

THE CURLEW IN THE MIST

The Curlew in the Mist

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‘Even the multitude of human beings has become
like a wilderness.’

— *Astavakra Samhita* 2.21

TO LIVE in solitude in a big city, one must become invisible. Isolation is always in reference to people; solitude is not. Isolation is in comparison with the life one might have had in company, with people, the social whirl, that really one never wanted, but one dithers on looking back in a forlorn mood. Solitude keeps its welcome to come home to after drifting in the ravaging weather of such thoughts, which staying in the city makes one prey to. Temptations on every street. Better to look out of the back window at the garden, the birds, the cats, than out of the front window at other people's lives, which remind, all too easily, of a life one has forsaken. If one looked out on a deserted moor there is only the rhythm of the bog-cotton teased by the nimble fingers of the prevailing wind, dropped for a time, but all the landscape including the solitary rowan permanently bent to its shape, everything on

the same slant ready for the ferocious wind to come again. Sometimes, I forget whether I am here or there, when the curtains are closed on the night and all I can hear is the gale.

A herd animal that develops an antipathy to its own kind will soon be expelled by them and left to die, but in the human species it became a philosophical attitude with skills of its own. The outsider. The stranger. The mountain hermit, the urban recluse. One is no longer identifying oneself as necessarily human, although perhaps not many who do achieve a degree of solitude go this far with it on the inner landscape, as it were. But interacting with humans is not a skill that will or should disappear, although perhaps one has a more natural affinity with those who have already walked some distance into what is disguised as a barren wilderness but is actually a bountiful plain. Though one may never meet them, save in the words they left. Reading Ryokan in one's own hut of a night, wishing one was further away than one is, but, nonetheless, further away than most.

Some who come this way, if they did not have the sound guidance of a few who went ahead, would turn back early before it is too late, sensing they were getting into something from which there is no return, a place with fewer and fewer signs. Who hasn't followed a sheep track up a mountain thinking it was a way humans had walked before, only to look down and see the human track way below. But it is not so bad to be headed where only sheep go if they're mountain sheep. It is true enough though, there is no return, not really. There may be an appearance of return, but the heart is always 'out there' once one has tasted it, even back in the city. The outer reaches always call. You can hear it in an early robin singing before dawn, the wind in the trees, the lashing midnight rain. And one is back there wholeheartedly, as if place is irrelevant, it's a state, the city becomes a kind of abstraction in faded memory, unreal. This is the distant plain, still. It is solitude that is speaking then. All the same, one yearns to be back out there, beyond the tracks of humans. But perhaps one is growing old now, no longer sure one is fit enough physically to manage it, though mentally one is confident having cut so many ties to the world.

I have often thought that the skills I possess are more suited to a post-Apocalyptic landscape. I'm just here early picking up the traces. In the city I feel I'm living in advance of the ruins, as if all I survey of civilisation is just a mirage to ease the collapse. But rather than head out, back to the solitary places I have known as the fulfilment of a wish, I linger as if death is just tomorrow, or the next day, so why expend any great effort moving my camp, this is as good as anywhere.

Solitude is the natural state, only illusions interfere with it.

There's a Sanskrit word I like, *kaivalya*, it means the utter aloneness of the self. It reminds me of when I was wild camping up in the Scottish Highlands back in the 90s, out on Rannoch Moor, solitary, like a retreat from the world, peat bogs, wonderful desolation. The mist, the clouds coming in low off the mountains, descended like a heavy theatre drape and I couldn't even see my feet following the narrow path weaving through the peat bogs unless I bent at the waist, a naturally humbling posture, bowing before the . . . I don't know what, just the sense of something magnificent hidden in the mist,

on another plane, and then I heard it, the curlew calling in the mist, so beautiful, only ever heard recordings before, the sound of solitude. An otherworldly sound. I've never forgotten it. Call it an epiphany, something, something great. The world was utterly wiped away, and all the things of the world, the concerns, all gone. And I almost hear it now, on the edge of my room, absconded from life.

I can hear the rain outside.

Zhuangzi said human life is 'like watching a white colt rush by a gap in a wall, suddenly over'. For many years I have regarded my life as little more than an overnight stay. Pointless getting too attached, to anything. We all know this but we set it aside, pursue our fantasies of desire, build our houses on quicksand. I knew this in my twenties but I still followed along for a while, doing what everybody did. But at the back of my mind was the thought I'd either kill myself or go to a Zen monastery in Japan. I'll tell you a story actually, about that, how that saved me from suicide one night.

I was feeling terrible, on the brink, in my dusty attic flat, when I really was living in poverty though I didn't

see it that way at the time, a starving artist in his garret, the old cliché, lived like that for years. Anyway, I'd just split up with this girl, been with her for four years, longest I've been with anyone, only realised I loved her when she found someone else. I was fretting and pacing the room at three in the morning, a really low ebb, I just didn't know what to do, all I could think of was suicide. Then an idea flashed into my mind: 'Go to the last place you had peace.' Just like that it came, like a real suggestion from someone else. The last place I had peace was in the afternoon. It was winter but the sun suddenly came out and I sat down for a little while under an Indian bean tree in the sunlight. There's a word I learnt recently, 'apricity', meaning the warmth of the sun in winter. Never caught on.

Those moments sitting in the sudden sunlight under the Indian bean tree were really peaceful, the storm of my feelings over this girl subsided for a little while. So then and there still way before dawn I put on my big greatcoat and scarf and gloves and boots and went out into the freezing air and walked all the way to the Indian bean tree with just this one idea in mind, get there and it'll all be solved. Ever since, wherever I've lived, soon on arriving in the area I've noticed a single Indian bean tree early on and no others, just the one. They've become like a special magical tree for me.

