43-44). Memory is clearly a problematic and often untrustworthy source. Taylor's work was influential here as he also explicitly draws attention to the limits, gaps and one-sidedness inherent in the project of creating anything 'real' from memory alone. He here draws our attention to the fact that memory is housed in that very physical thing we call a brain: 'We exist to other people,' he writes, 'only as the sum total of the cells devoted to us in their amygdalas, superior temporal sulci, medial-frontal and orbitofrontal cortices – just as they exist to us only in ours. You might open up someone else's brain and find a miniature version of yourself in there. But then again, you might not recognise the you that's imprinted on that person's grey matter.'<sup>8</sup>

My solution to doubts about the veracity of memory was to make such anxieties an explicit function of my own text: to flag up the unreliability of the narrator to the reader and his memories, since this textual anxiety mimics the physical anxiety I felt at the time and so places the reader inside the text rather than passively looking on. For instance, I explicitly question whether 'these really [are] the thoughts of a child, or am I putting words into my brother's mouth, making him more articulate than he can possibly have been? Can I really remember the evenings of a single week more than two decades ago?' (p.43). And I state of one recollection that 'I cannot be sure whether the memory is really mine' (p.44). Indeed, I conclude this passage by

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p.103

demonstrating to the reader that ‘Memories are as easy to borrow as library books’ (p.44).

Taylor’s memoir also fosters an atmosphere of uncertainty, and uncertainty not just about the deceased but also the memorial: ‘Where once my father was, in his place stands this book, which like him is full of unanswered questions and phantom John Taylors.’<sup>9</sup> In much the same way, my narrator, “Sam Meekings”, also becomes a phantasm, unable to escape from the past at every turn and out-of-sync in a present where his ‘mind returns again and again to the impossible...because my brother’s death has so disturbed the world I had previously taken for granted’ (p.23). My text is, then, very often a kind of phantasmagoria, with memory after memory following on from one another as if in a dream.

In a historical search, each source leads back to another. The Aberdeen Bestiary takes much of its raw material from the *Physiologus*, a Greek text written in the second or third century CE, as well as from classical texts by authors such Pliny the Elder, written in the first century CE. In this way, we must add another thousand years to the history of our ‘primary’ source, though it is worth nothing that both the *Physiologus* and the works of Pliny are collections of stories, myths and beliefs, many of which pre-date Christianity and the start of the Common Era. It is impossible to trace the exact origin of the majority of the tales contained within these texts. In the same way, most of the memories of Luke used in the composition of my own text depend on earlier memories; for instance, his final appearance as an obscenely-muscled bodybuilder retains its power to shock only when it exists beside the earlier memory of him as a skinny teenager. In the creation of my text, therefore, I do my

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, pp.262-3

best to show how each memory leads to another buried within it, by the method of structuring each chapter as a series of leaps of association, each one leading from the present into the past. However, every memory of the past also sets up a comparison with the present. Thus rather than a stream of consciousness, these leaps into the past serve as a carefully-planned chain of links and connections that nonetheless always and ultimately lead back to the present, and so ensure the composition of the text reflects the composition of the self: made up of a tangle of memories bound by the present moment. The reader of my work therefore follows the same progression as the narrator: being pulled always from the happiness of the past back into the sadness of the present.

The *Aberdeen Bestiary* is not presented as a chronological, geographical or alphabetical account of the natural world. Instead, it divides all living things into distinct categories: beasts, livestock, small animals, birds, reptiles, worms, fish, trees and plants, and stones. There are also sections bookending the proto-encyclopaedia that focus on the creation of the world and on the nature of man.

The larger design of my own work follows a similar principle: instead of building a chronological account of our relationship, I have divided it up into twenty-four sections. This was a potent number for me, since not only does it mirror the twenty-four years of his life but it also serves as reminder of the twenty-four hours of light and dark by which most cultures from the ancient Egyptians onwards have measured out the rotation of the Earth on its axis. It is thus a self-contained number, and a number suggestive of completion or finitude – note, by the way, that there are twenty-four major and minor keys in the Western system of music.

At first I was tempted to follow this structure through to its natural endpoint, and create a memoir set entirely in a single day, thereby creating a circadian text whereby each of the twenty-four chapters mirrored one of the twenty-four hours of the day. In this I was influenced by *Ulysses* (1922) and *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), both novels in which the action takes place within a single day and yet also draws on the weight of the past. *Mrs Dalloway* was originally entitled *The Hours*, and at many crucial points in the novel Big Ben is heard to chime – near the beginning, then at 11:30 am, at midday, and at the end of the eleventh and penultimate section of the novel. In every instance time is both inescapable fact – ‘Out it boomed...the hour, irrevocable’ – and something impossible to grasp: ‘the leaden circles dissolved into the air’.<sup>10</sup> Julia Briggs has suggested that ‘Woolf deployed the numbers of time as part of her struggle to master contingency and happenstance, and embed them in a vision and design.’<sup>11</sup> I also wanted to employ this structural principle in order to mitigate against too great a sense of coincidence and chance, and to suggest a deeper principle of design that the narrator was seeking to identify as the book progressed. My twenty-four chapters serve as a reminder of the constraints of time, but also of its limitlessness, for at the end of the twenty-four hours the clock must begin again.

For all its attractiveness, the circadian structure did not, however, work for me. This was partly because it became clear that I would not be able to achieve the narrative arc that I want to hint at by limiting myself to a single day. It is also partly because setting the entire narrative within a single day might suggest that grief is something transient and short-lived, and I want to demonstrate the opposite. The circadian pattern of organisation also does not allow much room for travel to different

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<sup>10</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1925), p.4

<sup>11</sup> Julia Briggs, ‘The Search for Form (ii): Revision and the Numbers of Time’, in *Reading Virginia Woolf* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2006), p.123

setting and locations when there is only one narrator, especially during those nighttime hours when the rest of the world is sleeping.

Night is important in my work, particularly in building a picture of the bereaved mind unable to rest. At midnight the clock ought to reset and time begin again, but now that my brother is dead nothing can go back to how it was before, and so the narrator gets 'stuck' at night. For instance, I describe how in order to decode his autopsy I sat up all night 'with a dictionary stolen from a hospital' (p.60) or again how 'and for many nights after the funeral as soon as I close my eyes I am overcome with the sensation that he is still there, lying as ever in the bunk bed above me' (p.64). It is for this reason that I state that 'Like an infectious sickness, Luke has passed his insomnia on to us' (p.196). Night destabilises the narrator because, like grief itself, night transforms the familiar world into something unfathomable and strange.

Night was also the time that my brother and I were alone and had, or so it seemed, the whole universe to ourselves. It was our special time, and ours alone. The nocturnal world functions, in fact, as a canvas for the brothers' imaginations. 'My brother,' I note, 'often told me that in the night he had seen a hidden trapdoor suddenly appear in the floor or in the corner of the ceiling' (p.13). Or again, 'One night,' I note, 'we concocted a plan to walk around the entire island and measure its size in the number of footsteps the journey took. Another night my brother devised a plan to construct a raft from driftwood and twigs' (p.42). Moreover, at night we discover a moon bigger than any other and feel ourselves kings, while even in our bunkbeds at home 'at any moment,' I write, 'he might swing his head down and suggest a midnight picnic, or ask me to tell him a story about the land of monsters we might find if we were to venture through the secret tunnel found at the back of the cupboard' (p.64). At night, then, anything is possible, because at night the brothers'



known world becomes something other, something apart from reason. In short, I see, explore and try to demonstrate a profound link between grief, night and unreason.

## B. Beginnings

Central to the creation of any history is the selection of a meaningful point in time at which to begin the narrative. Should a history of the Second World War, for instance, begin with the invasion of Poland in September 1939, the annexation of Austria the previous year, the militarisation of the Rhineland in the mid-1930s, Hitler becoming Fuhrer in 1933, or even the humiliating penalties enacted on Germany by the Treaty of Versailles in 1919? The question is a never a simple one – each cause is itself caused by a preceding event, and so on back through time.

One logical starting point for the history of my brother and I would be the day of my brother's birth, on the Eve of Saint Agnes; another would be the day of his death; yet another would be his funeral. None of these, however, would have been right.

Edwin Muir, in his seminal *An Autobiography* (1954), writes 'It is clear that no autobiography can begin with a man's birth, that we extend far beyond any boundary line that we set for ourselves.'<sup>12</sup> In the same way, no bereavement memoir can begin with a man's death or even with his funeral. Or at least, so I felt, which is why I begin some time after the giddy whirr and raw shock of the funeral, when all distractions are stripped away and there is nothing left to do but remember and reflect. This is vital, because from the offset I wanted to restrict the work, as much as possible, to just two characters (my brother and myself) in order to maintain a detailed and relentless focus. My memoir in fact does not include the funeral simply because it was a large and crowded public event; the opposite of the intimate and meditative work I want to create. By beginning after this has taken place, I am also able to utilise two structuring devices more common to fiction: namely, a quest narrative in which the protagonist

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<sup>12</sup> Edwin Muir, *An Autobiography*, new ed. (Edinburgh: Cannongate, 1954), p.39

pursues understanding, and a slow revealing of information to the reader. For instance, I build up slowly to the reveal of my brother's cause of death in chapter 8 (p.60), and hold back mentioning his name until chapter 9 (p.73), while keeping the details of his last days mysterious until the very end of the book, in mimicry of the traditional structure of detective fiction.

One of the forerunners of the modern memoir, Edmund Gosse, also structured his work to reflect the progress of a quest. His *Father and Son* (1907) was a key influence on my text since, despite being very much a product of the late Victorian era, its purposes are identical to my own – namely, to give a portrait of childhood and adolescence, and also to ensure that the narrator, the traditional subject of autobiography, is considered only in relation to another key character. For Gosse, this is the overbearing and somewhat puritanical figure of his father, and for myself it is of course my brother.

