School of Media, Creative Arts, and Social Inquiry

‘As with everything else the end eventually comes …’
Or, how prose might work to capture a sensation of the past

Daniel Juckes

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Declaration

To the best of my knowledge and belief this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgment has been made.

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any other university.

Signature: ..... Date: 14/3/18

Abstract

This thesis combines creative and exegetical components into a hybrid work which is, at once, a memoir of the relationship I had with my grandmother, an investigation into family history, an examination of writers' methods, an experiment in historiography, and maybe even a phenomenology of things. The thesis addresses how the past, and a sensation of the past, might be evoked, with a focus on the seamless prose of Virginia Woolf, W.G. Sebald, and Marcel Proust. I also use objects from the past—from a family archive consisting of built up detritus and ephemera—to describe the seamlessness of memory and perception. The thesis asks how seamlessness works, and how it might be written; it is intentionally speculative and deliberately circulatory, perhaps best described as a coalescing of endings which are all not quite final. The thesis shies against explicitness in the hope that a felt sense of the past is one result; the research positions the past as vital to the present, and describes a way in which that importance—the past's vitality—can be represented on the page.

Keywords: seamlessness, prose, objects/things, Virginia Woolf, W.G. Sebald, Marcel Proust

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Throughout the whole project Julie Lunn and Stephanie Oleksiuk have provided support and advice, along with the rest of the Hub community; and, in the early years of my research, the Creative Practice Network read a lot, and put up with a lot, of writing which needed direction and shape: thanks to you all as well.

I'm thankful to the editors and guest editors of *Life Writing, Meniscus, TEXT,* and *Westerly*, who all gave time and feedback to parts of this project, as well as space for the words I strung together. This thesis could not have been completed without the

support of the Australian Postgraduate Award and Curtin University's own contributions, both financial and material. Equally, this work would not exist if it were not for a whole host of writers whose books and essays I've plundered. A list, of sorts, can be found at the back of 'As with everything else the end eventually comes …', but that list is incomplete: in a project like this, the works which remain uncited are often as integral as those which make up the footnotes. Thanks, too, to the librarians, archivists, and enthusiastic email-responders who have all played a role in getting this work up: special mentions must go to Melanie Pryor—for her enthusiasm, friendship, and, on one occasion, her spare room, as well as for her emails—and to John Billingsley.

I'd like to thank my friends and family too. To Kathy—thanks for offering your home and your company. To Kate and Tony, and Laura and Amy, thanks for putting me up and putting up with me: I'm so, so grateful. To Kevin and Jean, thanks for the same, for always being there, and for your kindness and enthusiasm. Thanks to Nanna and Grandad: nothing you do goes unnoticed; it's a privilege to be as close to you as I am. Mum, Dad, Ben, and Milo, there aren't quite enough words—and, even then, the correct order would elude—to describe how much you've given me, and how grateful I am. This is a work which tries to take delight in the way the past leads to the present, and my past is wrapped so tightly through you all. Melissa: thank you. You've put up with a lot, and given me a lot in return. I know there have been times when this thesis has threatened [y]our sanity, but through broccoli pasta, way too much House Hunters International®, and the kind of loyalty I hadn't known possible, you've made the experience more fun than I ever thought it could be. And, finally, Grandma: you always asked me what it was I was writing, and I regret that I didn't quite know what to tell you. It's this. I miss you, I love you, and all that follows is for you.

Perth, February 2018

Preface

A couple of days after I finished one of the more final drafts of this thesis, I found myself trying to catch up on Christmas shopping. It was a hot day, I was in the city, and I was not coping well. Without meaning to, I ended up in a book shop, and—while I *did* manage to get one or two presents there—I found a book I wanted as well. That day I had been trying to distance myself and my thoughts from the thing I'd been writing, but somehow or other had been pulled back in, almost immediately and mostly by chance, to the lonely backwaters of PhD-land. There, in the bookshop on William Street, I realised that Oliver Sacks' *The River of Consciousness* could have been significant for the work which follows—it got to the nub of a number of questions I'd been approaching from a slightly different direction. Instead, it will be significant to this preface, which is designed to introduce myself, the subject matter of 'As with everything else the end eventually comes …', and the way I have chosen to present that subject matter.

I'm not too familiar with Sacks' work, but I know enough of the gist; I work as a bookseller, and over years in that job you develop a kind of knowledge of writers like Sacks: popular, prevailing, and personable, able to distil difficult concepts into clear, accessible prose. From a distance he looked capable of wonders, and, honestly, the title of his book interested me: I'd spent the months previous to my encounter with his work trying to articulate how consciousness feels something like a river, and somehow not quite that at all.

A friend owed me a birthday present, and seemed happy with my choice of *The River of Consciousness*. I bought the book and he transferred the money. But I would have bought it anyway, because towards the end of the title essay, Sacks asks a question which could, in fact, be something like the fabled—and elusive—central research question for the thesis which follows: he asks, 'How [are] various snapshots 'assembled' to achieve apparent continuity, and how do they reach the level of

continuity?'[1] This question is posed in the midst of a discussion about how consciousness seems so seamless, when it is in fact made up of distinct, atomic, monadic moments. These snapshot instants are the blocks from which consciousness is built; it forms like the rolling of a film of photographs through a cinema projector. It's this phenomenon which I'd come to concentrate on. The equation, according to Sacks, of what those snapshots are made from is something like Perception + Memory = Seamless Experience. I felt that to be true, and in the thesis which follows I've tried to demonstrate why.

The 'perceptual moment', a one-hundred-millisecond long building block of both perception and memory, is the key to seamlessness and contains vastness in its brevity.[2] I thought, then, in the bookshop, that I could twist the central question of this thesis around Sacks', like this: How do writers of something like life writing assemble various snapshots to achieve apparent continuity, and how do they reach the level of continuity? I hope the emphasis on 'something like life writing' does not distract too much at this point, and that that particular focus will emerge through the body of the work.[3]

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[1] O. Sacks. (2017). *The River of Consciousness*. New York: Alfred K. Knopf. 178.

[2] Ross Gibson, a writer I borrow from frequently through the pages which follow, isolates this moment as 0.3 seconds in duration, following on from the work of Benjamin Libet. Gibson says,

> Consciousness is formed in a constantly arising-and-altering moment that is generated within each individual psyche as it negotiates the risky edge between itself and the larger world … For Libet, consciousness is comprised of a stream of present instants that coruscate in 'mind time', in an urgent, ever-evaporating 0.3-second interval of lived experience between when stimuli are first registered in one's broad-but-almost-formless awareness, and then interpreted within the structured flow of inchoate, conscious personality. (*Changescapes* 109-110)

It's Gibson's ability to evoke a past, as well as the slipperiness of that evoked past, which makes him an important resource for this thesis.

Sacks describes how the present might be perceived differently, as faster or slower, depending on the level of dopamine in the brain; he dwells on the extremes of those with Tourette's syndrome or sleeping sickness or migraine. But, in all cases, 'The sense of continuity … results from the continuous overlapping of successive perceptual moments' (180). Perception is tied imperceptibly with vision, which is 'seamless and gives no indication of the underlying processes on which it depends … this fusing of discrete visual frames or snapshots is a prerequisite for continuity, for a flowing, mobile consciousness' (Sacks 180-181). This mechanism, Sacks says, 'probably first arose in reptiles a quarter of a billion years ago' (181). There is a reptile in the thesis-to-come, and when I first read those words in the bookshop while Christmas shopping, I was pleased that the Australian Flatback Sea Turtle I encountered did—or might—in fact experience time in a similar way to myself, if more slowly, its moments longer and more stretched out. It had seemed that way at the time.

[3] Thankfully, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson describe life writing as 'a moving target and an ever-changing practice without absolute rules' (*Reading Autobiography* 8). Simply, it is hard, sometimes, to know where genres end.

This thesis is concerned with the ways in which prose can ape the seamless sensation of consciousness; how prose might represent a model for something like the atomic process of building a sense of the present by various forms of overlapping moments. It turns out, according to Sacks, that the past is integral to those overlapping moments; any sense which might emerge of the present (Perception + *Memory*) is contingent on an ongoing sensation of the past. I hadn't realised, until I came across Sacks' book, that that interlinkage was key to my consuming interest in the things—literally—which make up my own past. For me, objects, detritus, and ephemera which last from the past into the present seem a similar kind of monadic—at least, an analogous kind of monadic—to the building-block perceptual moments of consciousness. As well as this, the right objects have their own particular qualities which aid in describing both the past and the way the past is experienced. (The question of what the right objects are is slightly separate to that, and one I've agonised over.) I had long been focused, in previous iterations of the research question, on the possibilities of an evocation of the past in prose, or on how writers might use things to do so. In fact, what I was trying to figure out was how the present feels, because of the past, and then how that feeling can be described in prose. Things were only ever metaphor.

It is the very seamlessness of experience that cements the feeling of time passing in the heart and brain of you and I: it is what makes sure we know the past is gone. That seamlessness makes something like the past hard to capture, and is a propelling agent for the sensation of time. The ability of a writer to capture something of this process relies, I think, on a mechanism in the brain which Sacks describes, one which stills while showing movement—or, as he defines it, as a persistence which outlasts its stimulus (the stimulus being the thing observed, or studied).[4] Sacks calls this persistence 'hysteresis', and when I said the word to myself in the bookshop in the city that day, having flicked through pages and read much of 'The River of Consciousness', it sounded a little like 'history'. Sacks describes this process as a kind of vital element in the forming of self, in the forming of the present (and thus, the future). In his words,

> The sense of continuity … results from the continuous overlapping of successive perceptual moments. It may be that the forms of cinematographic vision I have

[4] Sacks. 179.