The hoarfrost is on the pavement and a car alarm is blaring away in a side street and I walk the long way to the Indian bean tree. When I get there, there is no-one around, deserted even though it's by the town hall, I sit down under it wondering whether it's going to make me peaceful again here in the freezing cold, my breath in the air. I sit there for a while looking up at the sky, a clear night, no clouds, pitch black, and I notice Orion in my line of sight, its stars really sharp, and a thought occurs to me, again like someone's voice: 'How many lives have you sat here looking up at Orion? Before you kill yourself, vow to go to a Zen monastery in Japan first.' So I did, I made that vow. Now I couldn't kill myself without all the trouble of going to Japan and becoming a monk.

I got up from the tree and walked back to my flat, a lone silhouette against the pale yellow horizon with the dawn chorus and I felt like an absolute giant striding Earth, a Titan among men. Put the key in the lock, turned it, closed the door behind me, and at the moment it clicked shut I fell down into the shambles of my life once again, torn apart by despair, but with the difference now that I had to endure it, I had no easy out through suicide, it was off the table, at least without some significant effort to address the situation first in a Japanese monastery. That was just before I went to

Rannoch Moor, to escape London and all this unsettled garbage of feelings. There have been other women since then, but for me I realise now they were all people I met on a deeper journey into solitude. And vows are good for a while; I don't know whether they can be said to be truly lasting, all I can say is that I haven't broken any yet.

Have you ever seen a cormorant hanging out its wings to dry? Always reminds me of Lucifer. I love cormorants. I found a headless dead one in my garden some while back. Thought it was a blackbird at a distance but as I approached I realised it was much bigger, had yellow webbed feet. I had a cup of tea in my hand, I went out when I saw it through the kitchen window. Headless, where had its head gone, I couldn't see it around as if it had been snatched off by a fox. But cormorants never descend low flying over to the reservoirs, I couldn't figure it out. Then I noticed firework casings in the neighbour's garden, the air still smelt a bit of sulphur, Bonfire Night the night before, loads of fireworks. Poor cormorant must have been hit by a rocket on its way home.

I decided to bury the cormorant underneath the pyracantha, which was a mass of orange berries. It

was a surprisingly refreshing act, something real and reverential. I realised how much of my world has been taken up with unreal things that I do not really care about, though they seem immense by comparison with this simple little wet garden and dead cormorant.

A little later I stood outside with a mug of steaming hot tea. The garden was full of birds, more than I've seen in the garden for ages. Blackbirds were gobbling down the orange berries, blue tits flitting around the branches of the sycamore shedding its leaves, one hopping over the disturbed earth beneath which the cormorant lay, looking for earthed-up seeds and insects. I felt like some burden had fallen away from me. I gathered a few late tomatoes to fry with rice and seeds. Suddenly I notice a blue tit gently swaying a dried poppy-head back and forth to spill out seeds into its beak. Never seen that before. Surprising how many things remain that one has never seen before. A calm happiness washes over me.

The gulls
on Boxing Day,
not entirely alone.

The last time I saw Jean, the old lady next door, out in the garden, before the son and daughter who never visited came to visit the empty house, she told me she had become housebound, and I was also shocked by the dishevelled appearance of her dog. Jean had always been so sprightly, marching down the road. Old age had seemed to set in on a single day for her, when she did her back in lifting ‘a stupid little coffee table’. She was never the same again. I never realised old age could come like that, like a flicked switch. When I studied chemistry and had to sign the poisons register for enough potassium cyanide to kill a small town, only me volunteering for that synthesis, I thought of keeping a little back for a quick exit from later decrepitude, but the idea of keeping safe something that dangerous for decades rightly put me off. Instead I placed my trust in just dropping from the sky like a butterfly whose summer is over, because, like her, I wouldn’t want to rely on anyone either.

I wanted to live like lichen gradually spreading on a boulder, or a tree adding another ring each year, just standing as part of the landscape with no aim of my own save what naturally occurred.

Massing seagulls crying, white against dark stormclouds. My dad told me when I was a kid that seagulls a long way inland means the weather is bad at the coast, and I always think of that, thinking the storm has caught up with you now, just before the downpour drenches everything.

I was sitting under a tall oak tree I often sat under in the early evening in a little grove in the wilder part of the Garden of Memoriam, when I noticed an elderly couple making a beeline towards me. As they got closer the woman said:

‘Ah, I see somebody else knows about it then.’

I was a little confused.

‘Knows about what?’

‘Oh, we assumed you knew about it, sitting there, we assumed you were waiting for it.’

‘Waiting for what?’

The old man looked up.

‘It’s here already my love, been watching us.’

‘The owl,’ she said, ‘there’s an owl at the top of the tree, we’ve come to see it the past few evenings.’

I stood and looked up, the oak was very tall, my eyes lifted to the first large branch, the second, the third.

‘Where is it? I can’t see an owl.’

‘Right at the top,’ the man said.

Sometimes you think you’re looking at the top, but then the top is much further up.

‘Oh yes.’

A tawny owl, large black eyes boring down into me, it had been aware of me, of these people, for some time. It was an instant communion. Great joy to look at the owl.

This was when I lived on the third floor in an attic. The next night I was walking around the Garden of Memoriam at dusk and noticed the owl flying from church turret to oak. I heard it calling about two in the morning through the open windows overlooking the memorial garden. Eerie and beautiful. There was no-one about, it may as well have been calling to me, so I answered it as best I could.