Using Gosse as inspiration, I set out to show how one's identity can often be very much dependent on one significant other – for me that was Luke and for him that was, I believe, me. Like Gosse and his father, we were fundamentally dissimilar characters, and yet for that very reason increasingly came to define each other. For Gosse, the world of his father – the world of the church, religion, and unquestionable moral standards – are profoundly alien; though his father and he occupy the same living space, their ideas, beliefs and values splinter to such a degree that by the end of the book they might as well be living in different countries. I seek to present a similar splitting by showing the different situations my brother and I found ourselves in as we grew up – for instance, by focusing one chapter on his hockey matches and the raucous and legendary celebrations that followed, and another on my time in the school choir in Chichester Cathedral.

However, I also want to show that, no matter how different we grew from one another, my brother's life remained intertwined with my own, and we remained bound by a common history. This was another reason why I chose not to begin at his birth and show us steadily growing apart from one another, for this would not have satisfactorily represented the complex ebb and flow of our relationship. For me, the most important action of the narrative – my brother's death – does not send us off in different directions but rather initiates the movement of the structure that spirals between past and present. In this way, I aim to show that it is time that becomes disordered, rather than our relationship.

In order to build towards his narrative climax, Gosse reworks many of the moments of the past so that they prefigure the future. Gosse creates a clear momentum towards one important action: the crucial break with his father that allows the narrator at last to seize hold of 'a human being's privilege to fashion his inner life for himself'.<sup>13</sup> Events are chosen for detailed description in his memoir because they foreshadow this break. For instance, the writer dwells on many intense moments when he becomes enraptured by books, thus foreshadowing the climactic choice he makes to turn to literature instead of religion. He describes, for example, reading a dramatic novel in the attic, discovering *The Tempest*, hearing his father read Virgil, and being transported by the poetry of death and grief in the garden. The narrative is thus one of learning and self-development, in line with the Victorian concept of continual progress. However, what I strive to show is a world where the twists and turns of history do not suggest progress and evolution but rather coincidence and contingency.

In this respect, my memoir is closer to Nabokov's modernist and 'fictional memoir', *Speak, Memory* (1951). In a chapter written as a review of the book itself,

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<sup>13</sup> Edmund Gosse, *Father and Son*, Oxford World's Classics edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1907), p.178

the author notes that ‘Nabokov’s method is to explore the remotest regions of his past life for what may be termed thematic trails or currents. Once found, this or that theme is followed...it guides the author into new regions of life.’<sup>14</sup> By sorting and grouping according to motif and subject matter rather than strict chronology, Nabokov’s memoir is taken in new and unexpected directions. I try to replicate this sense of continual discovery by also grouping according to theme, for instance by focusing on the pets kept at different stages of my brother’s life in chapter 20, or by dedicating the whole of chapter 8 to the various moons we witnessed or that played a key role in local history. I also aim to foster the Nabokovian sense of being led in unpredictable directions, as when I describe taking an unknown path and finding by chance the same park where I accidentally cut my brother’s head open (p.125), or when I am drawn into a cathedral I have not visited in decades, or to the farm I have not explored since I was a boy, or into a favourite childhood book, all because ‘the past has its own peculiar gravity’ (p.114). I eschew a linear progression in favour of allowing my narrative to be led by various coincidences of place, time, memory and association.

What I also learnt from reading *Speak, Memory* is how a writer has a duty to be selective in gathering and presenting his material. In this respect, the work of the memoirist is that of a curator: deciding which memories aid the narrative and which might detract, distract, or dilute, and I made a choice, early on, to focus very strictly only on the relationship between my brother and myself. This meant, for instance, casting aside memories of his interactions with his two girlfriends even though there was undoubtedly much material there. I do occasionally use the memories of others, in particular my family members and my brother’s friends, whom I interviewed and spoke with during the research stage; however, I choose, with their permission, not to

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<sup>14</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory* (London: Penguin, 1969), p.238

cite or reference them in the work. Again, this is in order not to weaken the claustrophobic atmosphere I seek to achieve.

In *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov slowly builds a multi-faceted portrait of his family's life in St Petersburg in pre-revolutionary Russia. In other words, like myself, he works to reconstruct a time now lost forever – and central to that lost time is childhood: 'The nostalgia I have been cherishing all these years is a hypertrophied sense of lost childhood, not sorrow for lost banknotes.'<sup>15</sup> I would say the same of myself, which is the reason why each of my chapters 'returns' to the childhood my brother and I shared. This shared past is the centre of my text, the place of solace and wonder that the narrative is consistently drawn back to. Note, for instance, how the narrator cannot walk in the Bracken Woods without picturing the military games and battles that Luke enacted there (p.28), and cannot drive along the South coast without feeling 'as though I am being drawn back – back to the ancient pier and promenade where as children we had walked almost every morning, back to the grey terrace where we once lived' (p.114). I wanted to make clear that my memory of childhood, hypertrophied by grief, cannot be escaped.

Finally, Nabokov's thematic structuring suggests that meaning rarely inheres in any particular moment but often flickers or plays through the connections *between* moments. Finding these connections thus becomes part of the primary objective of each chapter. In each case I begin with an image linked to a particular theme, and use this as a way to weave together philosophical ideas, quotations, historical events, particular places, and the raw material of memory. For instance, in chapters 5 and 6, the photo I found of the house Luke had bought and was working on, reminds me of images of London ruined in the blitz, which in turn reminds me of the house of

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p.49

skeletons my brother and I visited in Blackgang Chine, which leads to a discussion of its strange history and the whale skeleton assembled there on the Isle of Wight, which leads to a reflection on the last days of Charles I imprisoned in the castle on the Isle of Wight, which was beside the campsite where my family used to holiday in my childhood, which reminds me of my brother's homesickness, which therefore brings us back full circle to the picture of the home he was never able to come back to. This not only provides an engine for the narrative, but also reproduces something of the movement of a grieving mind, searching for meaning in endless associations.

To represent this associationism I was conscious of attempting what Mikhail Bakhtin terms a 'heteroglossia'<sup>16</sup>: namely the cacophony of overlapping codes and discourses that is human language. In my case this meant anything from pop culture, West coast Hip Hop, and children's books about goblins through to etymology and the Bible. The mixture of different forms of discourse and genre markers is intended to suggest that life and character cannot be easily pinned down and constrained within one 'type' or genre. To put this another way, and to echo Whitman, people contain multitudes, and I want this to be reflected in the contents of the narrative. Bakhtin argues that we speak with many voices, which means we are made up of voices that are not (only) our own; language operates, he argues, on 'the borderline between oneself and the other...the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language (it is not, after all, out of the dictionary that the speaker gets his words!), but rather it exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions.'<sup>17</sup> A portrait of my brother and myself must then encompass not only our own words but their sources or intertexts – for example, the books of George

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<sup>16</sup> Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981)

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, pp.293-4

MacDonald and Frances Hodgson Burnett, Sunday School Bible stories, and the tales of Sherlock Holmes.

In this, I was once again strongly influenced by Edwin Muir – this time his dictat that ‘no autobiography can confine itself to conscious life...In themselves our conscious lives may not be particularly interesting. But what we are not and can never be, our fable, seems to me inconceivably interesting.’<sup>18</sup> I attempt to reproduce this ‘fable’ – my brother’s fable, that is – through the many subtexts and intertexts of his life. However, this life could only be seen in retrospect, and thus there was no better beginning than the days after the funeral. In the beginning, death.

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<sup>18</sup> Muir, p.39



### C. Chronophobia

I know a surprising number of people who are afraid of clowns. Countless more who cannot even look at spiders or mice without screaming. A few who have an unhealthy fear of dwarves. I myself, as I recount in the memoir, have a fear of snakes. I have even met one or two writers who claim to feel physically sick at the use of adverbs. But I have never met anyone besides my brother who suffered from a phobia of the past tense.

More specifically, it was the years before he was born that seemed to drive him mad. I would sometimes tell him stories about things that had happened before his birth, but he could not bear to hear. As a child he simply would not accept that the world had existed, almost exactly as it was now, before he arrived.

There was no rational way to explain it, yet that did not deter him. He agreed that since he was seven and I was nine that I was, therefore, two years older than him. He was also happy to agree that he had not been around forever. He would not, however, accept that anything had really happened before his birth – the Second World War or dinosaurs or Henry VIII were no more real, in his opinion, than Rumpelstiltskin or the Tooth Fairy. They were stories adults made up to keep us kids confused. No matter what evidence we produced he would not believe it, and any photos of times before 1984 made him so mad that he would chase me round the house threatening me with blue murder if I didn't throw them in the bin that minute.

One of the first challenges with which I was faced, therefore, was how to reconcile this childhood chronophobia with the main facet of my project: constructing a history. How to write a history of someone who refused history? In the initial planning of this work, I tried to limit myself to the quirks of local history and events (from the great storm of 1987 to the hockey matches, the holidays, the school trips,

and so on) that had occurred within his lifetime, in the belief that this brief span of time (from 1984 through to 2008) was now marked out as his. I assumed that I could construct my creative history in such a way that the news and events of those years, both international and local, would take on particular meaning and significance in relation to my brother. However, when drafting and re-drafting the first chapter, I soon realised that this temporal organisation revealed a basic falsehood in my logic: just because things occur concurrently does not mean their relationship is any more significant than any other two events. I therefore revised my plan and structure in order to demonstrate how meaning could arise from any historic events or ideas that provided a point of connection with my brother's life. Walter Benjamin notes that the historian can use such connections to create a 'constellation in which his own epoch comes into contact with that of an earlier one.'<sup>19</sup> I use these points of contact between different historical epochs to show that the present is composed of splinters of the past. This serves to re-cast my brother not as a product of only those twenty-four years but as a human composed of and inseparable from the unending text of human history.