> described—with either sharply separated stills or blurred and overlapping ones—represent abnormalities of excitability in the coalitions [of neurons which produce them], with either too much or too little hysteresis.[5]

This coalescing of memory and vision is something I sensed, but needed to articulate. And too much or too little history was one of the problems I had to wade through to get to the version of the thesis you're about to read. There were thousands of things to think through, and a weight of stories which could have been told. The trick to that wading is something I've tried to describe, enact, and evoke in 'As with everything else the end eventually comes …'. It is vital to the method. The whole thesis, in fact, might be described as a depiction of methodology, and, at that, a methodology which became nothing more than an attempt to stop myself from drowning in details. The intimacy which I hope that evocation produces is key to my attempt at arousing a sense of perception in the mind of the reader; it is deeply rooted in the separating, blurring, and overlapping of moments. It seems to me that those who can manipulate their prose into the kind of writing Virginia Woolf calls 'impassioned',[6] and Roland Barthes calls 'seamless',[7] are better able to evoke the sensation of sensation (that linking of memory and perception). The writers I found my way to through the process of research—those who I argue produce versions of impassioned, seamless prose—are W.G. Sebald, Marcel Proust, and Woolf herself. They all, together, are one of the reasons I have concentrated the research question on 'something like' life writing: in their own ways Sebald, Proust, and Woolf evoke many of the conceits of that broad umbrella term, but each also sense the fallacious claim at its heart. 'As with everything else the end eventually comes …' is most definitely not a novel, but it is also only ever something-like-life writing.

'Too Much, or Else Too Little' is, coincidentally, the title of a paper I wrote halfway through the course of my research.[8] That paper helped to shape both the argument of what follows, and the way that argument is presented—the argument and its

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[5] Ibid. 180.
[6] V. Woolf. (1926/1975). 'Impassioned Prose'. *Granite and Rainbow*. USA: Harvest Books.
[7] R. Barthes. (1987). *Michelet*. Richard Howard (Trans.). Oxford: Basil Blackwell. (Original work published 1954). 27-28.
[8] D. Juckes. (2017a). 'Too Much, or Else Too Little: How Exile and Objects Affect Sense of Place and Past in Life-Writing Practice'. *Life Writing*. 14. 4. 495-504. doi: 10.1080/14484528.2017.1364208

presentation are entangled in each other. I took the quote from the pages of *Aurora Leigh*, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's novel-in-verse.

There are a number of points in *Aurora Leigh* at which I could pause, and use, to describe the personal motivations for the research I undertook—and, it seems, cannot stop undertaking. The importance of objects and ephemera, for a long time the primary focus of the research (which once centred on why things from the past often cause a strange kind of exhilaration), is summed up neatly in the following passage, taken from the moment when Aurora discovers the joy of reading, of pillaging her father's books:

> Books, books, books!
> I had found the secret of a garret-room
> Piled high with cases in my father's name,
> Piled high, packed large,—where, creeping in and out
> Among the giant fossils of my past,
> Like some small nimble mouse between the ribs
> Of a mastodon, I nibbled here and there
> At this or that box, pulling through the gap,
> In heats of terror, haste, victorious joy,
> The first book first. And how I felt it beat
> Under my pillow, in the morning's dark,
> An hour before the sun would let me read![9]

In a literal sense, too, this passage is helpful, because it describes some of the genesis of my research. When I applied for doctoral candidacy I called the project I wanted to undertake 'Somewhere the Past Lives in Boxes'; this claim was to prove both true and false, but that is beside the point. What is evident is that the title still represents the hoard of things—a whole hodgepodge of family detritus, described through 'As with everything else the end eventually comes …'—found in an equivalent to my father's garret-room. There were boxes, piles, bags of things, tilting and teetering in the house where my grandmother lived. There was a stockpile of things, disordered and disorienting, which I thought would help me tell an interesting story, and which I felt I had to examine. Even though they sat still on the other side of the planet I was ravenous for them, like Aurora for the books beneath her pillow.

[9] E. Barrett Browning. (1856/1859). *Aurora Leigh*. London: Chapman and Hall. 30-31.

The quote from which the title of my paper came reads, in full,

> And then I did not think, 'my Italy,'
> I thought, 'my father!' O my father's house,
> Without his presence!—Places are too much
> Or else too little, for immortal man,—
> Too little, when love's May o'ergrows the ground,
> Too much, when that luxuriant wealth of green
> Is rustling to our ankles in dead leaves.[10]

The context here is that Aurora has just returned to Italy, where she grew up. That feeling of what I can best describe as all-but-not-quite was one I had grown familiar with on returning, a couple of times, to the place I grew up—the Calder Valley, in West Yorkshire—to conduct fieldwork. I had been struck by the oddness of leaving (and arriving) somewhere I'd once known intimately, and that oddness was emphasised on each return—as was the leaving, of course, which was always more permanent than it had seemed the first time around. The result was that I was unable to feel settled in England, no matter how much I longed to be, and just as I find it difficult to be settled in Perth, Western Australia, where I live now.[11] When I came to write that too-much-too-little paper—in its original guise, as a contribution to the inaugural International AutoBiography Association Asia-Pacific conference, in Adelaide, in 2015—I was doing so under the cloud of a further kind of severance: my grandmother, who had kept that garret-room full of objects, had just passed away. The distance I felt was the death knell to my claim that the past might *just* live in boxes: of course it does not. But it does not quite die either—think of the way hysteresis works: it is defined in the *OED* as 'a coming short, deficiency, to be behind, to come late. [As] any dependence of the value of a property on the past history of the system to which it

[10] Ibid. 292.

[11] Without quite meaning to, I wrote a paper about this feeling of unsettlement. I wanted to write about the essay form in Australia, but through the case study I chose—essays awarded and commended in the Calibre Prize—I came to read the 'ontological disturbance' I suffer from as endemic in postcolonial Australia (at least for the settling parties). This essay about essays did a lot to shift my thesis-thinking: I moved focus, over time, from the things I was writing about, to the ways I might be able to write about things in light of this unsettlement. 'Walking, Talking, Looking' was published in *TEXT* Special Issue 39 (2017), edited by Rachel Robertson and Kylie Cardell.

pertains.'[12] The way I see it, some of the past is merely delayed, and comes along addled by all that has happened since, as well as all that is perceived of what has happened since.

When 'Too Much, or Else Too Little' was finished, it felt like a template for what the thesis I was writing might become. Thus, my grandmother's death marked, and forced, a shift in my research, both in the direction of my thinking and in the way those thoughts were then described. More practically, I had planned to conduct a series of interviews with Grandma about some of the things she'd kept for years and forgotten about. Instead, I had to rely on what I knew, what I could find out, and what I could guess. The creative work I was thinking of producing—a kind of history reliant on exactness, on wresting lost and specific details from the past, because of the specificity I sensed in the things that had lasted—shifted to something built, as I came to realise, on the same wobbly foundations as seamless experience: perception and memory. This refocus led to the simple realisation that the past I was writing was filtered in a similar way to the past I remembered. Because of that, the thesis I was writing became less a history and more a memoir (as well as, literally, something I could use to remember my grandmother with). The voice I found, which I thought would work, straddled the academic and creative aspects of the research, and pulled the two together. This kind of entanglement is crucial to both the experience of the thesis and the experience of the present. It is a way for the form of the work to add to its arguments.

My supervisor, Rachel Robertson, had—for a long time, it must be noted—advocated I try something like an integrated thesis. She thought that the work I was doing would be more suited to an entangled, seamless way of writing. Together we looked at examples of theses which worked in that mode: writers like Threasa Meads,[13] Jane Grellier,[14] and Adrian Hyland[15] offered solutions and mechanisms for incorporating and combining, for shaping the academic and creative work into a whole. They also helped expand the kinds of notions I had regarding what a thesis could look

[12] *The Oxford English Dictionary*. Vol VII: Hat-Intervacuum. (1989). Prepared by J.A. Simpson and E.S.C. Weiner. Oxford: Clarendon Press. 585.
[13] T. Meads. (2015). 'Folded in on Yourself in This Way You Become: A Liminal-Autobiographical Map of Healing from Child Abuse'. Flinders University: PhD Thesis.
[14] J. Grellier. (2015). 'Learning Reflective Practice: An Autoethnographic Performance in Six Movements'. Curtin University: PhD Thesis.
[15] A. Hyland. (2015). *Kinglake-350*. Melbourne: Text Publishing.

like. And so, the life I was living and the research I was doing became entwined (even more than they were initially). As Craig Batty and Donna Lee Brien say,

> The 'successful' exegesis, perhaps, is that which connects creative and critical components seamlessly by the careful use of a well-crafted research voice; one that speaks of the various components as a thesis—as a whole—rather than individual parts that are brought together to form the doctorate.[16]

This wholeness, the wrapping of the creative and critical, is necessary for the thesis to function, just as a sense of wholeness is vital to the illusion of seamless experience.

Despite the diminished obviousness of objects in the thesis, I would still describe it as a work of Thing Theory, but perhaps one which tries to interpret things as they are used and thought about in the work of Woolf, Sebald, and Proust—as well as in my own practice, of course. The contribution I make to both the academic discipline of creative writing, and the thinking through of things, is in the way I have tried to interpret objects as flecks of both time and space, crammed with potential pasts, and part of the welter of all that's been. My work describes the way prose writers like Woolf, Sebald, and Proust use the slippery sensation of the present as it is: infused by the detritus of the past; I ask how those writers use things to both orient and disorient their readers within their miniature page-worlds. That is why it became necessary to nestle things more snugly within the work: to see them as motes of what was.