‘Ooo-ooo-ooooo.’

I had split up with a lover a week before, I found the owl a comfort, a pleasant distraction from my sorrows. I would go and sit under the owl’s tree at midnight, but I never saw him at the top again, I would just catch his silhouette flitting across the sodium sky. I sat on the ‘slave’s grave’ in the middle of the night in the moonlight allowing small twigs to drop through my fingers, an unconscious gesture of letting go.

On the way back to my flat I saw many daffodils in a garden that looked lovely in the full moon and I

dragged one through a fist-sized hole in the wire-mesh fence. I brought it back home and put it in a vase of water. I had just set the vase down on a dusty fireplace altar where I had been burning incense in my sloping roofed bedroom when I glanced out the open window to the rooftop bathed in moonlight. The owl was sitting on a chimney pot looking at me, not five feet away. I sat down slowly by the window and we just looked at each other. He seemed a great sentinel of night, as if he had been watching me for some time on my nocturnal wanderings, and recognised me and knew all about me, and now had specifically sought me out. In his slow blink I forgot all about my troubles.

Rain. I love rain. Dark all afternoon. I stood outside in a light drizzle, the gulls are in from the coast, bright white against the sagging grey rump of the sky, like a horse's steaming paunch. The atmosphere fresh and alive, a few minutes standing too wet to sit and a quiet peace descends, as I once saw a mist descend across the path through the bogs on Rannoch Moor, rolling down fast and heavy then snaking away across the path before me into the bog-cotton like ghost adders into the moaning bones of sunken footprints long covered over. There is something truly secluded about damp places where

sundew invite midges to lunch and butterwort lie about the place like lime-green starfish and returning sodden boots have to be dried in a slow Aga. In just minutes standing in the drizzle I am transported, watching rain droplets dripping from the honeysuckle.

Once, when me and Rikki were walking down the road this old lady who had been looking out of the window rushed out to speak to us. She pointed up to the roof of a building and said: 'Is that an eagle? That huge bird?' I looked where she was pointing, took her hand in mine and reassured her it was just a chimney pot, 'but it does look like a big bird, I see what you mean'. As we walked on Rikki pointed out to me that I'd taken her hand in mine, she thought it was good I did that, compassionate, she'd have found it hard to just do that. I hadn't registered it: 'I didn't think about it.' She gave me that look: 'That's what's good about it, Silly.' Rikki was forever noticing things, once she said I must be an angel. When I caught that look in her eye I'd remind her: 'Fallen.'

Another glorious day
Of nothing to do
And nobody to see.
The lion's yawn of life,
Surrender to it, but what?
The breeze billows the curtain
But the curtain settles quickly
As it was.

There is a sameness to the days I used to find oppressive,
but now is fine. I think it's when I find the energy to
lift my head just a little from the floor that I realise how
easily everything is in my power, but then I relinquish
that power in favour of doing nothing.

Pretty Chinese girls
avoiding squashed kumquats
in heels.

I was standing in the garden. Half four in the morning
and it's light already. I was drawn outside by the bird
song while the kettle was boiling. Carmine-streaked
clouds. A loud robin singing in the eucalyptus. A wren

accompanying it hidden away. I don't remember the world being this beautiful when I thought it existed.

Against brooding clouds
As the kettle starts to boil
The first swifts arrive.

I have sometimes pondered seeing no-one ever again that I know. I have thought about not speaking any more. I have thought about writing only in isolation, not publishing it, at least not having publication as a goal, rather leaving it as a possibility that may or may not come about on its own, as moss grows on a stone, or an outhouse crumbles, or a bowl of water left outside for the birds and cats to drink from eventually turns green, or convolvulus covers over a garden in a great green wave.

Perfect seclusion is heavy rain.
When I hear it out of the window,
I take pleasure in the sound,
cut off at last.

Early morning mist settle-swirling in roses looks like
smoke from blown-out matches.

The lit curtains
dusk disowned.

This patchwork quilt of memories I draw around me
against the bitter wind of nihilism. Years reduced to
the rubble of a few scenes.

A trickle through rocks,
joins other trickles,
you can see it in
the mountains, you'd
hardly think that great river
snaking away through the
landscape below
came from this, this
almost hidden little beck,
grasses overhanging,
the dipper flitting
smart and sweet.

After the funeral his father read something out back at the house. The ceiling in the living room was water-damaged and swollen. People were trying not to notice it. My mind drifted.

I remembered a day when he was putting the knife back in the jam and then panicked when he noticed there was an angry wasp stuck to it. A proper pretend picnic, like children might have. Must have been twenty years or more ago. A few girls there. Were we still clinging to the apron strings of college? Drawing from the well of not-quite friendships so full of potential.

I saw him infrequently in the past few years. He had a succession of ugly-looking girlfriends. I had big gaps when I was alone, but when there was a girl around she was pretty. He seemed most himself between girlfriends. I would usually hear from him then, he'd ring me up, we'd have a drink. He'd moan about not being in a relationship. I'd be cast in the role of advisor: 'What the fuck does it matter? Learn to make real lemonade. Collect flowers. Draw.'

It never seemed much had changed in our lives. Apart from him getting balder and fatter, and me getting greyer and more adamantly not bothered about my life amounting to nothing.

'Hey, do you remember that picnic when you put the knife back in the jam and there was a wasp stuck on it

going mad and you were dashing about like a little kid shitting yourself?’

‘Oh yeah, that was funny.’ He seemed wistful for a moment, then he asked:

‘D’you remember Vanessa? She was there that day.’