My brother was not, by the way, alone in denying the existence of any time before his birth. In his memoir *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov notes 'I know...of a young chronophobiatic who experienced something like panic when looking for the first time at homemade movies that had been taken a few weeks before his birth.'<sup>20</sup> For some, there is nothing more terrible than the thought of the world identical in every way except for our absence. As children many of us assume that the world is not separate from our being within it, and that it cannot therefore exist without us. Part of the driving force of my project is, therefore, to prove that the opposite is in fact true – namely, that it is impossible to escape the past, that it is relentless, that we are part of

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<sup>19</sup> Benjamin, p.265

<sup>20</sup> Nabokov, p.5

its very fabric and cannot cast it off. My project therefore considers the past not as finite blocks of time whose meaning is both dependent on and negotiated by their immediate context but as the vital point of connection between the living and the dead: between each of us who has ever lived or will ever live. For instance, finding the school notebook in chapter 22 sets up a conversation between the narrator and the school-age brother that is also a conversation between the present and the past, and thus leads directly to the conjuring of a multitude of ghosts (pp.190-92).

What bothered my brother was, I believe, that the past seemed like a bottomless cavern opening up beneath his feet, and even to consider it gave him the most terrible vertigo. It was something far too nebulous and abstract to get a grip on, and at the age of seven or eight it proved impossible for him to imagine something without any clear limits or circumference. It was far easier to simply pretend it did not exist, and to keep on moving forward without glancing down. This same fear of time is reproduced in my memoir when I attempt to calculate my brother's time on earth, leading to me feeling as though 'I am standing at the edge of an arithmetical abyss, with nothing below but an infinity of lunatic calculations' (p.179).

The limitations of time and knowledge have always been a fundamental facet of both memoir and history. In the early eighth century, the most famous of all Anglo-Saxon historians, known as the Venerable Bede, wrote of the conversion of King Edwin to Christianity. The conversion is triggered by a story told to him by a royal adviser. The story goes like this: it is a winter's night, and in the forests outside snowstorms are raging and the wind is howling; yet you are inside by the warmth of a fire, eating a hot dinner with your counsellors. Suddenly a sparrow flies in through one door of the banqueting-hall, swoops over the dining table, and without stopping flies out through the door at the opposite end. For a few seconds the bird is safe from

the darkness and the storms, but just as quickly he is gone, back into the uncertain world from which he came. Our lives are like this, for we are on the earth for only the shortest of time, yet of what came before and what might follow, we know nothing. If someone can tell us something of what we may find there, we must listen to what he has to say.<sup>21</sup>

It is a story that sticks in my mind, not least because more than a thousand years later we still have little idea of who or what or where we are, before or after our mortal lives. That is one reason why in my memoir I focus on the time we shared, and do not hypothesise about any religious or metaphysical beliefs about where my brother might now be. Bede's story, though, begs the question of not only post-existence but also pre-existence – which is intriguing simply because we tend to overlook the former. Few people, after all, lie in bed at night and worry about what it was like before they were born – apart from my brother, of course.

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<sup>21</sup> Venerable Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (New York: Dover Books, 2012), pp.116-7

## H. Happiness

It was easy to sometimes feel, during the writing of my memoir, as though life was retreating from my grasp, as though the more I indulged my memories and revisited the past, the more my presence in the here and now diminished.

One explanation for this sensation is the way that long-term memory invariably works to improve the past. Very often we suffer through the most monotonous of times only to later turn them into fond memories, into *do-you-remember-when* or *those-were-the-days*. We retouch, buff, spit-and-polish until we have persuaded ourselves that things were better back then. From the safety of a great distance, we construct happiness with hindsight.

This problem or tendency was very acute for me, since in my memoir I claim that my brother and I were blissfully happy as children together.

Clearly this claim is problematic in itself – but no less problematic is the very nature of happiness and its representation. Roland Barthes writes of the impossibility of writing definitively about pleasure in *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973), in which he asserts that a writer ‘can only circle such a subject’.<sup>22</sup> Instead of trying to give a complete picture of a blissfully happy childhood in my prose, I choose to circle around key everyday moments and dip in and out. Indeed, by mixing these brief glimpses of personal pleasures with folklore, beliefs and cultural history, I seek to show that pleasure is something formulated through the connections that bind a community or culture, that pleasure is intimately bound, both personally and socially, with the pleasures of others. For instance, I note that ‘some of my brother’s happiest times’ were at the hockey club, especially when partaking in the club’s ‘articles of faith and arcane rituals’ (pp.149-50), and the reason for this, I believe, is that in so

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<sup>22</sup> Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill & Wang, 1975), p.34

doing he was sharing in the happiness of others. His happiness, that is, shaded into theirs and vice versa.

To press on, then, with the question of the nature of happiness: when I assert that my brother and I were happy children, what does that actually mean? Well, during the planning, writing and revision process I was guided by two or three working definitions of this capricious and obstinate emotion. The definition I started with is perhaps best expressed in algebraic terms – as follows:

$$a - b = \chi \quad \text{where } a = \text{activity, } b = \text{one's sense of oneself, and } \chi = \text{happiness.}$$

This acknowledges that we are often happiest when we forget our selves, and thus our own peculiar worries and problems. Some of the happiest and most vivid times I recount in my memoir were moments when either my brother or myself were not who we normally were: when, for instance, we were a ragtag band of soldiers in the bracken woods, or when my brother transformed into the devilish Bebe, or when he forgot his worries at school and immersed himself in the role of hockey captain or bouncer. Bliss comes from those moments where the immediacy of the present is all that exists in the child's unpremeditated consciousness: for example, when I am leaping from the jetty, all other thoughts forgotten (p.43); or again, when my brother and I lay waiting for the storm to pass, believing the wind is calling to us alone (p.9), or when in our tent on the Isle of Wight my brother and I imagine we might easily drift away (p.37).

These moments of intense joy that are contained within the immediacy of the present moment are of course a key feature of late-Victorian Aestheticism. I am here thinking in particular of Walter Pater's famous formulation that the utmost pleasure

arises only when you can ‘give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moment’s sake’.<sup>23</sup> However, Pater also notes the problem inherent in finding pleasure in those present-tense epiphanies, because the very nature of time means that the moment of pleasure is ‘gone while we try to apprehend it’ and therefore seeking to follow it only gives rise to ‘that continual vanishing away, that strange, perpetual weaving and unweaving of ourselves’.<sup>24</sup> Happiness in the immediate present is only ever happiness lost.

Much of our happiness is focused on the most brief and fleeting of moments, and is undoubtedly amplified by chance, caprice, and plain old-fashioned good luck. Happiness is thus bound up with a sense of the present moment suspended without worry about what may happen next. This is why so much of my memoir returns to the world of our childhood, as I seek to describe and illustrate the way in which as children we live without a sense of tomorrow. We truly were what we pretended to be in such present tense moments – pirates at sea, cowboys under attack, or astronauts exploring the fringes of space (p.126).

This sense of a present moment indefinitely suspended is vital to my work. Yet there is a contradiction here, for the present moments suspended in my work are, of course, always already slipping into the past. Happiness is something that is shown, by means of tense, to already be past. I sought to make this fundamental tension a key part of my project: to demonstrate that any memory of happiness is undercut by the fact that it is a memory.

Clearly, then, both time-past and time-present are crucial to my memoir; but so too, albeit less obviously, is time-future. As Mark Currie has suggested, the very structure and composition of books means that there is always some sense of the

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<sup>23</sup> Walter Pater, *The Renaissance. Studies in Art and Poetry*, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition (New York: Dover Books, 2005), p.199

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p.196

future – ‘For a written narrative, the existence of the future is material, in the form of graphic signs or pages ahead’.<sup>25</sup> This becomes particularly interesting in my memoir because on the one hand, it is marked by a sense that there is no possible future without my brother; whilst, on the other hand, the very book the reader is holding is testimony to the fact there has been a future. This tension is an important facet of my project, and indeed my emotional life, for while I myself had no desire to live on without my brother, my memoir is stubborn witness to the fact that I have done so.

The second definition of happiness I came up with can be expressed algebraically as follows:

$d(e + f + m) - r = \chi$      where  $d$  = personal satisfaction,  $e$  = work,  $f$  = family health and comfort,  $m$  = money,  $r$  = the possibility of future regret as seen from the present, and  $\chi$  = happiness.

For much of my life, this is what I have believed: that happiness is the reward of utility. That if one works hard and doesn’t make a fuss then everything will turn out all right, that there is some karmic justice to the structure of the universe, and that good behaviour will somehow lead to contentment. My brother’s death, of course, demonstrates vividly the folly of such thinking. My memoir is, in this sense, one long argument with myself.

All this explains why I include as many mundane and everyday objects in my work as possible – for example, the blue plastic bottles of mouthwash I found amid my brother’s belongings, the solitary scuffed trainer left in his car, the list of hip hop

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<sup>25</sup> Mark Currie, *About Time: Narrative, Fiction and the Philosophy of Time* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), p.147



CDs with over-the-top titles and cracked cases, the funeral wreaths with crumpled petals and dried-out leaves left to shrivel on the uncut lawn. My obsession with this material evidence of the everyday and banal is an attempt to deny death, to suggest that there has been no dramatic rupture, that the world is exactly as it always has been, and indeed that my life-long pursuit of duty and hard-work has not gone unrewarded.