Another feature the integrated model offers is hybridity, something I have come to recognise as vital to the works of nonfiction I love most. I'd like to position 'As with everything else the end eventually comes …' in this context: as a work of hybrid creative nonfiction in the vein of writers whose names crop up occasionally in the thesis itself, writers like Ross Gibson, Rebecca Solnit, Geoff Dyer, and Helen MacDonald.

A significance of my work is an acknowledgement that the intricacies of nonfiction writing extend just as far as those of the novel itself—that includes the novel-ish writings of Woolf, Sebald, and Proust, on the flipside of that coin. I think the way they write—and the way I have tried to—adds to that broad life writing field (which I have

[16] C. Batty and D.L. Brien. (2017). 'The Exegesis Now: Where Are We, and Where Are We Going?'. *TEXT: Journal of Writing and Writing Courses.* Special Issue 44: The Exegesis Now. http://www.textjournal.com.au/speciss/issue44/Batty&Brien.pdf. 5.

tried to avoid defining) a method for writing lives which might seem uneventful, or, perhaps, 'everyday': that would be kinder.

I hope this thesis can have an impact in both scholarly and non-scholarly environments, and that its hybridity is not a hindrance but an enhancement of its themes. I've tried to give a multi-faceted view of the past, and I've also tried to find a way for life writing to be honest about its deficiencies and forthright about its value. The telling of ordinary stories is more than necessary in a world overloaded with claims to the extraordinary.

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'Hysteresis' is a wonderful word to whisper. It is also a reassuring concept: the nature of things is a little delayed, the present merely a shortcoming. Both of these mean that what's been matters; they are part of why the past has a force even as it shivers and vanishes before the eyes of an onlooker. I'm aware, of course, that there are a number of shortcomings in 'As with everything else the end eventually comes …', but hysteresis tells me that is inevitable, and so I hope instead to be able to work on them in the future. I want, for example, to catch up with the way the method I've used might be described. The process of creation is not unstudied, but the way in which the whole of the world impacts on consciousness—and unconsciousness—is more than fruitful for an entire lifetime of research. It is this forever-impacting aspect of the moments a person lives through that strikes me as one of the more unfinished aspects of the thesis; I think that things, at the very least, might be useful in articulating the phenomenon. I am interested, as well, in the historian's journey and their processes, and in the link between that journey and the process of memoir and autobiography; in this direction, the direction of the kind of hybrid nonfiction I'd like my work to be judged by, the genre line gets both further away and fainter, and there are lurking tensions.[17] I'd like to see where or when the genre line might fade away. The method by which things marry in consciousness, and how, is also quite elusive, but I think that the building of a prose work can map those mechanisms a little.

Personally, I'd like—one day—to get to the bottom of exactly how Woolf makes *The Waves* work. But I feel I'd need an entirely new thesis—and a new focus, away from 'something like life writing' specifically, to get anywhere near getting that done.

[17] My Candidacy Proposal was built around examining these tensions. I still have some way to go.

I hope, too, that I can expand my ideas around the power of ephemeral things: those items which are perhaps closest to dissolution were what captured my attention most in the family archive I got to work with. I'd like to add to Thing Theory by thinking through what's throwaway more explicitly, perhaps by excavating, through the life writer's lens, what Jane Bennett describes as the 'shimm[y] back and forth between debris and thing'.[18] It is the intersection of that lens with the ephemeral things I describe which will be most fruitful for further study: life writing has long been concerned with Woolf's 'moments of being',[19] and I've tried to interpret those moments using ephemera.

I hope that the interdisciplinary nature of my interpretations work to frame things, and writing about life, within a larger research context. The Humanities are currently grappling with what the posthuman might mean, and while I do not claim to have figured any of that out, I've certainly managed to step into the discussion. The boundary between object and subject has never been more tenuous, and that slippage is a key concern for this thesis. Rosi Braidotti, in her book *The Posthuman*, describes some of this thought:

> Subject formation takes place … in the spaces that flow and connect the binaries … [George] Eliot pointed the way by writing with ears and mind open to that roar of energy that sustains Life. Virginia Woolf did the same by steering her writer's gaze towards the perfect stillness of Life defined as constant flow. Writing is a method for transcribing cosmic intensity into sustainable portions of being.[20]

Subject formation is the domain of the life writer, and I think there is much to be added to this discussion by creative writing academics. That discussion is also the domain of writers like Oliver Sacks, who ask questions of perfect stillness and constant flow. In *The River of Consciousness*, he asks, 'How … do our frames, our momentary moments, hold together? How, if there is only transience, do we achieve continuity?'[21] I hope this thesis can contribute to answering those questions, along with the myriad

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[18] J. Bennett. (2010). *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. 4.
[19] V. Woolf. (1985). *Moments of Being: A Collection of Autobiographical Writing*. Jeanne Schulkind (Ed.). New York: Harcourt.
[20] R. Braidotti. (2013). 'Posthuman Humanities: Life Beyond Theory. *The Posthuman*. Wiley. ProQuest Ebook Central. Web. 164-166.
[21] Sacks. 183.

others which lock and interlock around the same theme. Prose offers one solution, as does history, as does the melting and overlapping of all that is monadic.

And, along with all that, I hope ‘As with everything else the end eventually comes …’ is an enjoyable read: work like this can sometimes feel too much, and yet always prove too little. But it can—if it is good, if it is challenging—be worthwhile anyway. It has been worthwhile to write, for a number of reasons.

Contents

‘As with everything else the end eventually comes …’

To look ahead is disastrous, considering how much has still to be recorded of time past.

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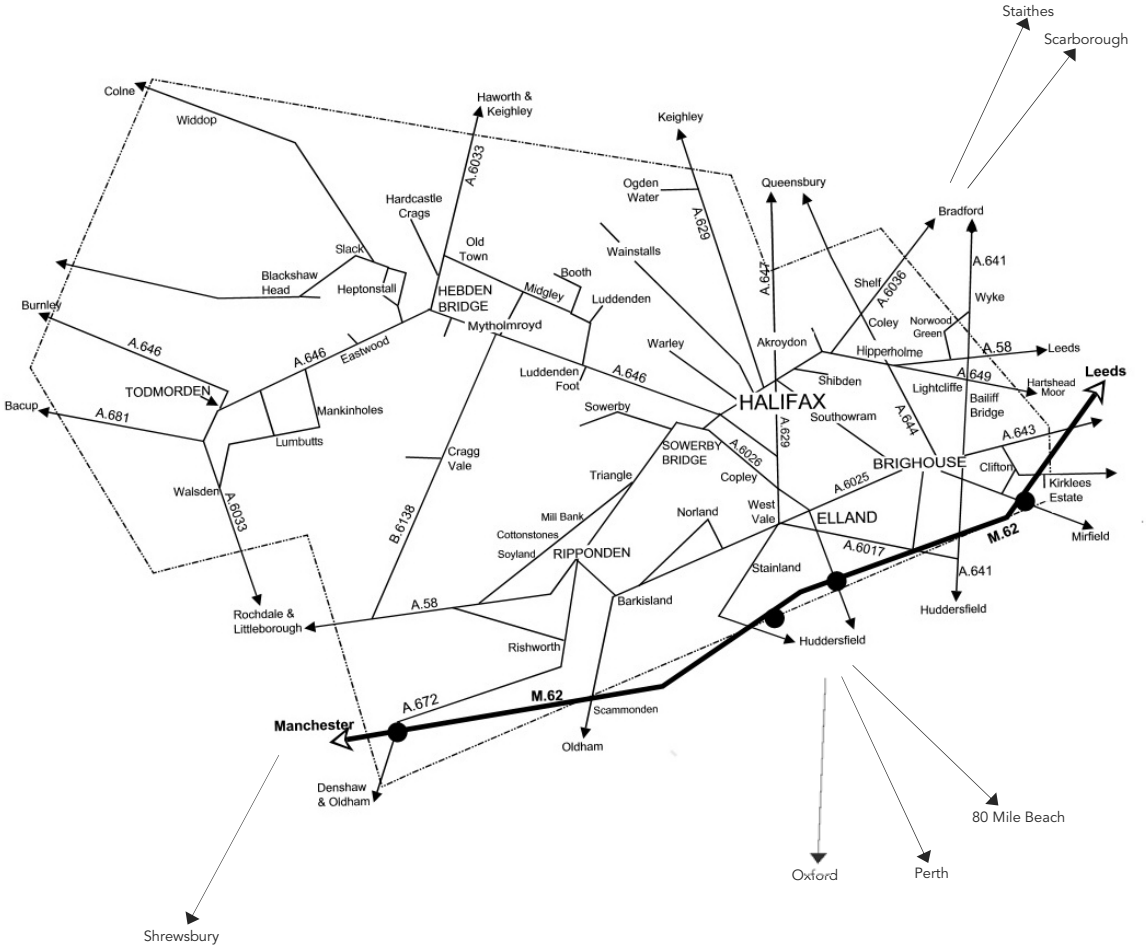
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A.6017
M.62
Stainland
A.641
Rochdale &
Littleborough
A.58
Barkisland
Huddersfield
Rishworth
Huddersfield
A.672
M.62
Scammonden
Manchester
Oldham
Denshaw
& Oldham
80 Mile Beach
Oxford
Perth
Shrewsbury

1

Our lying senses

> ‘She was told that you were going to write a book. She seemed pleased. She wiped away a tear.’ And then I fancied I could remember that, a little time after her death, my grandmother had said to me, crying, with a humble expression, like an old servant who has been given notice to leave, like a stranger, in fact: ‘You will let me see something of you occasionally, won’t you; don’t let too many years go by without visiting me. Remember that you were my grandson, once, and that grandmothers never forget.’
>
> Marcel Proust (trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff). *Cities of the Plain*. Part I. 225.