Brown-eyed. Beautiful. Temporary.

His father said something about the goddess Kali, which brought me out of my drifting, but I missed the context.

His mother had put on a good spread, there were nice tiger lilies on the table. There were a lot of people who came back to the house I hadn’t seen in years, people I never quite became friends with at college. They were all successful now and appeared content with their lives.

A few with beautiful children seemed to have done the best, but they were all on vast bonuses and probably didn’t spend much time mingling with momentarily tidied-up tramps like me. I was surprised, when they asked me what I was doing now, and I mumbled out a few semi-descriptive sentences indicative of never actually shedding the Bohemian lifestyle, that they seemed genuinely impressed. Over a cube of Cheddar cheese and a silverskin onion on a cocktail stick, I was at a masqued ball as my previous self.

For a time I wandered in the garden, remembering conversations sitting in wrought-iron furniture before

any of our lives had set. Venus was bright in the dusk sky. I had a silly but delightful conversation with an eight-year-old girl who came out and tugged on my shirt for attention. I told her the moon was made of polystyrene and that she shouldn't eat tadpoles because they would squeeze out of her eyes like squidgy black tears. She made an uuuhrr face.

I later learned that her father had told her I was a wizard, and sent her off into the garden to talk with me.

I strolled back in. A few had drifted away.

People were sitting on the floor, a joint was going round. I noted which direction and sat down one away.

I saw Derek.

'What you been doing since I last saw you?'

'Two years as a gravedigger five delivering bread.'

'Sounds good,' I said.

'Not when the lid came off the baby's coffin.'

'So how's delivering bread?'

'We don't go hungry for bread,' he said.

Pete was a drug dealer with a one-eyed cat. When we turned up he was sitting on his joint-burnt sofa looking sad. He told us his dog had just died, you want some blow yeah? Have to go and fetch it, won't be a jiffy on me bike. Next thing we know before we've even sat down there's Pete standing up on his bike peddling out in the street. Always have to stay a while at Pete's it's not just turn up buy the stuff and gotta dash. You sit down he makes tea you chat with the telly on and the one-eyed cat jumps up on your lap and eyes you. So Pete's back with the blow and the kettle's on and he says saw this fantastic programme on ants the other night, d'you see it? Ants are fascinating creatures you know they're a completely advanced society man they're like the fascist dictatorship of the insect world except they don't have a dictator and they're not fascist they're just ants but they build this society up from the ground they're like the Borg. Pete's stirring the tea did you put sugar in mine I say and he nods his head and I think fine okay I'll have it with sugar and Pete says did you see that programme on ants man showed em with tunnels digging away they're intelligent creatures man I've got a lot of time for ants.

No I didn't see it Pete good was it, when I was a kid I saw antfarms advertised at the back of *TV21* I think it

was and always wanted one looked like a glass box with ant tunnels and you could have it on your mantelpiece and watch em.

So we skin up with a book on the lap and the TV's on there's a film on looks like *Michael Collins* and Pete says did you know ants they make their own beer well it's not beer but it's like beer I watch em in the kitchen they're always keeping to the same trails I get the magnifying glass out and watch their little antennae twitching sometimes man I think they know I'm watching em I don't mean just watching em I mean, watchin em man really watchin em, interested in em, and sometimes I blow a bit of smoke from the joint over em not too much don't want to hurt em just give em a bit of a zonk. I don't mind ants.

A few ants is okay, I say, but trouble is you've got a few ants and ten minutes later there's hundreds of em and unless you stop up the holes there's gonna be thousands of em and they'll be all over your carpet everywhere.

I don't think so, says Pete, I think they're intelligent enough to keep to their little areas, they follow trails, scent trails.

Yeah Pete, but what if their scent trails start going across your carpet in the living room and they don't keep to the little area where you don't mind em?

That's our fear man, that's our fear interferin with the natural order of things. The ants in my kitchen are just in one corner they've been there for weeks and have shown no inclination to stretch their territory any further, they know man they know I wouldn't like it them spreading out they've picked that up from the vibes in the air and they're sticking to it we've got a truce.

Well Pete, you're an extraordinary man, maybe you know how to communicate with em where others don't.

It's fear that makes us want to trample on em. They've got their society we've got ours, there's no reason we can't live together.

Sorry about your dog Pete, how old was he?

Fifteen, that'd be about seventy in dog years. I buried him yesterday, out in the forest. Haven't been up there for years, buried him near where the witches make their pentagrams in that clearing by High Beech. Sat on a log round the remains of a fire, brought a bit a puff with me, skinned up. Woodpecker's hammering reverberating through the forest, man they got rhythm, I could listen to that all day. Noticed a few ants on my boot, occurred to me I might have brought a few with me or I was gonna bring a few back. The embers were still warm and then I remembered it was Beltane the night before.

I took a sip of tea, he must have put three bloody

sugars in this. There was an ant floating in the tea, I fished it out on the tip of my finger. See this? Ant.

Must've been in the sugar, says Pete, they come up for a few crystals of Tate & Lyle. I don't begrudge em.

I have decided to live like a cat. Avoid my own species, keep my distance. Walk around the field. Sit in the garden. Eat, drink, shit, sleep.

I was sitting in the chilly garden as the sun went down contemplating the idea that human existence amounts to little more than the daily endurance of mediocrity, growing increasingly annoyed with the little that life really offers, the constant barrage of backwardness, the uninterestingness of it all, when into the silence of dusk came the approaching cries of a hundred or more gulls, and I dropped the idea in preference for this visitation of the beautiful. It seemed the natural thing to do to get up from my chair and watch the gulls go, that lovely calming sound, and the crows that started their own chorus when the gulls had gone as the light gradually seeped away.