I move now to my third algebraic definition of happiness:

$$(\chi \times a) \quad (y \times a)$$

$$\frac{\quad}{t} = \frac{\quad}{t}$$

where  $a$  = a set proportion of the human race,  $\chi$  = happiness,  $y$  = unhappiness, and  $t$  = any given moment in time.

It often seems as if our happiness is relative, as though it depends upon the unhappiness of others, that there is a terrible equilibrium to it all. In Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1953), the character of Pozzo says that 'The tears of the world are a constant quantity. For each one who begins to weep, somewhere else another stops. The same is true of the laugh.'<sup>26</sup> It is a simple truth that many of our pleasures are indeed dependant upon the miseries of others – whether those are the cars and airplanes that suffocate the planet, the clothes and toys and phones and gadgets made in the appalling and inhumane conditions of sweatshops halfway across the world, or the shiny new products constructed in factories whose waste spreads sickness among our neighbours. It is a terrifying thought – that the happiness of any one of us at any

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<sup>26</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, in *The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber & Faber, 1990), Act 1, line 461, p.33

given moment might be equal and opposite to the misery of another human being at that same moment.

This account of happiness is, though, at work in many of the central chapters of my project where happiness only exists as an absence, as the opposite of the grief and pain I am describing. Connected to this are my frequent allusions to the casual cruelty of the world – see, for example, the discussions of the torture methods of Guantanamo Bay (p.137) or the examination of the history of bear-baiting and bear-fighting (p.165). The accounts of my brother’s childish games or odd adult whims are, then, held in balance with the more general cruelty and suffering of human history and so become (at least partly) redemptive in comparison.

That, though, is a huge claim to make. So, to begin again, let me offer my fourth algebraic definition:

$c = s(r + q) \times w = \chi$       where  $c$  = human connection,  $s$  = that spark that makes two people both smile at the same moment,  $r$  = a reflection of your own thoughts and feelings in another,  $q$  = the sense of your life only existing at that point in time,  $w$  = an awareness that such moments are brief and could slip away at any second, and  $\chi$  = happiness.

If happiness depends on the possibility that it is temporary and if my text pursues this very particular vision of happiness, then it is closer to what Barthes calls a text of ‘bliss’ than a text of ‘pleasure’. Note how Barthes defines the text of bliss as ‘the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts...unsettles the reader’s historical, cultural, psychological assumptions’.<sup>27</sup> And my central aim in writing this work is

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<sup>27</sup> Barthes, p.14

indeed to discomfort the reader, to show them how closely related is happiness to loss. I try to achieve this through a series of unexpected segues and juxtapositions – note, for example, how the scattering ashes is followed by a list of theories about the genus of fairies, or how I imagine my brother checking his text messages in Victorian London. Happiness is contradictory and unsettling, precisely because in my memoir there is no happiness that is not in some way dependent on loss.

## M. Memoir

A memoir is, by usual definition, a narrative record or account of a single life; however, in reality the dominant mode of autobiographical writing is that of constant positioning, with the narrator frequently being defined in comparative terms – I am thinking here of conversion narratives from writers such as Margery Kempe and John Bunyan that detail the believer's relationship with their God; childhood memoirs from Gosse's to more recent and extreme works such as Dave Pelzer's *A Child Called 'It'* where the memoirist is constructed in relation or opposition to familiar relationships; or war memoirs such as those by Siegfried Sassoon and George Orwell that depict the narrator as defined by the effects of larger historical forces at work. What the modern history of the memoir suggests, then, is that the self, independently or alone, is without meaning, and only ever exists in and through its situatedness within the world. From the start, I decided that my own narrative would push this idea to its logical endpoint, by focusing on how my brother and I define or even produce each other.

This does not mean, though, that ancient memoirs were not important to me. In fact, one of my key influences was the work that has often been called 'the first autobiography' of Western culture: the *Confessions* of St. Augustine of Hippo (written around 397 C.E.). It would be a mistake, though, to think that this seminal work is a straightforward record of a life, for in many ways it is a distinctly modern text – and, like my own, focuses on the key relationship that comes to define the narrator's existence. Only the first nine chapters present events from the author's life, after which the text takes a discursive turn with further chapters presenting philosophical ruminations on the nature of memory, close readings, and analyses of specific pieces of scripture. It is, if you will, a hybrid text, a mash-up of genres and styles, a mixture of distinct textual types, and in this way it was influential for my own project where

personal recollection rubs up against local history, literary analysis, theology, folklore and philosophical speculation.

In Augustine's *Confessions* there is a constant movement in the text beyond the events described to suggest some deeper significance. Eugene Vance suggests that it is this that led to the mixture of styles: 'Augustine', writes Vance, 'was sufficiently lucid about his rhetorical strategies to understand that, though he could not in good faith carry to completion a narrative unless its events were licensed by what existentially occurred, he could complete that story by passing from a narrative of empirical events to a closure that was ideal, conjectural or speculative.'<sup>28</sup> Speculation and conjecture are also integral to my project, as I too seek to locate meaning and significance in the chaos of everyday life. And very often that meaning is the relationship between my brother and myself. Indeed, it might be said that every description of Luke is in some way a description of 'Sam'. For instance, the account of Luke weaving together a 'never-ending monologue [that] invested our movements with so much adventure' (p.29) could almost apply to Sam weaving together his memoir.

I should add that Augustine's *Confessions* was also important for me in the way it acknowledges and even draws attention to its own limitations and artifice. This is not an objective work, nor does it pretend to be, and I followed its path in trying to constantly put into question the reliability of the authorial voice. The narrative of the *Confessions* is frequently curtailed, and is filled with elision as the author cherry-picks that which works best to illustrate the broader theological point he is trying to convey. For instance, whilst his mother, Monica, is one of the central figures of the narrative, his father is rarely mentioned. Again, his own (common-law) wife and son are not

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<sup>28</sup> Eugene Vance, 'Functions and Limits of Autobiography in Augustine's *Confessions*', *Poetics Today*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (1984), p.401

shown or discussed in any detail, while the act of stealing pears from a neighbour's tree as a child is amplified for dramatic and theological resonance. In the same way, I stripped back my text to the bare essentials. My own partner and children are never mentioned, and for the purpose of the text they do not exist. Neither does my youngest brother feature in my project. These elisions serve, I suggest, to increase both the intimacy and claustrophobia of the Luke-Sam relationship. This amplification through omission allows me to minimise distractions and so analyse in detail this key relationship.

I also found Augustine influential in the way that he sets up a clear contrast between before and after the defining event of his life – namely, conversion to Christianity. Clearly, I too work around a defining event – my brother's death. In this connection I seek to set up a contrast between the summer in which he died and time before. In the summer of mourning the sound is often described as muffled and there is a repeated evocation of the faded yellow of old photographs – note the 'ghostly yellow light' of the moon (p.76), the 'yellow glow of the streetlights' (p.129), and the faded yellow lilies of the funeral cortege (p.147). There is also a recurring greyness – grey skies reappear at regular intervals, along with grey canopy, grey clouds and grey ash. By means of these 'colourings' I seek to upend expectations by making the present as close as possible to the black and white dullness we associate with the long-distant past. In order to further set it apart, I overload the sections set in the past with sensory description – here, smell, touch and taste all play a much larger role. Central to this is the focus on food – witness the omelettes (p.156), oysters (p.171) and boiled eggs (p.197), not to mention breakfasts complete with 'sunburn-pink bacon with curled lapels of fat' (p.177).

This use of contrast also helps to highlight the split within the narrator himself. He is suddenly broken and incomplete, and to illustrate this the narrative is deliberately fragmentary. In this, my memoir follows developments in the genre far more recent than St Augustine, developments that have been marked by increased experimentation with form. One of the most successful of those recent works in the ‘grief memoir’ genre, and one that I am heavily indebted to, is Joan Didion’s *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2006). This raw and unflinching look at the effects of loss on the grieving mind stands out from other grief memoirs because it rejects the idea that writing about such painful and disorientating experiences is itself an act of healing that provides consolation. It offers a stark refusal of the social expectation to ‘move on’. I was deeply influenced by Didion’s emotional honesty, which I seek to replicate in my own work by documenting some of the ridiculous actions and beliefs I succumbed to in the wake of my brother’s death, such as chasing a lookalike around a local Sainsbury’s and spending days wallowing through old boxes of CDs and primary school notebooks. Didion stresses ‘the power of grief to derange the mind’<sup>29</sup> and documents how the magical thinking of the title breaks down the logic of the everyday world – how, for example, the shoes of the deceased must not be thrown away because he ‘would need shoes if he was to return.’<sup>30</sup> In my own work, the rules of normal life are also suspended, so that the narrator suspects that Luke might leap out from behind a tree in the woods, or suddenly phone once more to explain where he was, or appear within an old photograph to communicate some unknown message or signal.