Walking out of Habberley from its centre, where the road starts at a three-pronged roundabout, I saw an old church and a cemetery; the headstones were mostly battered, some of the graves barely there under blankets of moss and grass, and the door of the church was open. Inside it was dark, and the stained-glass windows were beautiful.

The village was quiet and the Habberley Road itself in shadows, even though the day was bright. The road was thin, and twisted away to a corner close by; there were high hedges which closed it in. The hedgerows were vertical, crammed with unknown flowers, thick leaves, and things that stung.

The sky was blue where it wasn’t clouded over; the clouds themselves were dense and grey but silver-edged, making the world look as if it was unsure of how it felt. Birds flapped and cawed but didn’t seem to sing. Alongside the road, above the hedge, a wire ran—held up by knobbled telephone poles. I heard small streams running, but when I looked through the hedge to where the sounds came from, close enough to feel damp from the foliage, there were small pools of water that, despite their murmurs,

were still. I saw foxgloves through the hedge; they were surrounded by rusted farm equipment, plastic sheets, and plastic drums, all draped in knee-high grass.

Perhaps two-hundred yards from the village I almost stood on the body of a bird. It was crooked and damp but not yet decayed; its black wings were trapped underneath its body and its belly faced upwards; its legs were bare and thin and so were its talons. It was a small thing with a beak the colour of yellow metal, like the nib of a fountain pen. The road it lay on was wet and shone.

I stopped at every gate—each time the hedgerow opened—just to take a breath. There were rabbits in the fields, cows and sheep. Where the telephone wire crossed the road a raven sat, as if suspended in the air.

At the sound of a barking dog a flock of birds jumped from behind the hedge and dragged themselves across the road; I could feel puddle-water gathering in my shoes. And up close I couldn't understand the hedge, how it grew and shaped itself: someone must cut it back, but, inside, even the neatest section was a wild mess of branch and leaves, a struggle for breath and air and light. There were tiny insects crawling along each and every stem, and white flowers I couldn't name. Sometimes roots would heave themselves through and out, onto the roadside. Once, as though the iron had managed some strange sort of alchemy, a gate was grown into the leaves. I could see it above my head, curled around, wrapped in dark privet.

After walking a mile or so I stopped for good. Birds were singing again and a car flashed past—I leaned back into the hedgerow. I turned around and faced the way I had come, back to Habberley and the small church and my hired car. I started to walk towards the village, running my fingers along the hedge, until a car pulled up alongside me. Did I need to get back to Habberley? asked a voice from inside. I got in, and, as we drove back, the voice asked what I was doing in the village. I thought of my father, late at night, in a room on the other side of the planet, lit by two small lamps sat in their opposite corners:

'I think I've found something out, Dan,' he said.

'Oh yes?'

'Yes, I … it's quite ….' He paused. 'I think Samuel may have killed himself.'

'How do you know?' I asked.

He showed me a print-out of a newspaper page. The bottom right hand corner of the newspaper was torn off, so that it was black on the photocopy—like a missing

tooth. The text was hard to read: a full-page spread of broadsheet squeezed onto an A4-sized piece of paper. Pushed to the bottom of the page, a headline read: ‘Rate Collector’s Suicide: Pathetic Letters’.

The man in the car, Phil, dropped me at the Mytton Arms in the centre of the village. He said that the pub was good on Fridays, that he’d be back later, that there was a bloke in the pub who might be able to help with my great-great-grandfather, and that I should hang around for a chat. I sat in a small room around the corner from the front bar and watched the place fill up, trying to attract the attention of a beagle with bulging eyes.

I had meant to stay. I saw Phil come in, but didn’t have enough cash for dinner, or even to shout him a drink, so I snuck out to find an ATM. There were none in Habberley; in Pontesbury, Minstrelsy, and Bishop’s Castle my card didn’t work. In Shrewsbury it was the same: there was a malfunction at the Australian end, I think—perhaps maintenance, as it was the middle of the night back home. That day I drove for two hours, lunging around blind bends, in and out of radio reception, looking for a cash point. And at a service station I gave up: the petrol light was flashing orange and my card worked at the counter, but I still couldn’t withdraw cash. I bought a sandwich and aimed back north. Grandma would be worrying, and it was getting dark, so I called to let her know that I was on my way, and set off. I imagined her in her chair by the phone and the window; by now her curtains would be closed.

Just outside Wrexham—somewhere I shouldn’t have been, but the GPS had overheated—I saw a badger, dead, at the side of the road. Its colours reminded me of the copying machine at the Shropshire Archives from earlier in the day: on a small screen text appears first as it should, black on white, but then—at the push of a button—falls into winking black. Out of the printer comes white ink on black paper, a negatived version of what was.

The sun was gone by the time I got back to Calderdale, and it was pitch black when I pulled into Mytholm Meadows. Grandma was in bed—I knocked on her door and waited long enough. When I opened my journal to write down the day the yellow flowers I’d picked, and the feather I’d found, were crawling with tiny, black insects. The paper was damp, and the ink already there—from earlier in the day—was faded and runny. But I wanted to keep the flowers, which were nothing more than weeds.

And I needed to keep the feather, to prove the flock of black birds had been there on the road.

That night I could not sleep. I lay awake and thought through the months I'd had. I could feel them: my hands were sore and memories licked. The room I was in was cluttered with things: betting slips, unpaid bills, and false teeth were piled up on the next bed.

The next morning I went into Hebden Bridge to pick up a prescription for Grandma. As I was putting money away—taken from a hole-in-the-wall across from the chemist—I found a crumpled £20 note in my wallet, wrapped up in a wad of receipts. So much for finding out the past: I'd been foiled by folded paper. I couldn't remember what Phil looked like or what car he drove, I could just see the eyes of the beagle in the bar as it watched me from over its shoulder. I'd found nothing on the Habberley Road except a sense of something. And that morning, in the middle of Hebden Bridge, in the middle of the Calder Valley, I realised—finally—that that sense was what was important. Something trembled in each of the hundreds of pale pink slips of paper, headed with 'Ladbrokes', and covered in faded, carbon-copied writing, that I had piled in a rough sort of order in my bedroom. But no one seemed to know exactly what that something was: no one I asked could piece together meaning from them all, except to acknowledge that they did, in fact, mean something. In fairness, I had not asked many, because for weeks the only people I'd seen were Grandma, Uncle Kevin, and Aunty Pat. They had chuckled between themselves at the sheer volume of those pink slips of paper, each some kind of evidence of one small sequence of actions. In 1981, for example, at Newton Abbot Racecourse (the slip was labelled N/A), on May 20, my grandfather bet £1.80 three ways. He got the bet in just in time: the race started at 4:45 in the afternoon, and the slip is timed at 16:46, so the horses (which included Charlie's Greeting, Raise a Hand, Sea Park, and The Floor Layer) would already have been running around the track miles away from where he was. Although that is a presumption: I do not know where Grandad was when he made that bet. But there is something even in knowing where he focused his attention: on the 4:45 at Newton Abbot. This is a little more miraculous than it might appear, because for the years I knew my grandfather all he was capable of was the clamping of his thin fingers tight around a stringy tissue, held preternaturally within one curled fist. And yet, once, he had been able to place £1.80 in three different combinations on a horse race, in May

1981 (7 years before I was born). Grandma would take my brother and I to visit him sometimes, in the house where he lived. It was a large building, which he shared with lots of other people, close to the centre of Halifax. We would catch the bus into town and walk there together. Somehow those moments—the 4:45 at Newton Abbot, and those visits with Grandma—were linked.

In one of Charles Darwin's scribbled notebooks, strung with crossings-out and those spangled diagrams which branch off and off and look a little like maps, the naturalist wrote (underlining the words, and crossing his last 't' with a flourish), that 'We may be all netted together'.[22] This nettedness is a little, I think, of what I felt that morning—and in bed the night before. An endless, intricate web was firming, briefly, and then eluding—bursting into life and falling off into something else.