I drop her love
For a perfectly good turnip
In the gutter of the market.
Tolerated, another day,
The dust on top of the wardrobe.

When I entered the library there was a powerfully bad smell. I quickly ascertained the cause: a dirty looking man sitting quietly on a chair reading a book. I tried to suppress the stink from my nostrils. As I turned into one of the aisles I saw a woman move fast as if to get away from me. She disappeared somewhere over at the back of the library. I supposed she thought it was me who stank, as the dossier's stink was permeating everywhere, and in my big black coat maybe I looked like the kind of guy who stinks, if your nostrils aren't very directional. All the same, I began to wonder, do I stink? I sniffed the air quietly around me. I weaved round to the back of the library looking for where they'd put foreign literature. I didn't even notice her at first but all of a sudden this woman, same woman, gathered up her things off the table and made a quick dash away from me. Moments earlier she had been smiling looking in a book. Strange behaviour I thought. And unkind were I the kind of guy who stank. I had an insight into what

stinky people have to put up with. All the same I was perplexed, a little, maybe there was another explanation. She was the kind of woman who was always rushing off somewhere, my presence coincidental. I turned to leave. There was the woman sitting at a table near the exit. As I passed her, up she shot and dashed off round the stacks. Rather than leave myself, I hovered around books in Urdu, half wondering whether I could chase this stupid woman all round the library just by browsing. I could hear her talking about me to someone. Then like in a cartoon she poked her head around the stack and clearly pointed at me. I strode over, saying, 'What's wrong with you?' She said, 'This is my son. So you'd better watch out.' I looked at her son. Tall guy who looked like he didn't know what the hell was going on either. She said, 'Every time I've turned my head you've been there.' I looked at her. 'Yes,' I said, 'walking around looking for books, what's wrong with that?' She said, 'You'd better stay away from the ladies.' I laughed an astonished kind of laugh and looked at her punchable face and said, 'You're seriously out of order lady.' I turned sharply and walked out, not wanting to stick around before she decided, dredged up out of her fantasies, that my crime was actually far worse than looking out of my eyes as I wandered around, she could easily manage to persuade others of it in her realistic

hysteria. Reflecting on the nature of false accusation walking down the road, the chaos of a disintegrating world assaulted my senses and I thought, is this an omen, is this telling me this world has gone bad and soon only mad people will be living in the cities? Should I get out to the wide-open spaces where there are few people? Clearly something about me and my appearance has triggered paranoid delusions in this woman. What if there is no justice left, only trumped-up charges? What if intelligence is dead and these are first-stage zombies? I became aware that my eyes were burning with rage the way people averted their eyes from mine, and yet they seemed drawn to glance back at me as if I was something they had never seen before. Had I a scythe on me I would have dropped them like bunched wheat. I recalled something said to me by a friend the day before, as praise of sorts, 'You're a scary man Joel.' And I laughed and said, 'I'm a pussycat.' I sat down at home reflecting on these things, wondering whether something of me was leaking out, something demonic that is certainly there, but hidden, usually, behind a friendly smile. And I thought to myself, hell let it rip now, let it tear across the sky. If they can see it then let them see it. And fear it. And I spontaneously strangled the air with a tight twist of my hands in a ferocious and sudden ejection of a curse breaking the neck of the

woman in the library, snapping it like a chicken's neck,
and with that the anger was thrown out of me and my
eyes burned with a fury and power that to some excites.
I will stalk this world now, I will prey upon it, I will
make a swift kill and move on quickly.

The snail's slime trail
glistens in the moonlight
leading to a crushed seeping shell
trodden underfoot for no more
than a human's hurried desire
to view the full moon.

I went from thinking as an adolescent that I wasn't very
good-looking to coming round in my late twenties to
the idea that actually I was really quite handsome in
certain lights and even when I went grey girls seemed to
like it at any rate they didn't mind fucking me. So I came
to see myself as distinguished edging towards perverted
old man, since I liked women a lot younger than me. In
my early fifties I stopped chasing skirt altogether, since it
seemed to me I wasn't as interested in sex or relationship
as I used to be, but lack of interest could have been a
response to feeling past it, and besides, not chasing it

and not being interested in it didn't mean it wouldn't just come along and reinspire an interest. But I didn't know, I wasn't bothered. Sex seemed a decades-long experiment I had satisfied my curiosity about. I didn't crave companionship, although I wondered why I didn't given that I had for so long. I was going somewhere else now – solitude – no more half-hearted attempts. If only because there didn't seem to be any other choice, so I may as well choose that. Acceptance is usually our finest choice.

I didn't particularly want anything any more. It was like I'd worked it all out of my system. There were many things I didn't have, but I felt no need of them. It was a curious state of affairs. I got up, late in the day, and pottered around all afternoon and evening into the early hours, went to bed at dawn. I sometimes thought, shouldn't I be doing something? Shouldn't I be 'having a life'? But clearly this was the life I was having and the freedom from any and all social pressure was I confess exhilarating. It was as if I had finally had the absolute courage of my convictions and had at last given up on compromise, fitting in, having my shoulder looked over. I had managed to buy my flat after my mum had died and left me everything my dad had slaved away for and what he had inherited from his father's slavery, so too the stream joining that from my mother's short