Didion’s memoir places the reader within the alternate reality of the grief-saturated consciousness, where nothing is quite as it should be and time slows down

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<sup>29</sup> Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking* (Glasgow: Harper Perennial, 2006), p.34

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, p.37

and ceases to operate as it used to. I try to foster a similarly oppressive atmosphere by setting the majority of my scenes in the present in cramped, claustrophobic, dark, and dusty environments, such as a dense wood, Chichester Cathedral, a lightless attic, and the mushroom and packing sheds of an old farm. Didion sums up this oppressive state as follows: ‘There was a leaden feeling. It was the same leaden feeling with which I woke on mornings after John and I had fought.’<sup>31</sup> This points not only to the emotional toll of grief that reduces the present day to something cold, heavy and unreal, but also the sense of incompleteness that suggests everything must now remain unfinished forever. It is precisely this idea of perpetual incompleteness that I aim to depict in my own work; for example, when describing ‘All the might-be could-have-been Lukes; All the possible Lukes that would be living out there still if it wasn’t for that one day’ (p.192). Didion’s construction of a text of overlapping voices was also heavily influential. The narrative not only presents the ideas of doctors, psychologists, and life-guides, but also a host of other texts, including quotation from Sigmund Freud, Emily Post, Philip Aries, Geoffrey Gorer, C.S. Lewis, and Thomas Mann. This feature of the text demonstrates both a search for comprehension (a writer looking for consolation in writing) and a performance of the need to escape the confines of the grieving self and locate meaning in the world of books. This is why I too decided to construct a tapestry of textual connections, quoting from authors as diverse as Boswell, Robert Laneham, Conan-Doyle and Johannes Hofer, in order to dramatise the way the grieving mind of a writer insatiably searches for answers in writing.

The appeal to multiple voices beyond the self is suggestive of an underlying anxiety about how much can really be known and understood by the grieving self. In fact, the idea of creating an accurate portrait of any self is doomed to failure if we

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid, p.31



accept, following Freud, that the self is driven by, and indeed composed of, a host of unconscious forces. According to Freud, of course, the self is not fixed, but fluid – not singular, but multiple. And it is for this reason that my text is fragmentary, that it jumps between recollections, folklore and close reading, that it switches tenses and draws attention to its contradictions and unreliability. I am trying, thereby, to create a narrative that resists seeking answers to that unanswerable question: who am I? I felt that trying to create a work in which I depict myself without complication would be to ignore the reality that we often little understand why we act in one way and not another. I therefore aim to show that the narrator, ‘Sam Meekings’, is also hard to fathom, not always acting logically nor in possession of sure answers or understanding – not even of himself. Freud cites, as examples of ways in which unconscious forces spill out into our daily life, not only dreams but also the ‘forgetting of familiar words and names...slips of the tongue...[and] certain errors’<sup>32</sup> and so I decided early on to try to make these a feature of my text. Much of the narrative happens without clear explanation, and I write several times that I don’t know why I performed a certain action or visited a particular place – for example, driving to Eastbourne, wandering round the Cathedral, and choosing seemingly unfamiliar paths through the woods.

I was, of course, very mindful that the success of a grief memoir depends on a fine balance between the specific and the general – a sense that the shock and incomprehensibility of loss is something that might be experienced by anyone at any moment. Besides, it is a commonplace that the best writing often hints at the universal in the smallest of details. It was, therefore, essential for me to make my memoir as specific as possible, and to focus in on key images and moments, from the gruesome faces of his boglin toys (p.18), through the greasy and nauseating meal at a pub that

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<sup>32</sup> Sigmund Freud, ‘Character and Culture’, in *Readings on Human Nature*, ed. Peter Loiptson (Hadleigh: Broadview Press, 1998), p.346

held a museum of curiosities on the second floor (p.177), to the expressions of the skeletal family in the amusement park on the Isle of Wight (pp.37-38). However it was also important to retain not only significant, meaningful or figurative details, but also to use banal and everyday details to ground the narrative in its immediate context. I was inspired here by the scrupulous and unrelenting attention to detail in the ‘auto-fiction’ of Karl Ove Knausgård, particularly in the first book of his autobiographical fiction which deals with the death of his father, *A Death in the Family* (2013). Here the past is very much as alive as the present, where it retains all its stark immediacy. After his father drinks himself to death, the narrator and his brother clean the house where the cold corpse was found sitting in a chair. There is a pile of laundry near the washing machine, and even this is focused on: ‘When the last item of clothing had been carried out, I sprinkled the Klorin over the floor, using half of the bottle, and then I scrubbed it with the broom before hosing it all down the drain. Then I emptied the rest of the green soap all over it, and scrubbed it again, this time with a cloth...’<sup>33</sup> This is the ‘kitchen-sink’ approach, where the brand of cleaning agent used is just as important as the feelings on discovering the body. Knausgård is not afraid of the banal or mundane; in fact, he embraces them to demonstrate that nothing in life, or indeed death, is unworthy of analysis.

In my memoir the accumulation of minutiae, such as in the long lists of the artefacts found in the loft or in the old sheds at the farm, suggests a relentless search for meaning. This is closely allied to the way I seek to mimic Knausgård’s thinking, or meditation. Note how Knausgård uses the dead body at the centre of the story to prompt thought: ‘Now I saw his lifeless state. And that there was no longer any difference between what once had been my father and the table he was lying on, or the

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<sup>33</sup> Karl Ove Knausgård, *A Death in the Family: My Struggle Book I*, trans. Don Bartlett (London: Vintage, 2013), p.272

floor on which the table stood, or the wall socket beneath the window, or the cable running to the lamp beside him. For humans are merely one form among many, which the world produces over and over again, not only in everything that lives but also in everything that does not live'.<sup>34</sup> The interweaving of description and reflective analysis creates a layered text that contains both the action described and philosophical thought. The style embraces long sentences and winding digressions, and this creates a meditative and hypnotic quality that I also aim to foster in my work, where every detail or thought might lead towards another in a never-ending chain.

This constant movement and analysis can, of course, create anxiety that the heart of the work might get lost amid the detail, and one of my concerns when writing was that the narrative might become overwhelmed by the amount of digression, connection and external exploration. In his recent book, *Reality Hunger* (2010), which argues for the aesthetic primacy of writing 'real life' over fiction, David Shields asks 'When a self can (through language, memory, research, and invention) project itself everywhere, and can empathise with anyone or anything, what exactly is a self?'<sup>35</sup> The answer is perhaps that the self *is* these projections – in other words, is both Theseus moving through the labyrinth and the labyrinth itself. In short, a work such as mine is a work of desperately mapping a self that is itself involved in desperately mapping. Shields was inspirational here, for like him I decided to do away with melodramatic coincidences, unexpected plot twists, and artificial revelations in order to focus on the internal world of the narrator. In this way, to quote Shields, 'we're left with a deeper drama, the real drama: an active human consciousness trying to figure out how he or she has solved or not solved being alive.'<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid, p.393

<sup>35</sup> David Shields, *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2010), p.60

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, p.432

Dramatising the working of human consciousness entails experimenting with form, structure and voice. Smith and Watson suggest that writing from life has always involved borrowing from other genres, and that ‘what is called “autobiography” is not at this historical moment (and, we would argue, never has been) a unified form, nor is it distinct from literary modes of either fiction or nonfiction. Most autobiographical narratives have...employed diverse kinds of storytelling, and presented disjunctive concepts of subjectivity and agency’.<sup>37</sup> Memoir provides me, then, with the possibility of blurring the distinctions between the real and the imaginary, between life and storytelling. One of the works that particularly inspired me to blend the autobiographical and the fictional was David Vann’s *Legends of a Suicide* (2009), in which the same terrible event echoes and recurs throughout the text. In the book’s first section, Roy’s father ‘took his .44 magnum handgun from the cabin and...spattered himself amid the entrails of salmon’<sup>38</sup>, and the ramifications of this act are felt throughout the rest of the book as guns appear again and again. For example, in the second section, the narrator, Roy, notes the sound of his father’s gun’s ‘shells in his pocket’<sup>39</sup> when he meets his father’s new fiancé, while in the third section Roy alarms his mother by pretending he has been shot, and a little later he declares, ‘I loaded my father’s .12 gauge and blew out most of our windows and doors.’<sup>40</sup> The death that triggers the narrative is inescapable as the story circles round and round the same inaugural truth. Though the locations, contexts and setting change, again and again the father is depicted as weeping late at night<sup>41</sup>, and again and again the father is

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<sup>37</sup> Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, ‘In the Wake of the Memoir Boom’, in *Reading Autobiography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), pp.127-8

<sup>38</sup> David Vann, *Legend of a Suicide* (London: Penguin, 2009), pp.9-10

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, p.21

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, p.33

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, p.9, p.48, p.55

shown saying ‘I don’t know’<sup>42</sup>, the very words that preceded the suicide as described in the opening account. In the same way, in my narrative I return again and again to the images and recollections of my brother as a restless and always-moving child, and also to the changes that he underwent in his final eighteen months. The scrambled chronology means that we are liable, at any moment, to return to the central incident: it cannot be left in the past, and so it always looms ahead.

*Legend of a Suicide’s* final and longest section switches suddenly to a third-person narrative voice, and describes an attempt by Roy and his father to survive together and alone on a deserted and inhospitable Alaskan island. Here, it is Roy himself who finally ‘pulled the hammer back again, raised the barrel to his head, and fired.’<sup>43</sup> From there, the story follows Roy’s father as he first flees the island, then the country, in a haunting and relentless journey that nonetheless leads eventually to the same end: his death. I seek to illustrate a similarly unsettling inevitability in my work where, even though my brother is resurrected in Sherlock Holmes’s London, or brought to life once more in the reconstruction of his final day, the narrative must eventually return to where it began. The creative work of imagining and reimagining is no simple cure or consolation.

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid, p.9, p.21, p.42, p.46, p.71

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, p.128

## P. Place

One of the key themes of my memoir is the relationship between place and memory. I go about demonstrating this in several ways. The very first thing I aimed to set up in the opening chapters was a conception of place as a palimpsest in which different ‘layers’ of time co-existed and might, therefore, be accessed at any particular moment. By opening with a journey into the same woods that my brother and I used to play in as children, I seek to reproduce the famous Proustian process of recollection sparked by sensory stimuli. In *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1913-27), in one of the most famous passages in twentieth-century literature, Proust described how after experiencing a familiar taste, that of madeleine biscuits dipped in a drink of boiled lime-blossom, suddenly ‘the old grey house upon the street, where her room was, rose up like a stage set... and with the house the town, from morning to night and in all weathers, the square where I used to be sent before lunch, the streets along which I used to run errands, the country roads we took when it was fine’.<sup>44</sup> A whole universe of detailed memory is vividly conjured up from the depths of memory by the stimulation of a single sense.