Darwin's work was a battle with endings, a plea to look beyond briefness; his diagrams were attempts to map the mechanisms of beginnings that become something else again. He wanted to describe the very processes of the past, and to do so, according to Adam Gopnik, Darwin adapted his prose to a particular way of thinking. He fought with time itself:

> In Darwin's work, time moves at two speeds: there is the vast abyss of time in which generations change and animals mutate and evolve; and then there is the gnat's breath, hummingbird-heart time of creaturely existence … The human challenge Darwin felt, and that his work still presents, is to see both times truly—not to attempt to humanise deep time, or to dismiss quick time, but to make enough of both without overlooking either.[23]

Darwin's work is his writing: the science was his ideas. And his writing attempts to describe the movements on which an entire system turns. Carolyn Steedman suggests that the incongruity Gopnik outlines, between the vast and the miniscule, is something writers of the past know inherently. She talks of the implicity of temporariness in any attempt to write down the past, even within the great web of everything: 'At the centre of … written history lies [a] recognition of temporariness and impermanence. And all historians, even the most purblind empiricists, recognise this in their acts of writing:

[22] C. Darwin. (1837-8). *Notebook B: Transmutation*. Retrieved from http://darwin-online.org.uk. 232.
[23] A. Gopnik. (2006). 'Rewriting Nature: Charles Darwin, Natural Novelist'. *The New Yorker*. 23 October. Retrieved from http://newyorker.com/magazine/2006/10/23/rewriting-nature.

they are *telling the only story that has no end.*'[24] History is always bordered, impermanent, flawed, and what Steedman calls time-consciousness 'pervades our very existence'. She argues that, 'narrative is thus not a clothing for something else but, rather, is the very structure of human existence and action,' and she suggests that, 'Time-consciousness is rooted in the apprehension of now, of each and every moment of being; [that] time is a structure that inheres in the very phenomenon of being narrated.'[25] The phenomenon of being narrated is something I have come to dwell on. Virginia Woolf was a writer who knew more than most about it, and about the conflict between long stretches of time and the 'gnat's breath' moments which, when pieced together, make up life as it is lived. Steedman's use of the phrase 'moment of being' cannot, of course, be accidental: the language is Woolf's. Hers is a beautiful evocation of the way narrative is strung in memory, of the way links are made.

In a posthumously published essay called 'A Sketch of the Past', Woolf asks, 'Why have I forgotten so many things that must have been … more memorable than what I do remember?' Here she is referring to the way time shirks our attention when we try to think about the day or the week or the year which has passed. She says, 'Every day includes much more non-being than being', and gives an example describing what she remembers of the day before: a walk along the river, willows 'all plumy and soft green and purple against the blue', reading Chaucer, and then the memoirs of Madame de la Fayette. And that is all. This causes her to state the obvious:

> These separate moments of being were … embedded in many more moments of non-being. I have already forgotten what Leonard and I talked about at lunch; and at tea; although it was a good day the goodness was embedded in a kind of nondescript cotton wool. This is always so. A great part of every day is not lived consciously.[26]

And that, in essence, is the problem of memory; that is, the problem of memory for those who wish to write down their past. When she was writing, Woolf struggled with the best way to present all that lived-through, but vanished, time; she believed that her great struggle as a writer was to try to find a way to 'convey both sorts of being':[27]

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[24] C. Steedman. (2001). *Dust*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.148. (Italics in original).
[25] Ibid. 144.
[26] V. Woolf. (1985). 'A Sketch of the Past'. *Moments of Being* …. 70.
[27] Ibid.

those moments which remained, and those turned to cotton wool. This entwining of impermanence and endlessness, of something and something which might be nothing, is difficult to comprehend. But the French historian, Jules Michelet, who was a rough contemporary of Darwin, used the duality to his advantage. He mingled history with autobiography, and saw the potential of life stories to burst open a grander, universal narrative—to situate a past within the mass of everything else, and to attempt a bridge between both:

> Each [person] is a complete universal history, a world. That false little universality confronts the grand and devouring universality of all … One person, how many unnoticed threads entangled her with other personalities! Examine, trace them closer and closer, you will shudder. One notices all the threads at the time of death, because they break or are laid bare. Like the threads and the creeping vines of ivy that I noticed yesterday in the forest of Saint-Germain: I ripped off the leaves, but the vines had gripped the bark so well that I had to separate them with iron.[28]

In Michelet's journals his life story intrudes relentlessly on musings on the past. Those musings, in turn, intrude upon the story of his life. This kind of history is one I can't see my way around, even if I've begun to understand the difficulties of transcribing a narrative that is, ostensibly, my own as well: life stories are wrapped in vines, as entangled in threads as histories are. It's as Steedman acknowledges: the process of history does not work, either as cognition or as narrative,

> without the assumption on the part of the writer and reader … that there is somewhere the great story, that contains everything there is and ever has been—'visits home, heartbeats, a first kiss, the jump of an electron from one orbital position to another', as well as the desolate battlefield, the ruined village—from which the smaller story, the one before your eyes now, has simply been extracted.[29]

That process of extraction does require an end, a severance: it has to have an edge to it. But while it's true that endings are the essence of narrative, of our short lives, it

[28] J. Michelet. (1984). *Mother Death: The Journal of Jules Michelet 1815-1850*. Edward Kaplan (Trans. and Ed.). Amherst, Massachusetts: The University of Massachusetts Press. 90-91.
[29] Steedman. *Dust*. 146.

might be possible to lean on another duality, that which exists on the flipside of ending and is the something else they fall into. Edward Kaplan wrote that 'History allowed [Michelet] to deny death by absorbing *individual* life in the *general*.'[30] The entwining of ending and beginning, and the grand narrative itself, were Michelet's concern. This is because, he says,

> I need to prove to myself, to myself and to this humanity whose ephemeral appearances I sketch, to prove that we are reborn, that we do not die. I need to do it because I feel myself dying …
>
> So I want, above and beyond the chain of these mobile lives, to partake of those instants we call men, those sparkling little tales that were persons. I want to weave a fabric of the ideas by which they perpetuated themselves, continued to live, contradicted death, defied nature.
>
> Nature weaves and tears, it knots, it breaks the living threads. We extract from ourselves, from our will, what we need in order to restore the bleeding fabric.[31]

Perhaps the sense of something I felt when I tried to consider a single slip of paper amongst all the rest of the detritus heaped next to, and around me, was something like that: a way of partaking in what Michelet calls sparkling little tales, as well as in that stretching, universal knot. Because it doesn't matter so much *what* I tell you of the past—the details are myriad and entwined and always selected, and that game is one it's fun to play. What matters is that I tell you how it feels to find them, and perhaps—by the inseparable but conflicting notions of history and autobiography—how I found them. This will, I hope, help the past peek from these pages, and might help me to sense something of what was. It may also give some notion of just how hard I've tried to find something—some proof—of anything:

> The historian's massive authority as a writer derives from two factors: the way archives *are*, and the conventional rhetoric of history-writing, which always asserts … that you know because you have been there. There is a story put about that the authority comes from the documents themselves, and the historian's obeisance to the limits they impose on any account that employs them. But really, it comes *from having*

[30] Kaplan qtd. in Michelet. 95. (Italics in original).
[31] Michelet. 104.

> *been there* (the train to the distant city, the call number, the bundle opened, the dust …) so that then, and only then, can you present yourself as moved and dictated to by those sources, telling a story the way it has to be told.[32]

*

I didn't tell Grandma what I had been doing the day before (which had ended on the Habberley Road, and ended again at a service station close to the Welsh border). She asked. I told her I had been researching our family's history, and that I had discovered a little of my great-great-grandfather, her grandfather-in-law. I even showed her the picture of Samuel I had found: before I left the archives I looked up and saw him on the wall, in a frame. I remember looking up from the microfilm machine I was working on—a big, white, plastic thing I'd had to lean over, as close as possible to the display, so as not to obscure the magnified newspaper text with my shadow—and seeing a man in a frame, then thinking he looked a little like my father. From my chair, I saw a row of photographs of old-Shrewsbury street-scenes, the pictures black and white and blown up. And there on the wall above my right shoulder, part of the sequence, was a picture of a shopfront hung with buckets and baskets and fenced in by spades and garden forks, hung with chains and bowls and brush heads. In the windows were scythes, pliers, nutcrackers, rope, and oil lamps stacked in close to the glass. And in the doorway of the shop was a man wearing a long, white apron, recently folded. He had on an open jacket, a waistcoat, and a tie with a pin pushed into the knot at his throat. There was a handkerchief poking out of his pocket, and above his head was the word 'Ironmonger', and above that was my surname. Underneath the picture was a small piece of card. It read, 'Samuel Juckes. Ironmonger, Tinsmith and Bellhanger. 3 Mardol, Shrewsbury.'

She couldn't see the picture. And I couldn't find a way to tell her how he died: it is not an easy thing to tell. Harder still to fathom is my curiosity for it; for each of the dead and gone I've wondered—and wandered—over. And, no less, my curiosity for her—who I miss and who I knew.

Behind Samuel, in the picture, the interior of his shop is dark but split with glints and glimmers. The glass of the upstairs windows is not clean, and the tools and things behind them are slightly fogged, just out of focus, though I can see cups and saucers,

[32] Steedman. *Dust*. 145.

scales, jugs, and other unnameable oddments. I know the bricks are red because I have seen the building, but in the photograph they are grey, a light grey. Samuel isn't smiling. In the picture he is looking straight at the camera and his brow is slightly creased. His lips look like mine: they hang lower on the right-hand side. And he *is* standing like my father. So that was what I told her when I showed her the picture: that he looks like Dad, like Chris. That I saw his shop on the main street in Shrewsbury, and that it's a travel agent's now. And then I asked, have you ever been to Shrewsbury, Grandma? I can't remember what she said, whether she had or not, but I can remember always asking her questions like that: have you been? can you remember? did you? were you? when? I liked the way she would never quite know—even admit to it, with an 'Oh, I don't know, Love.' And then something more decisive: a yes, or a no, followed by her looking into herself, back on herself, at what she knew.