working life before settling in to being a housewife, and what she had inherited from her parent's graft. Doubtless there were pennies and groats going way back in time, perhaps to my great great great maternal grandfather, who escaped being hanged as an accessory after the fact to murder when his elder brother was for the act itself. The younger brother was accused of hiding the pistol in a ditch in their father's garden but there was no direct proof, only circumstantial. There is a romance about the wrongdoings of the past when everyone concerned is long dead. It's those that get reported if you're otherwise a nobody and provide the detail beyond the bare bones of census records and births, deaths, and marriages. How excited I was to discover my great great great granduncle was a highwayman. I have even visited the spot where the gallows was erected and formed entertainment for a crowd of ten to fifteen thousand who apparently gathered there to witness the hanging, according to the very detailed account in *The Times*, August 3, 1819. In those days a murderer was hanged at the location where the murder took place, now a road corner named after him frequently mentioned on the local radio's traffic bulletin. Who knows whether there were a few banknotes and silver sixpences formerly belonging to the shot salt merchant in my haul laundered by time. His grave I have visited,

where I picked a daisy and laid it there as insufficient recompense but heartfelt, and ran my hand over its mustard-yellow lichens in the rain, chipping a bit off under my fingernail. My forebear after his execution was sent for dissection.

To the end he protested his innocence, declining an offer from the chaplain to unburden his soul of part of its guilt by confession. He showed ‘a composure and resignation worthy of a better cause’, according to *The Times*. Had the evidence not been against him, ‘his firmness of soul’ would have ‘exhorted compassion in all, and a conviction of his innocence’. As the cart passed ‘his wretched mother’, my great great great grandmother, he shook hands with her without losing any of his composure.

On the scaffold he read aloud Psalm 108, ‘O God my heart is ready’, from a small prayer book that still exists in the local museum. Afterwards he said to the crowd: ‘God bless you all.’ As the hangman was adjusting the rope, he said to him: ‘That can only kill the body.’ *The Times* observed: ‘The action of his lips and hands showed that he was absorbed in prayer till the moment of his death.’ Almost at the same instant as he was ‘launched into eternity’, and before the last convulsions were over, ‘a loud clap of thunder burst over the spot where the innumerable multitude had collected, and for half an

hour afterwards, redoubled peals reverberated awfully through the heavens'. Apparently it made 'a suitable impression upon the numerous spectators'.

I once had a girlfriend, Angela, we drove to the area in her car to visit some of the places of this story. On the way she was telling me how she once went out with a guy who took her back to his parent's place out this way. They had a farm. His parents said:

'Did you see that big tree coming up the drive?'

'Yes.'

'That marks the spot where a famous murderer was hanged long ago.'

Just as we were approaching the spot on the map where the execution took place, Angela said:

'This place looks familiar.'

She went white as we got to the destination round the bend. It was the tree she had seen when she was in that relationship with that guy. We got out the car.

'That's the house up there I was telling you about. That's definitely the tree.'

We walked towards it. There was a fresh dead fox on the roadside verge, as if neatly placed there as a sacrifice. It didn't look run over. Angela took a few photos of me pretending to be hanged from the tree.

We were in the local bookshop and asked the owner if he had any stuff on this famous local murderer from

the past. He pointed us to a book that had the story. Then he asked whether we were interested in historical murders, he had other stuff.

‘No, just this one.’

‘Oh, why’s that?’

I hesitated for a moment whether to tell him, then told him:

‘He’s in my family tree.’

A woman in the bookshop shrieked, with delight I think. They obviously all knew about him round here.

He was 25 and a champion bare-knuckle fighter with the nickname ‘Bruiser Bob’. He worked on the canals when not prize-fighting. He was caught because of a banknote of £5 he sent to a woman he had a romantic liaison with so she could buy some pigs, but the note had been marked by the murdered salt merchant’s son-in-law. There is a rumour still repeated in the pubs of the area that his father later privately confessed to the crime and his son had gone to the gallows to protect him.

I bought my flat outright with the inheritance and no longer had to be concerned with rent, and a little was left over such that I needn’t be concerned about a job for a while. Not that I was much concerned with it

before, only signing on, though now I was free of that as well. Friendships, left unattended, gradually began to dry up, like flowers that are not watered they withered and died, or, if they did not die, since friendships never truly die, they were as good as dead since they did not catch up with me and I did not catch up with them, though they remained in my thoughts from time to time, which I told myself was them thinking about me, a psychic ripple I would pick up on, certainly not the vulgarity of a phonecall, a voice in the ear at a moment's notice. I pondered getting rid of the phone, but I let it sit there gathering dust, paying for the privilege of unbeknownst eventualities and for the sake of ringing the fire brigade given that the chance of finding a pay-phone out in the street was negligible. Certainly with my mum recently dead and my dad long gone there was no-one I felt a duty to maintain communication with. Nor anyone I wished would ring. So I was free, financially and mentally, in the latter most especially since I had conquered the tiresome mental chatter of thinking there was something better I could be doing with my life. The desire to travel evaporated as had the desire for relationship. The desire for anything other than the moment as it fell quite simply up and left me, much to my surprise. It wasn't as if there was anything particularly desirable about my situation as I

found it, it was more that I couldn't give a damn about anything else. It was not as if I had resigned myself to a life of deadened aspiration and absence of pleasure, rather I was holding myself back from a tidal wave of excitement at the prospect of at last living without any of the usual bullshit of social approval. Although I had hardly started, I felt *this* is the meaning of my stuttering hardly-got-going life, *this* is approaching the pinnacle of my dubious and elusive achievements. The fog is clearing, I am no longer a failure if I haven't had sex in an aeroplane toilet, I am no longer wasting away for want of a condominium in Spain, a doting wife and gorgeous children whose homework I help with, or success in any conventionally defined terms, nor am I chain-ganged to a set of friends I must amuse at regular intervals. I didn't miss a bit of it. That's when it dawned on me, when I realised I didn't miss any of it. It dawned on me that I was being genuine for the first time in my life as I headed into my late fifties. For all I had apparently lost, I had gained myself. I could tell the truth now. It is that sense of just sitting down and realising this is the meaning of everything, this is where it's all been leading, those years of fighting through, the thousand awkwardnesses, the kisses, the embraces, that chrysalis of abandoned dreams and unlucky choices. *Now* I see what I'm doing.