For Proust, the primary senses – particularly taste and smell – prompt a vast project of recollection. And it is now a common ploy of fiction to employ songs, sights, tastes and sensations to elicit an unexpected turn toward the past. Indeed, the device of the involuntary memory is arguably over-used and over-familiar. I have therefore attempted to go further, and replace the idea of the senses stimulating memory with the idea that a particular location gives rise to the past. In other words, I want to suggest that memory is not only internal but also external. In my opening chapter, the woods themselves do not just contain the past but are themselves the past

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<sup>44</sup> Marcel Proust, *In Search Of Lost Time Vol 1: Swann's Way*, New Ed edition trans C. K. Scott Moncrieff, D. J. Enright & Terence Kilmartin (London: Vintage Classics, 1996), p.54

– a past which can be accessed only through retracing the steps I had previously taken with my brother.

Place thus functions for me as a kind of archive. In each chapter it is a specific location that dictates the action. In short, place has a kind of agency in my work, with the spirit of the place, or ‘genius loci’, driving much of the narrative. For example, chapters 9, 10 and 11 are driven by the city of Chichester and its history or histories – not just the pilgrims arriving to see the bones of St Richard but General Eisenhower awaiting D-Day and young men fighting in Wetherspoons.

When I talk of the dizzying feeling which overcame me in the Goblin Woods, or the sense of déjà vu that afflicted me as I wandered around my brother’s old haunts in Chichester, I am seeking to use specific topographical details to conjure up ghosts both general and personal. Witness, for example, such *general* traces or ghosts as the local stories and myths surrounding the Goblin Woods (pp.9-10), or the fragments of Roman mosaic beneath Chichester High Street (p.92); and such *personal* traces or ghosts as the memories of my brother playing in the woods (p.7) or working as the bouncer outside the door of the Dolphin and Anchor (p.68). This interplay is vital for showing that memory is at once both public and private. Indeed, by having general, or public, traces overlap with personal traces I seek to dramatise the anxiety that the past – and indeed my brother – was at once both everywhere and nowhere.

In this respect one of the biggest influences on my work was W.G. Sebald’s *The Rings of Saturn* (1998), a travel narrative in which a walking tour of the coastline of East Anglia becomes a profound meditation on loss, ruin and destruction. In Sebald’s work, each location leads to discussion of fragments of the past. Speaking of a house in Suffolk, for instance, the narrator remarks upon how difficult it is to ‘say

what decade or century it is, for many ages are superimposed here and coexist'<sup>45</sup>. This conception of place as a palimpsest in which different pasts – both public and private – all overlap is precisely what I seek to use in my own work. Recall, for instance, how the description of my brother and I ascending the tower of the castle in the Isle of Wight overlaps with the final imprisonment of King Charles I in the same castle (pp.44-47).

To further this Sebaldian layering of pasts in my own work, I try to create a fluidity between present and past tense in each chapter – for instance, moving rapidly and without warning from my present-day experience in Chichester Cathedral to my school days in the church choir there and the Roman building of the city of Noviomagus on the same site. This mingling of the past and present allows me to mimic something of Sebald's collecting together of events and items of folklore that may not otherwise have had much meaning on their own. Gregory-Guider talks about Sebald's 'collated, collaged landscapes', and it is such landscapes that I seek and find in a host of locations from Eastbourne beach to Hesworth Common. Each one functions as a tapestry of connections. Gregory-Guider goes on to point out that 'Each place in Sebald's work thus opens onto a ghostly version of its past existence, allowing a kind of traffic between the present and the past, the living and the dead'.<sup>46</sup> This 'traffic', however, is not spurred just by place but also by text. *The Rings of Saturn* returns several times to the seventeenth century writings of Thomas Browne, and I attempt to create my own textual 'traffic' by drawing on the work of Johannes Hofer, the Aberdeen Bestiary, and Conan Doyle, among others.

One of the major issues I faced stylistically was avoiding the tics of Sebald's style, chief among them the use of academic or antiquated lexicon, and the long

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<sup>45</sup> W.G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, trans. Michael Hulse (London: The Harvill Press, 1998), p.36

<sup>46</sup> Christopher C. Gregory-Guider, 'The "Sixth Emigrant": Traveling Places in the Works of W. G. Sebald', in *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 46, No. 3 (2005), p.428



sentences characterised by digression and sub-clauses. In order to carve out my own style and narrative voice distinct from that employed in *The Rings of Saturn*, I focus on integrating far more of my personal experiences into the narrative. The Sebaldian narrator is to a certain extent unknowable: his past, his family, his social situation, and the details of his work are never mentioned, and all the usual detail of a life is kept hidden. For Sebald, it seems, the tragic and difficult events of the past are almost too terrible to mention directly. *The Rings of Saturn* contains countless allusions to destruction and loss without ever addressing the first cause or event from which such sensations have arisen, leaving the reader to fill in the blanks about the lingering effects of Europe's (and specifically Germany's) 'dark century'. It is true that I also employ allusion and indirectness to build my narrative towards a climax, for instance by withholding crucial details first of my brother's name, then his cause of death, and finally his last day, in order to help build momentum and sustain the reader's interest. However, I do finally, by the end of each chapter, return to the first cause or 'primal scene' of my text – the loss of my brother.

In addition, some of the ideas that arise from Sebald's use of place as a site of memory in *The Rings of Saturn* inspired some of my own thinking on the nature and reliability of memory. As Edward J. Hughes has suggested, *The Rings of Saturn* 'draws much of its persuasive power precisely from the forces of cognitive doubt'<sup>47</sup> and, indeed, it could be said to embody Keats' conception of Negative Capability – 'that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason'<sup>48</sup>. By situating itself within uncertainties, *The Rings of Saturn* remains, then, open to the unknown, to the possible and infinite, and it

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<sup>47</sup> Edward J. Hughes, 'Lacunary Knowledge in Sebald and Proust', in *The Modern Language Review*, Vol. 109, No. 1 (2014), pp.16-7

<sup>48</sup> John Keats, *The Letters of John Keats*, ed. H E Rollins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958), pp.193-4

is exactly this openness I want to foster in my memoir. It is the questions that are important here rather than the answers. Doubt, if you like, is the engine of the narrative. After all my memoir begins with the admission that one of the worst things imaginable to me has already happened – the ‘threat’ and source of tension in the text therefore comes from my concerns over the reliability of the memories that I am using as my primary source. In chapter 1, chapter 6, and chapter 18, I specifically address some of these issues of borrowed, warped, or fictional memories, and the doubt that such concerns cast over the rest of the text. Note how I confess that ‘The closer I try to examine my own past, the more I come to doubt’ (p.43), and admit the fallibility of my recollection by stating that ‘perhaps none of this is true’ (p.158). Furthermore, from Sebald’s work I adopt the frequent use of modifying adverbs such as *maybe*, *possibly*, *perhaps*, to illustrate this lingering sense of uncertainty that provides the tension that hangs over my project.

Yet it is not only memory that is unreliable but our sense of place itself. As Simon Schama has suggested, place is constructed as much by imagination as by facts – ‘Before it can ever be a repose for the senses’, writes Schama, ‘landscape is the work of the mind’<sup>49</sup>. I seek, then, to show that locations change depending on who is viewing them. For instance, the beach at Littlehampton is unbearable for my mother, because of the child dressed as Spiderman on the shore, while I cannot bring myself to enter the pier at Eastbourne because of my memories of all the losses and failures that occurred there. The psychogeographic traffic runs two ways: the emotions and behaviour of the viewer are influenced by the location but the location is also changed by the emotions and behaviour of the viewer.

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<sup>49</sup> Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, reissue edition (London: Harper Perennial, 2004), pp.6-7

Having established how essential the notion of place as personal construct was to my work, I then had to work out how to order and organise the progression of places, events and memories that were to build together to create the Sebaldian ‘collage’. After much experimenting with a rigid structure that saw me visiting the places my brother had lived in a roughly chronological order, I found this approach did not allow me enough leeway to make those imaginative leaps of connection that provide the magical element to the text and take it beyond the limits of the grief memoir to something less familiar, less generic. I was, therefore, drawn to the Situationists’ idea of the *dérive* (or drifting) as a key source of inspiration. The idea of the *dérive*<sup>50</sup> is that getting lost defamiliarises the world, and so is itself an almost creative act. In many of my chapters I therefore describe the experience of getting lost in the minute actions of everyday life – actions such as looking at a photo, taking a trip to a supermarket, visiting a relative. In each case I seek to foreground how the world becomes momentarily strange in the moment or moments of getting lost.

The idea of the *dérive* helps me structure, or un-structure, my memoir as a series of wanderings. Guy Debord, writing about *dérive* from a Situationist perspective, talks specifically about ‘the sudden change of ambience in a street within the space of a few metres...[and] the path of least resistance which is automatically followed in aimless strolls’<sup>51</sup>. And aimless strolls are clearly vital to my narrative: in Eastbourne, for instance, without intention or pre-meditation my wandering leads me

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<sup>50</sup> Guy Debord, ‘Theory of the Dérive’, trans. By Ken Knabb, in *Les Lèvres Nues* #9 (November 1956) <<http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/theory.html>> [accessed 8 November 2014]

<sup>51</sup> Guy Debord, ‘Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography’, trans. by Ken Knabb, in *Les Lèvres Nues* #6 (September 1955) <<http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/presitu/geography.html>> [accessed 9 November 2014] (para. 11 of 22)

to the park where I had injured my brother as a child. In such moments, drifting functions almost as a cousin to automatic writing, whereby the subconscious mind dictates the direction and content of the ensuing text.