That day in Shrewsbury was one of the last I spent in England, and the day afterwards—in Hebden Bridge—was one of the last I spent with her. And I remember, on that almost-last day, how much I was plagued by all the other places I thought of her in; imagined her in. What Penelope Lively calls 'the view from old age'[33] frightened me, felt heady and teetering, like the way Proust's giants of time—right at the end of those blasted, never-ending books—gaze down at all the moments they've had, tottering along on spindling living stilts the height of churchtowers, trying to make sense of all they can't remember and all that they can; trying to somehow stay upright despite the impossibility of all that's below (which is each moment passed and lived, each skerrick of life processed).[34] My grandmother had lived, it seemed, so many years; she was exactly what Vladimir Nabokov, stealing Jean Cocteau's phrase, describes Proust's novel as: 'a giant miniature, full of mirages … of games conducted between space and time.'[35] This messing with scale is part of the duality of impermanence and endlessness, and Proust's writing plays with those tensions: Clive James describes *Remembrance of Things Past* as 'a racing glacier'.[36]

That day in the bottom of the valley her eyes were clouded over, her skin slack; her ears were large, her hands mottled. And I felt 'the perpetual slide of the present, with

[33] P. Lively. (2013/2014). *Ammonites and Leaping Fish: A Life in Time*. London: Penguin Books. 3.
[34] M. Proust. (1931/1957). *Time Regained*. Stephen Hudson (Trans.). London: Chatto & Windus (Original work published in 1927). 432-434
[35] V. Nabokov. (1980/1983). 'Marcel Proust: *The Walk by Swann's Place*'. *Lectures on Literature*. London: Picador. 208.
[36] C. James. (2016). *Gate of Lilacs: A Verse Commentary on Proust*. London: Picador. 13

the ballast of what has been and the hazard of what is to come'.[37] We were in her small lounge room and two clocks competed—one in the kitchen, one on the wall above her chair—tick-tick-tock-tock. Then, there, I forgot Samuel and remembered her an impossible distance away, at home with us in Perth a year or so before, under a sky which was higher, and in the throes of summer.

The light was bright. The heat crept down vents, through cracks in the walls, seeped through skin. And even that memory was almost warming, somehow.

We were in the kitchen, Grandma and I. The red and pink painted on her cheeks and lips was uneven, wet with sweat. The shape of her lips made a rose-coloured map on the glass in her hand. The skin around her eyes was loose, crinkled like the sea seen from an aeroplane window. Her eyes were colourless, and also made of water.

In the house that summer, from room to room as she walked, she slid her fingers across white-grey walls. Her fingers left grooves in the walls, as though horse-drawn through soft stone, like the deep wedges you can touch in rock which is black and wet and ribbed and dark under the thick gritstone bridges of Calderdale.

But all the canals were gone and alien birds croaked at the window. Her fingers slid from door to door around the house because she couldn't see, and the plugs in her ears warbled like magpies as she tried to hear. It seemed that through all the years I had known her she had plunged towards this: where I drifted at the sides of her eyes at the edge of her world.

For ten years she came to visit, staying for the summer. She came to sit and watch the garden and to be with the dog and us; to see what the world looks like upside down. To eat potato wedges on the foreshore at Matilda Bay, or to go to the markets at Kalamunda. It is a long way from Bradford, from Halifax, from the bottom of the valley, to Perth: every trip was nine thousand miles. This cumulative ninety-thousand miles is—as the crow flies—almost halfway to the moon, if a crow could get there. It's as long as the vessels and veins under your skin would be if they were laid end to end to end. In my memory crows bang bones in the garden. They are big and black and rip silence with their voices. They tease the dog and drop his bones, drag them, and the sound ticks, tocks, fades.

In the kitchen we were talking. And birds chattered mechanically in her ears as she told me of a mist that covered the moors: a man walked through the mist and through

[37] Lively. 123.

the years towards us then, bearing a flag and taking slow, deliberate strides. The bus she was on went behind him. It happened silently as I pictured it, bus and man parting clouds. But the ladies on board would have talked, smoked, and complained the slow way home. There was a war on, then. But now that misted day is somewhere in the past, drifting starlit miles at starlit speed, gone in all directions. Then she said,

'There's an old man in the corner saying his prayers.' Her voice a little like mine.

'Where, Grandma? I can't see him.'

'There, right there. He has a bad leg and is sitting with his wife.' Her finger pointed slightly to the left of where her eyes were aimed.

'I can't see him, Grandma. It might be those shadows on the wall.' She was always seeing things in shadows—or perhaps shadows in things.

'Ohhh, maybe. Maybe.'

I remember watching with interest her watching the outside world—the one outside-but-inside her eyes—getting closer, creeping in. Old men, monks, little girls, dancing ladies; all of them real to her on those restless, restful, silent sitting days we shared that summer. The reason was this: because she could only see the world through the corners of her eyes they played tricks on her, and what she saw as real I knew was not. But this wasn't because she was deluded—no more than is normal, anyway. It was because her eyes were traitors. The macular degeneration that forced my grandmother to stop reading her books, which made her follow the walls with her fingertips, had fooled the channels which wound and wrapped each other inside her visual cortex, so that where she could not see—through the holes and gaps which pocked her eyes—she hallucinated. Her perceptual completion process—simply, how she saw, how we see—filled in those pocks with whatever her brain had stored in its grey depths. The neuropsychiatrist John Smythies says that, 'What we see is largely virtual reality created by the brain from memory.'[38] What she saw was like that but twisted: because her battered retinas were almost worn out, her brain stepped in and caused delusions. This is called Charles Bonnet Syndrome. Roger Shattuck, a Proust scholar, describes truth as a 'miracle of vision'.[39] But, later, he affirms what Proust knew: that, 'The

[38] J. Smythies. (2005). 'How the Brain Decides What We See'. *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*. 98. No 1. January. 18. Retrieved from https://search-proquest-com.dbgw.lis.curtin.edu.au /docview/235018549?accountid=10382. 18.

[39] R. Shattuck. (2000). *Proust's Way: A Field Guide to* In Search of Lost Time. London: Allen Lane, The Penguin Press. 100.

science of optics forever shows the *errors* of our vision, the distortions from accuracy, deviations from the straight line, reductions in point of view and perspective.'[40] Like Proust himself, whose universe, Shattuck says, is shaped by the 'persistent principle' of error,[41] Grandma could only see at one remove. This is part of the problem of extracting a life story from the web in which it's locked: even if it can be isolated, it's still proven to be a fantasy (to steal, this time, Nabokov's line).[42] The links made in that web of everything are always false.

I remember that summer in Perth as composite: she sits between sleeps on the couch as the television tells news and weather. She, always interested in what time it is. We, shouting at one another—but only to be heard. I microwave our lunches as she pulls a feather duster over pictures and tables and tops. And we sweat whatever it is we are eating as I turn the pages back and forth of whatever it was I was reading, in a comfortable, exhausting routine. This method of memory, the loaded process we use to remember and recreate by composite, is like 'conceptual filling in'—a vital part of the perceptual completion process. Without an ability to compress and crosshatch and montage, our vision, like our memory, would be useless, untethered, lurching. In *The Waves*, Woolf manages to distil a little of how that drifting state might feel. Louis is speaking, and he realises the flux around him (as well as the necessity of moments of being, even if they too are false):

> People go on passing; they go on passing against the spires of the church and the plates of ham sandwiches. The streamers of my consciousness waver out and are perpetually torn and distressed by their disorder … I am conscious of flux, of disorder; of annihilation and despair … Yet I feel, too, the rhythm of the eating house. It is like

[40] Ibid. 107.
[41] Shattuck. 107.
[42] Nabokov. 210. The quote in full reads thus:

> One might be tempted to say that Proust *is* the narrator, that he *is* the eyes and ears of the book. But the answer is still no. The book that the narrator in Proust's book is supposed to write is still a book-within-the-book and is not quite *In Search of Lost Time*—just as the narrator is not quite Proust. There is a focal shift here which produces a rainbow edge: this is the special Proustian crystal through which we read the book. It is not a mirror of manners, not an autobiography, not a historical account. It is pure fantasy on Proust's part, just as *Anna Karenin* is a fantasy, just as Kafka's 'The Metamorphosis' is fantasy—just as Cornell University will be a fantasy if I ever happen to write about it some day in retrospect.

> a waltz tune, eddying in and out, round and round … Where then is the break in this continuity? What the fissure through which one sees disaster?[43]

This expression of the incapacity of the senses is part of the puzzle of capturing the past—or, at least, capturing the essence of it. I found a different evocation of it in the work of Elena Ferrante, where the glut of the real, and the need we have to gloss that endless accumulation, is an important concern for Elena Greco, Ferrante's author-narrator in the *Neapolitan Novels*. Elena's fascination and subject, her friend Lila, is caught at times by a sensation described as 'dissolving boundaries'. As in Louis's fear of flux and Proust's vertiginous view of time, there is a very real terror associated with seeing or feeling or knowing too much about the world, of how it swims and shifts. Though sometimes, for Lila, that world breaks through. After an earthquake, the two girls take shelter in a car. They wait for their neighbourhood to settle back again, to still. But Lila is wounded by what she has learned:

> [T]he terror remains, it's always in the crack between one normal thing and the other. It's there waiting, I've always suspected it, and since yesterday evening I've known for certain: nothing lasts … there is always a solvent that acts slowly, with a gentle heat, and undoes everything, even when there's no earthquake.[44]

Terror lurks between moments, between moments of being—where the perceived world slides fast—and that makes a knowledge of endings nothing but a knowledge of the system of nettedness Darwin drew. It's a matter of setting boundaries to further dissolve them: of focusing closer and closer to forever enlarge the scope of vision.