When I was young I used to hate myself. I didn't read many novels, and when I did it was the novels of films I liked. I didn't think I was being mistreated, I thought it was normal. It probably is normal, how can I know what goes on in other people's houses? Did I think of it as unreal? When I walked around in short trousers, did I think of it as unreal? I had *The Boy's Handbook*. I thought it would teach me how to live by showing me how to tie knots and perform semaphore. Morse code would surely come in handy. I learnt all the capitals of the world. I tried to listen to what people told me, but usually I had my own ideas. I would work out complex alibis to cover my tracks over certain misdeeds. I generally preferred to be alone, but I always felt hard done by that I had no-one to play with. I don't know why I say that, as there was Robert who came calling on his bike and we went out riding in the countryside, a grubby fly-tipped countryside but still good when you got off the road where we'd stop in lay-bys to talk about masturbation and tell dirty jokes. He heard a lot of good ones from his big brother and I felt I was getting the benefit even though I was an only child.

I was often bored. I was never taken to a restaurant, sometimes a café where I had a roll full of grated cheese

which I dipped in a pool of brown sauce. I always liked to look in the petshop. I liked coming back from the seaside on the charrabang, as it would get dark before we arrived home and at the end we would all sing 'For he's a jolly good fellow For he's a jolly good fellow And so say we all' to the driver. I don't remember that happening in any other circumstance. A day out at Rhyl. A plastic bag full of sandy shells, a bit of seaweed, and some postcards. I only ever found common shells, I never found good shells, I had to buy those. I think I have more happy memories of childhood than I have unhappy ones. But it's hard to know how to make an assessment and not worth the trouble. For a long time after leaving home I thought that the unhappy memories spoil the happy ones, but now I no longer know. The long broody days I still like. 'It keeps threatening...' mum would say looking out at the darkening sky, 'It's black over Bill's mother's'. I loved standing behind the TV set staring down at the dusty hot valves glowing orange through the ventilation slats. At the end of an evening, if I was allowed to stay up late to watch something, dad would turn the TV off and stand guard over it for a while. 'The set's got to cool down,' he said. He was afraid it might set fire to the curtains if left unattended. He called to mum: 'You gew on up love, I'll be up in a minute.' Those were the days when the little white

dot remained at the centre of the screen for ages as the set went off. The other way you had to be careful to ensure you turned it on five minutes before *Doctor Who* was due to start or it might not have time to warm up.

There's not the variety of things happening now as there was then. I had high hopes as a boy, what I would do later on. It all seemed possible. But I had to do a lot of things I didn't want to do then. Now I don't do anything I don't want to do, except, perhaps, get up, leave dreams. Many things are the same. A liking for nature, my solitariness. It took me years to get rid of habitual patterns of thinking, to stop falling for them, to stop entering in. The usual things, feeling lonely, feeling scared about the future, seeing no way out of particular situations. I fed those fires for years. Now I am free of them. This was the achievement I ended up seeking while my contemporaries pursued careers, marriage, kids, money. I never went after any of that. A brief flirtation with career, a string of girlfriends, a couple I'd have liked to marry and be with for the rest of my life and fulfil that fantasy of enduring love. If you wait long enough after it's over it always seems a narrow escape. Even the *if onlys* eventually dry up. Perhaps we like the acting of it, the desperate pleas, the end of the world hauled up from the well of our lost love. The thoughts of suicide in the wake of epic

betrayal. What an acting job. We surpass ourselves, such feeling, bawling into a handkerchief. Even at the time I would usually have a passing moment when it felt I was acting, acting my heart out, what a stellar performance. But we have to let that realisation go, it's getting in the way, though it would end our sorrows there and then, it would get in the way of the performance. The plain truth is that we want this despair, we want it bad, it's telling us we're alive, we're having the experience we see in films, we're really living, we're heartbroken and it's fucking cool. This is acting gold.

The ransacked room of our lives that we make of our memories. If you're going to have a room make it plain white with nothing in it, otherwise outside with the night sky for your walls is best. What purpose is served by imagining the long journey of years to arrive where I am when where I am is always the same, once stripped of the accumulated junk. What is the life one has led prior to now? That trip down memory lane. Are you going to include the scenes from all the films you've watched, the books you've read? You may as well, they're as vivid. Every object has its attached story. You know where everything came from, yet every single story is alike. You look around your room, the scissors, the clock, the

chair, the cushion, the books, the towel, the trousers, the lamp, on and on, every object you know how you happen to have it, you can build up an archaeology of the present moment out of the unending parade of objects. Yet like a pebble has had its sharp edges smoothed away tumbling together with others in the repeated washes up onto the beach, these gathered objects masquerading as one's own little hoard have all got their stories straight. It's all your doing. You gathered this little bounty in your journey to here and now. Your hands brought them here, your hands set them up in their home. The more you look, the more every single object is perfectly positioned, whether the room's a mess or clean and tidy. Sometimes it seems I am digesting these objects, I am like a fat snake lying between rocks in the sun the rat still fidgeting in my belly.