My interest in strolling or walking also serves to place my memoir within a larger literary tradition – not only the Situationist tradition of wholly purposeless movement but also the quest tradition of purposeful movement. I think here of *The Pilgrim's Progress* in the seventeenth century and, indeed, of the heraldic quests of Arthurian legend and the strange and unpredictable wanderings of Homer's Odysseus. It is true that the quest has a finite end (the pilgrim reaches the Celestial City, Odysseus returns home), whilst the act of wandering has no specific destination; however, they are similar in that in both it is the action of the movement that is important for the text rather than its conclusion. In both cases the substance of the narrative is the trials, journeys or challenges faced during the movement. Wandering thus functions as an open-ended quest.

It might be added that wandering has always been a central tool of historical inquiry. Richard Cobb, for example, has argued that there is no better way to access the past than to find it by exploring the specific physical locations of the present: 'A great deal of Paris eighteenth-century history,' he writes, 'can be walked, seen, and above all heard, in small restaurants, on the platform at the back of a bus, in cafes, or on the park bench'<sup>52</sup>. Historical enquiry is not a process that happens through academic research alone but also through immersion and personal experience. The wandering framework thus allows me to further suggest the blurring of lines between the objective and the subjective that is key to my memoir.

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<sup>52</sup> Richard Cobb, *A Second Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp.19-20

Finally, emphasising place in my project also allows me to build in aspects of the uncanny. When we say that certain places are ‘haunted’, what we mean in essence is that they retain the imprint of events that occurred there. In this sense, ghosts are memories that belong to places.

The role of ‘ghosts’ in many fictional works depends upon the idea that they are tied to place while simultaneously being dislocated in time. And this tension often informs my text, where frequently time is secondary to place, and location dictates such chronology as there is. The result of this is, I suggest, a conjuring of ghosts. For instance, the idea that there might be a child hiding within the locked mushroom sheds arises from the blurring of past games of hide-and-seek with the present search. If someone was once hiding there then to some extent part of them is always there, as a kind of ghost. According to Jacques Derrida, there is no escape from the ghostly nature of the world, since ‘everyone reads, acts, writes with his or her ghosts’<sup>53</sup>; he argues, indeed, that we are ‘structured by the phantasmic and in particular that we have a phantasmic relation to the other, and the phantasmicity of this relation cannot be reduced’<sup>54</sup>. We are all, he implies, inhabited by ghosts, and it is certainly the case that my own work cannot escape the notion of the ghost at the shoulder, and indeed of the ghost within. I seek to foreground this by focusing on incidences of the uncanny and inexplicable. Witness the doppelganger in Sainsbury’s (pp.52-55), the sudden flights of birds or beating of wings in the woods (p.28), and the blurred figure half-seen in a reflection in the photograph of my brother’s new house (p.40).

It is also the case that I make ghosts a recurring trope. Witness the woods in the opening chapter that might be ‘inhabited only by ghosts’ (p.9), while the goblin in

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<sup>53</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx* (Oxford: Psychology Press, 1994), p.139

<sup>54</sup> Jacques Derrida and Maurizio Ferraris, *A Taste for the Secret*, quoted in Gray Kochhar-Lindgren’s *TechnoLogics: Ghosts, the Incalculable, and the Suspension of Animation* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2005), p.199

the second heads straight for the ‘ghost train’ (p.16). Later I introduce the idea of the ‘hungry ghost’ of Tibetan Buddhism (p.27), and our terminally-ill grandfather ‘chasing ghosts’ through the fog of his dementia (p.51). I also refer to the classical idea that our hearts are ‘a little treasure chest where we bank our ghosts’ (p.60), while the moon that stunned and awed my ten-year-old brother when it seemed to draw closer than ever to us seemed ‘illuminated by the ghostly yellow light’ (p. 76). Ghosts are, indeed, identified as an integral part of the drifting structure of the work – note how I am ‘guided by some shadow, some irrepressible force suddenly pushing and tugging me in directions I would not usually have considered’ (p.115). Note too how in the last chapter I finally face the full connotations of this repeated trope head-on, by admitting that Luke ‘would have quite liked to be a ghost’ (p.209). This climactic revelation, which leads to the memory of him dressing in a white sheet as a child, completes the gradual movement that has been developing throughout the text, whereby the invisible world of the past continues to assert itself until ‘He is so close that I might almost reach out and touch him’ (p.210).

Ghosts, of course, complicate any simple sense of place. As Roger Lockhurst remarks, ‘Only ghosts, after all, can walk through walls, [or] breach the boundaries of the increasingly privatised zones of the city’<sup>55</sup>. In my memoir, I most obviously make use of this mobility in the quick segue between the doppelganger in Sainsbury’s and Shelley’s sighting of his own double in Italy two hundred years before (p.57).

My own experience with ghosts illustrates something of this mobility. It happened during one of those school trips designed to get us out of the classroom for an afternoon but without overly denting the precarious annual budget. We were taken in a fleet of school minibuses to Kingley Vale, a nature reserve on the South Downs

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<sup>55</sup> Roger Lockhurst, ‘Occult London’, in *London: From Punk to Blair*, ed. Joe Kerr and Andrew Gibson (London: Reaktion Books, 2003), p.337

just outside Chichester. The biology teachers hustled us into groups and handed out clipboards and biros before leading us on a walking tour. We then trudged down a worn track towards a grove of dark, crooked yews, gossiping and laughing in groups as we went. It was a warm, sunny day and all of us were excited to have escaped the monotony of the classroom, even if a few of my classmates made loud complaints that there was nothing more boring than trees.

I remember someone joking that we were being punished by having been sent back in time. And looking down the hill towards the narrow distance, it was hard not to think that this was what the past looked like: a handful of squat stone cottages on the fringes of farmland. It was, we felt, a place that no-one sensible would wish to visit. This impression was heightened by the dull monologue of the teacher imparting botanical information as if in some archaic incantation: adder's tongue, hollyhock, goosegrass cleavers, river-water crowfoot. We ambled through the wood pretending to listen, until we finally reached a cluster of tall yews that were said to be enchanted.

Around the roots of the trees scurried three or four grey squirrels. As we approached, they looked up in what appeared to be disdain. Something in their haughty manner put me in mind of groundsmen or caretakers who dislike nothing more than people disturbing their peace. A couple of them circled the trees then came back to see whether we were still there. They treated that tiny spot as though it was theirs alone, even snubbing the breadcrumbs and chocolate wrappers that some of us had dropped.

The trees in which the squirrels had made their home are thought to be among the oldest in these islands, and indeed they feature in ancient legend. In the middle of the ninth century, according to the collected annals of the Anglo-Saxons, a band of Vikings spread devastation across the south coast, pillaging and plundering all the

settlements they came across and carrying away anything they desired. When news reached the men of Chichester that these Vikings were close by, they gathered together their weapons and pledged to meet the savage Danes before they could reach the city. It was at the foot of Bow Hill in Kingley Vale that the two groups first confronted each other. By nightfall, the valley was littered with bodies. It is recorded that many hundreds of the enemy were slain, while those who survived the bloody encounter fled for their lives; and it was from the graves that the now-gnarled yews had grown. Legend then comes into play as it is said that at night these wizened trees pull their long roots from the earth and wander across the valley, circling around both the homesick ghosts of the ferocious Danes and the more local ghosts of the defenders.

An alternative history of Bow Hill states that though the area is undoubtedly enchanted, the wandering trees are not trying to encircle and imprison the phantoms, but rather that they are the phantoms themselves. When darkness falls, this version states, the trees change shape and take back their human form so that they might gather in dark communion once more near the burial mounds at the crest of the hill, named in some legends as The Kings' Graves and in others as The Devil's Humps.

Yet another version suggests that the ghosts of the warriors did not hang around in either spectral or botanical form but woke the morning after the battle as squirrels, condemned to guard the trees whose roots grew from their graves. This last variant of the story would at least explain why the squirrels did not seem to like us getting too close to their trees.

If there is one thing that every version of the legend agrees on it is, then, that spirits, be they the ghosts of our ancestors or the very trees and creatures themselves, are by their nature restless. To put it another way, they are somehow both connected



to place and yet set against place. In short, they complicate not only our sense of time but also of space.

## S. Skeletons

My old History professor used to keep a skeleton in his office. It was a tatty old thing, the teeth crusty and yellow and the bones in good need of a scrub, and it hung feebly from its stand in the corner of the office like a slack suit crumpled upon a hook, grinning madly at the overflowing stacks of manuscripts and first editions piled haphazardly on the carpet. According to campus rumours, it was either the last remains of some seventeenth-century criminal dug up for the medical students to practice autopsy, or a beloved relative from the furthest fringes of the professor's family tree that he could not bear to part with.

At any rate, its function was obvious. It was a prop. It allowed him to play up to the role of eccentric old don, and it was clearly a part he relished. It also helped him to spot the wandering eyes of students not paying enough attention to his words, and so to catch them out with impossible questions – something else he clearly relished. But most importantly it served to illustrate the theories with which he would bludgeon impressionable young minds. 'History,' he would say as he drummed his fingers against the pale cranium, 'is a tale of death. It starts with death and ends with death. All we have left are the bones. It's our job to dress them up.'