In the car Lila panics, lets down her guard, and describes to Elena for the first time what fires her terror:

> She said that the outlines of things and people were delicate, that they broke like cotton thread. She whispered that for her it had always been that way, an object lost its edges and poured into another, into a solution of heterogeneous materials, a merging and mixing. She exclaimed that she had always had to struggle to believe that life had

[43] V. Woolf. (1931/1968). *The Waves*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books.79-80.
[44] E. Ferrante. (2015). *The Story of the Lost Child*. Ann Goldstein (Trans.). Melbourne: Text Publishing. (Original work published 2014). 178.

> firm boundaries, for she had known since she was a child that it was not like that—*it was absolutely not like that*—and so she couldn't trust in their resistance to being banged and bumped … She muttered that she mustn't ever be distracted: if she became distracted real things, which, with their violent, painful contortions, terrified her, would gain the upper hand over the unreal ones, which, with their physical and moral solidity, pacified her; she would be plunged into a sticky, jumbled reality and would never again be able to give sensations clear outlines.[45]

Lila's interpretation of 'real' and 'unreal' is the same as Proust's narrator's in *Time Regained*. He knows that the work he is about to embark on will always be constricted because everything always is, unless the depths of something like the past can be evoked (by fiddling with perception, by triggering something which feels larger than a word on a page):

> The mind has landscapes at which it is only given us to gaze for a time. Through a branch [a painter] perceives it, it lies before him, he seizes his brushes, but already darkness has come and he can paint no longer, night upon which day will never dawn again … the body is the great menace of the mind.[46]

But the Proustian narrator is—at times—excited by the dizzying possibilities of this boundary-less, slippery space. When he considers the past from within his own episodes of dissolved boundaries—like when he glimpses those giants of time—he gains a quick look at eternity.[47] From this glimpse the narrator is able to conceive his work: it must be one which tricks the senses, which apes 'the form of Time':

> I had a presentiment … during a period which had so much influence upon me, a form which, normally, is invisible, the form of Time. I should endeavour to render that Time-dimension by transcribing life in a way very different from that conveyed by our lying senses. Certainly, our senses lead us into other errors, many episodes in this narrative had proved to me that they falsify the real aspect of life.[48]

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[45] Ibid. 175-176.
[46] Proust. *Time Regained.* 418.
[47] Ibid. 419.
[48] Ibid. 429.

The waving lines of heat, the massive eyeballing crows, and the kitchen in my memory describe something like the past. They will seem like lines, birds, and a kitchen you know, and they will be made of parts of things you have seen and then scavenged. They are real by being made unreal, because that is how memory and vision have to function. It's this real-made-unreal which Proust and Ferrante use to evoke the past, the way it lingers, and how it keeps changing the present. The way that the past lingers in memory is, I think, similar to the way vision and memory are inextricably linked, wrapped in each other in madcap loops in the brain. For Grandma during that summer, and for the last years I knew her, her body became that menace to her mind. She could still reach back into her skull, but into memories curtailed by synapses, and she found it harder and harder to reach her eyes through windows and into gardens: each time the picture changed. She would sit, sometimes, on the other side of the window, with the dog at the side of the pool. She could hear the birds—one which, she said, sung 'Liverpool'—but she could not see them, and her boundaries dissolved.

In an essay called 'The Sun and the Fish', Woolf evokes the blurring of vision with memory (which she considers a kind of recalled sight). She touches on how some things might last longer than others, in both sight and memory, and on how what we remember is influenced by everything which impacts it, always. Despite all that, she also underscores memory's potential:

> When one says Queen Victoria, one draws up the most heterogeneous collection of objects, which it will take a week at least to sort … A sight will only survive in the queer pool in which we deposit our memories if it has the good luck to ally itself with some other emotion by which it is preserved. Sights marry, incongruously, morganatically … and so keep each other alive.[49]

The explosion of what 'Queen Victoria' means is a clue to how a writer might pulse life into the past on the page: how essence might become shapable, or, at least, evocable. But, for now, I'd like to dwell a little on the interlinking of memory and vision: they *are* strangely twinned, each a boiled-down version of something seen or experienced. And, in memory—like on the page when extra details are filled into a

[49] V. Woolf. (1928/1967). 'The Sun and the Fish'. *Collected Essays: Volume Four*. London: The Hogarth Press. 178.

scene—it is even possible to change what is seen: I can add to the world behind your eyes by telling you what else is there, by appending detail, by increasing focus. For example, the kitchen table we sat at in my memory was made of glass; her shirt was stained; and I eventually grew frustrated at having to shout, as well as grumpy at the noise of the television. This alters how the world is, permanently, and though the process is unconscious in memory, it is the same. Think: if you look more closely the picture always does change: think of a microscope or a telescope, and the power those lenses have, think how boundaries dissolve each time you reconsider a scene or a moment—how endings and beginnings seem futile when this duality is invoked, or when something is allowed to be enlarged for a moment (like, perhaps, a used, pink betting slip). This alteration is the process of how the present is experienced and recollected, how it is always shaped. Ross Gibson expresses it like this:

> Every utterance colludes with the world and with every other utterance that has gone before it as the world keeps on breathing and rousing. Every breathed act of speech is thus a forceful event in a mighty system of urges … Every object might be a subject, defined better by its capacity for dynamics, not by its status.[50]

If each object is subject then, even in memory, the world shifts and is not our own. And that is heady, terrifying. But we are, at the same time, comfortable with this kind of filling in: we know it is the nature of things even if we forget that it is. We are comfortable with the fact that the world is made simpler for us, and that that simplicity helps to deal with complexity—perhaps because we are used to how stories work, how history functions: as fantasy, or, at least, something fantasised; as the only story which has no end.

When those with Charles Bonnet Syndrome watch the world outside their eyes they do not have the luxury of choice; they cannot add easily to the store from which their world is drawn, and so they lose an authority over the illusions which describe the world they interact with. Their 'perceptual' filling in is different: it is what is real because it is what they see, but enacted by tricked visual neurons. This malevolence is

[50] R. Gibson. (2012). *26 Views of the Starburst World*. Crawley, Western Australia: UWA Publishing. 93.

irreversible.[51] It is a trickery which is hard to comprehend. But once, and only once, I saw a girl standing in my bedroom. She stared at me from grey darkness and smiled and I reached for her and blinked and she was gone. She was bigger than she should have been and too close to be so far away, and when I saw her and then didn't see her I was caught still in that darkness by a kind of terror. And I think, sometimes, that what Grandma felt was that creeping fear: she had to live in a world where what is, isn't—where what was, wasn't. What she saw were the usual composites, yes, and they were built from all her hoarded memories. But those memories were congealed, and without reference to the world set before her—they were scenes to haunt the brain. What she saw was not real: old men, monks, little girls, dancing ladies. The giant miniature she made each time she looked was corrupted.

And yet, in the eyes of those of us without tricked retinas or fuddled visual cortices, the process is the same. So where does that leave us? The neuroscientist Vilyanur Ramachandran says that,

> The evidence … suggests that what we call perception is really the end result of a dynamic interplay between sensory and high-level stored information about visual images from the past. Each time any one of us encounters an object … these massive feed forward and feedback projections are in the business of conducting successive iterations that enable us to home in on the closest approximation of truth.[52]

I wonder if we really are comfortable with this? Ramachandran suggests that we all hallucinate all the time; that we, too, see from composites, make patterns, infer. That we fill the world in as we turn our heads and move our eyes. How else is it possible to keep ourselves in place? I think it *is* reassuring to know that the past can be focused when an object is encountered—even if it slips, even if it fits seamlessly within the dizzying jumble of everything else; that an approximation of truth can be sensed despite all that, and even though the terror of dissolved boundaries lurks, is something more than nothing.

How to capture the past, then? How to sense it? How to be sure that what was, was? How to be confident in the filling-in processes we use when, by necessity, those

[51] V.S. Ramachandran and Sandra Blakeslee. (1998). *Phantoms in the Brain: Probing the Mysteries of the Human Mind*. New York: William Morrow. 103.
[52] Ibid. 112.

processes are always corrupted? We need to be able to trust our own minds, if our bodies continue to prove so menacing. The task of memory—to keep as much of the past as necessary, so as to navigate what is to come—is at odds with the way the world changes, even if its processes are geared around the very motor of that change. In *Middlemarch*, George Eliot recognises this contradiction. Her solution is to focus in, to look closely, to see—in as much detail as possible—what holds her characters in place: 'All the light I can command must be concentrated on this particular web, and not dispersed over that tempting range of relevancies called the universe.'[53] Her method matches the mechanisms of memory and vision, even as it burrows into the very corners and crannies of what can be observed and recorded, to try to drag something solid back from the past, from the world. That is part of how the past is snared. The action of memory is, in essence, a failure to find: a botched keeping. And, with that in mind, if not in body, is *this* work, and all the varied attempts it contains at remembering my grandmother and the web in which she is still entangled and always will be. (Michelet was wrong about that: her threads have not broken, and it takes a great effort to see them laid bare.) The last days I knew her, in the bottom of that valley in a town called Hebden Bridge, became a sequence of experiments in how we might be linked together, both in the past and in consciousness, an investigation into how it might be possible to perceive our stories as interacting. It's all to do with endings that are also beginnings, and with the swelling of insignificant details; with the ways memories shift like swirls of dust and shape the present always.