The whole notion of 'personal belongings' became diffuse. When the trees shed their leaves in autumn who accuses them of being litter louts? Instead it is rather beautiful to watch the brown leaves float to the ground, as if every single one has its destined place there. So what was this past I had accumulated? It came to a practical end when my mother died, since there was then no-one left to whom I felt a duty to continue to pretend. Although of course I did still pretend to be a

person in a world in as much as I still locked my door, lest a moving shadow might attempt to steal a dash of colour from my life. Although I knew there was nothing that could be taken that wouldn't instantly be replaced by what lay beneath it, still it seemed the done thing to make a notional attempt to protect what I had, although actually I couldn't give two hoots about it and would have happily left my front door wide open if it wasn't for the aversion I felt to strangers peering in. If I lived in a hole in the ground I dare say I would be none the less circumspect, I would maintain that it was *my* hole and that others had no right to it. Rather like standing guard over the ground upon which one's house stood after it has been reduced to rubble in an earthquake. All this to say that I am living in space, actually not even that, space is living in me. It takes the form of a room looking out upon a street, surrounded by objects aloof to their own nonexistence, tending their resignation as servants of my comfort.

I am a thug to my own cherished memories, a vandal of my beautiful moments. Just as I am writing it I am reading it. It is like dappled light in a swimming pool.

Does someone in a shack in the wilderness long for a shack in a greater wilderness? I rather think they do. Thus, I live in a shack in the wilderness. When you no longer conceive of humans as such are you not already

very far away from centres of population without even setting foot outside your door? You may know that they are conventionally called humans, but to you they are just waveforms that momentarily arise and assume importance, and then subside.

A tiny flower
shelters from the rain
under the protection
of a large leaf.

Memories that have solidified like stalactites the fluid mind naturally runs to drip down time and time again.

Down the alley under lamplight
a Red Admiral butterfly suddenly
flutters out of the fog.

How few things matter, in retrospect. The breeze rustles the leaves of the sycamore, drowning out voices a few gardens down I don't want to listen to, two different worlds juxtaposed, I fall back into my peaceful solitude

in the rustling of the leaves, reading through old diaries cover to cover as a prelude to burning them, three faded relationships flicked through the past few days sitting contented out in the sun. A note springs out at me: ‘Santoka occasionally felt too attached to his diaries, then he would burn them or throw them away. Before he left Gochu-an he burned the few possessions he had accumulated.’

I do very little, I sit in the garden and watch the seasons change. That is all.

The foxgloves are marvellous, every time I look at them the bees are in and out of the spires of flowers, even in the rain.

As the sycamore shade advances I notice the lilac blossom is all brown, dark over there now. Its lilac light has gone out.

There’s a fragment of conversation between my mother and her father, that I remember overhearing when I was a kid.

‘I’m buggered if I’m gewin all the way to Bushbury in me best weskit,’ he said. ‘I never gid a tinker’s cuss for him or her an her babby.’

He noticed me listening at the table, while I was doing a jigsaw.

‘Who you talking about gramp?’

‘A goner,’ he said, and laughed. ‘He keeled over down the lane just when he thought his luck was in. He day foresee his other number coming up.’

Gramp was always amused by life’s little ironies. I think it was from him that I learnt not to get too excited by apparent good fortune. He had a wisdom about him. I thought at the time most old people had it, but now I realise hardly any do. They’re just old, wisdom passes them by.

When mum was worried about something, he’d give her the benefit of his advice: ‘Wait un see. Yow doe know nuthin as yet. It could just as easy turn around and bite some other poor bugger.’

If anyone was overthinking a problem he’d just laugh and say:

‘You know what thought did – followed a muck cart and thought it was a wedding.’

I asked him about the man who keeled over down the lane, and he replied:

‘He day ave two brass farthings to rub together most his life then his Premium Bond came up, but he day have no time to enjoy it. He gallivanted around for a bit but it weren’t for that, it were for banging nails into his coffin lid and heaving him into the ground. Always too sure of himself, that’un.’

Gramp laughed again. He turned to mum and said:
'It's a good job yow listened to me. If yow'd wed him
like yow wanted to yow'd be a widow now with a babby
to bring up on yer own, tuppence ha'penny change out
of his winnings after the funeral, and this'un here'd be
doing his jigsaw in oblivion.'

At the isolated croft,
Thatched roof, horseback brown,
A pasty-faced old man is led away
By the district nurse to her car.
He looks at me with awful fear in his eyes,
A stranger coming from the mire
Out of the dark cold smirr of rain
Like ghosts have come before.
Now he's too old, too frail,
To rattle the shutters at tormentors,
Arm supported by a woman he doesn't know,
Carrying his small suitcase.
I step into his world after traipsing
Endless miles through a storm to arrive
Like something that has haunted him for ever.

An ice-cream van parks outside playing its jolly tune,
engine turning over, waiting for the unenthusiasm of
a cold day to have second thoughts. Then it is gone,
like a landed butterfly just as you get out of your chair
to have a look, a moment's silence before its strangely
reassuring tune in a distant street, looking for its next
settling place.

The boulder baking hot
From all day's sun,
Sitting behind it, sheltering
From the bitter gale that's come,
Chipping off lichen crust
A fingernail caking up
With mustard powder,
The sky a sagging soaked sheet.
Soon I must, I must go,
Stand up and face the journey
Over the hills I've still to go.
I will, I will start out soon,
Bow my head to the sleet.
Just one more handful
Of this boulder's store
Of warmth.