He would proceed to regale us with an almost insurmountable list of examples: the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in 1914 leading to the 16 million that never returned from No Man's Land; Elizabeth I's childless death leading to Civil War some fifty years later and Charles I placing his head upon the chopping block; the clandestine murder and post-mortem framing of Franciszek Honiok as a Polish aggressor that the Germans used in the Gleiwitz incident to justify invading Poland which led, through many twists and turns, to a loaded gun being wielded in the Führerbunker at the end of April 1945.

It didn't matter that his theory was easy to counter. Was it not, for instance, the convoluted international treaties that really caused the Great War? And who is to say that a war ends with the dead on the battlefield – what about all those left behind, the women forced to work in factories, the social upheaval? The more forthright students among us would, indeed, argue with him until we were blue in the face. In fact, that was the point. I soon learned he did not really believe his argument. After all, he would not have got very far as an academic were his research really so reliant on generalisations, or his conclusions quite so glib and full of holes. His death-theory of history was intended to provoke, to antagonise, and to kindle debate.

When, though, I came to begin this project, it became clear that there might be more to the theory than provocation; for death, of course, is the engine of the events I describe, their motivation and spur. Part of the impetus of my project was, you see, to recover something of my brother from death's grasp. Moreover, death is the key to the book's very form with each chapter setting out to expose how close death is to life.

Furthermore, it is death or, more precisely, mourning that dictates the spiral-shaped structure of my narrative. Note how my mourning transforms the linear existence of the time before my brother's death into the circling, unmoored drift of the summer of 2008. Mourning, it seems, will always destabilise a linear concept of time since it constantly brings the past into the present. In this, I was again influenced by the work of Sebald, where adherence to the usual rules of temporality is questioned and where the past is shown to be ever present. In the novel of the same name, Austerlitz states 'I feel more and more as if time did not exist at all, only various spaces interlocking...between which the living and the dead can move back and forth as they like, and the longer I think about it the more it seems to me that we who are

still alive are unreal in the eyes of the dead'<sup>56</sup>. Within my own work, I seek to create a similarly interlocking space, one in which my brother is simultaneously both alive and dead. The success of this project depends on making sure I represent scenes from the past with as much force as scenes from the present. In other words, I had to all I could to make the dead as real as the living. As Sebald suggests, this is not so difficult as it might first appear.

I should, perhaps, here return to my intention to focus on just my brother and myself. This allows me to narrow the focus of the text to look in microscopic details at a few key details without distraction, to amplify the intimacy of our relationship, to show how much had been lost, and to emphasise the claustrophobic and lonely character of loss. To this end, I do my best to limit any information about my self unless it pertains to my relationship with my brother. Moreover, by removing all references to my work, my friends, and my life in recent years, I seek to keep the narrative anchored in the present tense of the funeral and to dramatically demonstrate that in relation to this sudden and unexpected event, all other concerns faded or even vanished. The memoir was always intended to focus on the two of us alone: the one now lost, and the one left behind. It soon, though, became clear that, since the relationship between us was now mediated and to some extents dictated by death, death came to function as the invisible antagonist of the narrative – the unseen presence in every page of the text, the third character in the drama. The narrative dynamic is, therefore, fairly straightforward: it is a battle between myself and the antagonist for 'possession' of my brother.

Representing death is, of course, no easy task. I did not want to fall into the maudlin, the self-pitying, or the cliché. Books about personal experiences of grief are

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<sup>56</sup> W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*, trans. Anthea Bell (London: The Harvill Press, 2001), p.359

often put into the category of ‘misery memoir’, with its connotations of despair, extreme anguish and eventual catharsis, but I wanted to balance my account of the emotional effects of loss with its myriad intellectual effects. In practice what this meant was exploring the ways in which the internal life of emotion is entangled with the external world.

In this I was influenced by the concept of the objective correlative: an object or event within a narrative that elicits an unspoken emotional or intellectual response from the reader. The idea was most clearly defined by T.S. Eliot, who explained that ‘The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an “objective correlative”’; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked’<sup>57</sup>. For Eliot, the use of carefully-chosen objects or events is the best way to provoke an emotional response from the reader, making him or her actually feel rather than merely read a description of a feeling. In that sense, the reader participates in the action of the text, with their own emotion brought into play. Therefore, following Eliot’s formulation, I deliberately limit references to death and withhold any direct account of my brother’s death until the penultimate chapter at the book’s climax. I instead deploy a series of images or, if you will, objective correlatives to remind the reader of this inescapable antagonist. There are a great many such images – for example, labyrinths, the moon, inescapable forests, and fog or mist. Let me, though, just concentrate on one – namely, bone.

The narrative is littered with bone. For example, the third chapter, ‘Holes in the Skull’, uses reference to ‘noises heard in the bones of empty houses deep at night’

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<sup>57</sup> T.S. Eliot, ‘Hamlet and his Problems’, in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London: Methune, 1921), pp.100-101

(p.22), to set up the idea of the narrative itself being haunted. This chapter also deploys description of the ancient medical treatment of trepanation where ‘a sharp-toothed drill is used to bore a series of holes in the patient’s skull’ (pp.24-5), and this serves to mirror the idea of the text itself as a form of exorcism, of letting out the spirits inside. In the fifth chapter, set mainly on the Isle of Wight, I dwell on the family of skeletons ‘frozen in the middle of their meal’ (p.37) in order to reflect the book’s concern with death-in-the-family; and later in the same chapter I document the history of a whale skeleton to this day preserved in Blackgang Chine (p.39). Again, in Chichester there are the bones of Saint Richard (p.82) and then in the ‘Museum of Curiosities’ there are the ‘tiny skeletons’ (p.176) of rats and rabbits. These bones and skeletons are, I suggest, the objective correlatives of incompleteness and ruin. And indeed there are, I think, especially evocative, echoing as they do the *memento mori* skulls or bones of medieval paintings.

Bones are, of course, analogous to ruins or fragments, and in many respects my narrative is set up to function as a series of fragments that will evoke both the ruins of grief and the fact that memory itself is riddled with holes and absences. For this reason, I make no attempt to join together all the memories into a coherent or linear flow, nor to anchor them firmly by date or age. Important in this connection is the way I employ many *in media res* openings to my chapters in order to further demonstrate this sense of normal life having suddenly and inexplicably been interrupted and fragmented. This sense of fragmentation is, however, challenged by my use, throughout the book, of the chivalric motif of the quest, or battle – in particular, the battle against death. This battle does not, though, take the form of some sentimental epiphany at the conclusion of the narrative, but rather is something that takes place by or through the very writing of my text. To put this another way, my

memoir is written in the belief, or hope, or dream that books are proof against death. In his meditation on ‘The Book: A Spiritual Instrument’, Stéphane Mallarmé says of books that ‘they form a tomb in miniature for our souls’, a way of preserving life beyond death<sup>58</sup>. And it is in this hope that I write. My memoir, I believe, wars against annihilation, battles against erasure. This is one important reason why I reference many older texts that have survived centuries of desolation – in and of themselves they are weapons in the battle against death and oblivion. These books include a number of ancient texts that have long outlived their anonymous authors, such as the Aberdeen Bestiary, the Greek Physiologus, the Domesday Book, and the Tibetan Book of the Dead, not to mention references to Roman, Egyptian, pagan, medieval and Native American folklore, all of which demonstrate that the act of telling stories is an act of survival and preservation, a way of undoing death’s work. I also enlist in the war-on-death the many books by dead authors that I reference – I think here of the books of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Samuel Johnson, George MacDonald, Frances Hodgson Burnett, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Robert Laneham, Johannes Hofer, *et al.* The readerly, textual or intertextual dimension of my narrative draws attention, then, to Mallarmé’s vision of a text as a vessel or tomb.

But if it is a tomb then it is not one in which the dead are, necessarily, at peace. This is, of course, a central concern of Christianity, which is a running theme of my memoir. As well as discussing the theological idea of the ‘Resurrection of the Flesh’ (pp.177-78), my brother’s sneering attitude towards religious belief (p.90), and the power of the Mass and religious relics (see chapter 10, which is set entirely within Chichester Cathedral), I also directly quote and discuss a number of passages from the Bible. In particular, I examine the figure and gospel of Saint Luke the Evangelist,

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<sup>58</sup> Stéphane Mallarmé, ‘The Book: A Spiritual Instrument’, in *Selected Poetry and Prose*, ed. Mary Ann Caws (New York: New Directions, 1982), p.82

paying particular attention to the story of the prodigal son, and his detailed portrait of Christ as, to quote, ‘a strange and complex character...[who] advocates a radical new way of living...a complete break from the comforts and delusions of our former life’ (p.90). I also give a close reading of the story in the Gospel of John of the raising of Lazarus, which serves as the dramatic climax of chapter 21 (pp.185-6). My biblical references are deliberately limited to the New Testament, and all are explicitly concerned with a single subject: resurrection. This is not, though, intended to signal any Christian hope or belief but rather to remind the reader of my sense that any form of writing is, by necessity, a work of resurrection, a way to re-animate the dead and, for a brief period at least, give them back the life they no longer have. By writing about my brother I am, I believe, enacting his (partial) resurrection.

I have a responsibility, therefore, to consider very carefully how I do this. And in the end I would see it as an imaginative exercise dependent on fidelity to the spirit (pun intended) of the memory, rather than the letter. By this I mean deliberately avoiding attributing psychological explanations to his actions. I felt I had a duty not to invent an inner life that may or may not have been accurate. If the skeletal portrait remains elusive and incomplete then that accurately reflects the feeling of incompleteness and uncertainty I experienced during that summer of grief. In the end, all that remains are the bones, for the bones of my brother have become the bones of the text.



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