So, in this memory of her house in Hebden Bridge, I am remembering her at a different home across the world in Perth. In the kitchen in my memory within a memory she tells me about Bradford. Staring at the memories, stirring them, her eyes squint slightly and her lips tense. Lines run through her face towards her nose and chin. A trickle of long-held thought edges past her lips in procession, memories unearthing memories. She pushes her food around her plate at the table in the middle of the kitchen, the scratching sound of metal on ceramic one I'll always keep for her. She lifts the fork to her mouth and it is empty. The television blares and our voices compete with it, with the crows and the heat that sings and rings. She watches carefully through the window, where dancing reflections make shapes and shadows—women in groups or men 'strung up'—and she remembers a church that is closed, a priest who is dead,

[53] G. Eliot. (1871-2/2003). *Middlemarch*. London: Penguin Books. 141.

and a girl whose mother's arm was severed in a car accident. She'd be old or dead now, that girl. Her memories drift in swirls of my own. She talks about Scarborough—where she went on honeymoon—and Filey and Bridlington, that whole east coast which, for a long time, was as far as she got from home. And then, again, my grandmother is distracted: there is someone in the garden.

In 'The Sun and the Fish' Woolf works her memories too, polishes them in a similar way. But she curtails them as well, by necessity, and still somehow lets the past breathe around their edges. Her essay describes a 1927 solar eclipse which coated Hebden Bridge and the Calder Valley in shadow. This was the same eclipse I remember my father telling me his father could, once, remember: he told Dad how he was taken, as a young boy, to look through lenses of smoked glass made for him by my great-grandfather. It is that eclipse—a mighty, incidental confluence—which allows Woolf to recall the spectacle of the past in detail, even if that detail is co-opted:

> Show me the eclipse, we say to the eye; let us see that strange spectacle again. And we see at once—but the mind's eye is only by courtesy an eye; it is a nerve which hears and smells, which transmits heat and cold, which is attached to the brain and rouses the mind to discriminate and speculate—it is only for brevity's sake that we say we can 'see' at once a railway station at night.[54]

Woolf describes an entire country waking early to watch the sky; facing north, heading out on dark roads, each person acting out an ancient role—part of a great multitude training their vision on the heavens. The eclipse-moment is, for her, a memory. But it is one with extraordinary power because, I think, of the precision of it: the very crosshatching of the sun and the moon, and all the weight of human attention focused on that strange meeting, are both an exercise in stopping the present—killing it—and (by writing it down) of making a precise moment last—of helping it persist. Woolf pins the movement of the present—the 24 seconds of eclipse—in prose, creating a kind of object which is a stillness in her whirling skull. The event is a morganatic association writ onto the page to create another one: a layering of layers. She embarks on a long description of the sun skidding behind clouds after being overtaken by the shadow of the moon, striving—as she sees it—to break free of the

[54] Woolf. 'The Sun and the Fish'. 178.

clouds and the great calamity about to face him (the sun, for Woolf, is 'he'). He went behind and then re-emerged, 'flying and thrusting through the murk', flashing like the images in a zoetrope until 'he was completely blotted out. The moments passed. Watches were held in hand after hand. The sacred twenty-four seconds were begun.' It's then that a kind of fear creeps into Woolf's prose, into her voice: boundaries dissolve. What if this moment was the end? What if all is lost at the blotting of the sun? She senses at the eclipse-moment the very turning of the planet she is on, and her essayed version of that feeling is enough for the reader to sense something similar.

Clouds obscure the rushing 'tearing and racing' sun; they muffle him. 'And,' she says, 'as the fatal seconds passed, and we realized that the sun was being defeated, had now, indeed, lost the race, all the colour began to go from the moor.'[55] But, of course, colour returns, and

> The world became more and more solid; it became populous; it became a place where an infinite number of farmhouses, of villages, of railway lines have lodgement; until the whole fabric of civilisation was modelled and moulded. But still the memory endured that the earth we stand on is made of colour; colour can be blown out; and then we stand on a dead leaf; and we who tread the earth securely now have seen it dead.[56]

By eclipse-watching, Woolf gathers both light and dark, life and death, beginning and end: they are part of the same sliding scale. In this way, boundaries dissolve. Only writers with Woolf's power of expression find it this possible to ensnare a world, to command the swirling light of the sun and the passing shadow of the moon. For the rest of us, we might try to draw what happened, and a memory leads to a memory leads to something else. I remember remembering, sat in a room at the bottom of a green and rolled valley crammed with rows of houses crinkled up in long black ribbons, the valley veined with iron tracks for trains; I remember the still, brown, pike-filled canals which cut up countryside. I remember watching Grandma asleep in her chair by the window, the thin veins on her fingers held dangerously at her temples. And there, in that memory, I am remembering her sat and doing something similar, in a room across

[55] Ibid. 180-181
[56] Ibid. 181

the world, where crows bang and clatter in the garden outside and the sun streaks the birds in a bright, remorseless light. Both memories are constructions. But this type of construction, like the building we do when we see and when we remember, is important. The web we weave of the past—just as much as the past itself—is vital for how the world might shift next. In *Changescapes* Gibson describes this process, the way we plot our pasts to make sense of the scatter-gun graph of life and consciousness:

> The self lives in a kind of shimmer where a somewhat-formed figure jigs in the ground of the messy world. We can understand this drama of consciousness … as an event performed in a field of received experience out of which a line of enacted sovereignty is drawn by each conscious subject. The line is drawn by the conscious figure; the field is delimited in the larger ground of worldly experience and memory.[57]

The method then, to replicate the past, is to produce something like a line of enacted sovereignty—Eliot's 'particular web'—set within a field delimited by everything else: the stars and the moon, hedgerows, valleys, forks, memories of monks. But how to plot that path? How to capture a web without breaking it? Simply, how can I trap my grandmother on the page now she is gone?

The reason the eclipse was so important to Woolf—besides the majesty of it—was because it was an opportunity to catch the world spinning, even in the shadow of its death. In 'The Sun and the Fish' the very journey of the sun is pinned to the page, described: a precise moment intersecting with a million others. The movement of the cosmos is emphasised even as it is framed, and each aspect of it is given weight because of the way its image forms in the mind's eye: as a multitude condensed: a giant miniature. This is the puzzle of describing the past; this is the game; this is the duty and the trap. In *The Art of Time in Memoir* Sven Birkerts describes this condensing as an aim (the actual method—a step-by-step guide for rescuing the past—is, of course, elided: each will have their own). He says,

> There is in fact no faster way to smother the core meaning of a life, its elusive threads and connections, than with the heavy blanket of narrated event … Things fit, but not so much side by side as associatively, in unforeseen orderings. I began to see that

[57] R. Gibson. (2015a). *Changescapes: Complexity, Mutability, Aesthetics*. Crawley, Western Australia: UWA Publishing. 111.

> events and circumstances were not as contained as I had once thought, but were, rather, part of a complicated weave, their influence appearing and disappearing over long stretches. And with this came a changed understanding about time, that it was not, psychologically, a linear continuum—the whole business was much closer to four-dimensional chess, but even that is a simplification, for life contains four-dimensional chess and a good deal else.[58]

The game is one of pattern seeking, of pulling something stochastic from the whole of the past, and setting it alongside something else which works. These becoming moments—eclipse moments, perhaps—when strung alongside others in 'unforeseen orderings', chime and chink, making an essence of the way the world was. It is, of course, a fantasy. And it is not easy. In a pamphlet written about an expedition to track a different solar eclipse, this time in 1922 high on the coast of Western Australia, a physicist—Alexander Ross—captures the difficulties Birkerts addresses, that of putting something like the way the world is sensed on a page. Ross is trying to evoke the nature of the universe as it is described by Einstein's theory of general relativity, but he can only do so by describing a lack—something missing from the way things are sensed. Ross acknowledges the difficulty of scratching something so vital, so motile, onto a page. Senses fail, even if a thing can only be considered in three dimensions, let alone two:

> Events are the real things in nature, and we can think of them as occurring in a four-dimensional world. To conceive their existence as merely in ordinary three-dimensional space is to rob the event of an essential quality of its being, and to substitute for the whole reality part of its attributes. The specification would be as incomplete as a blind man's analysis of a rose, or as a totally deaf man's description of a thunderstorm.[59]

But it is possible to capture something of life, isn't it? In the marrying of sights to each other, in Woolf's morganatic associations, or Birkerts' unforeseen orderings. It's possible, even if it is difficult; even if it seems out of the question when I am left only

[58] S. Birkerts. (2007). *The Art of Time in Memoir: Then, Again*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Graywolf Press. 3-6.
[59] A.D. Ross. (1923). *A Popular Introduction to Einstein's Theory of Relativity with an Account of the Tests Made by the Wallal Solar Eclipse Expedition*. Perth: E.S. Wigg & Son Ltd. 15.

trying to remember watching my grandmother sleep, and knowing that she no longer sleeps (or perhaps always does). But that's what memories are for, and why the mind's eye is so much more than an organ of sight. An articulation of the past—if it lives the right way, if it describes the core life-meaning Birkerts speaks of—can help to settle a person within the messy shimmer, their world of dissolving boundaries. It can help to address Lively's fears of age and time, that sliding present which is even more impossible to capture than the past:

> The mind needs its tether in time, it must know where it is—in the perpetual slide of the present, with the ballast of what has been and the hazard of what is to come. Without that, you are adrift in the wretched state of Alzheimer's, or you are an amnesiac.[60]

My work, then, will be an exercise in exploring time's tethers: in seeing just how a web of somewhens might be drawn. Because prose—in the right hands—can snaffle the past. It can, in words like these, be a more solid tether in time than shifting, ruthless memory. The sun that Woolf traps is proof of that, as is the fish she moves onto in the second part of her essay. She sets the grandeur of an eclipse alongside shining tanks at London Zoo, and sees the golden image of two lizards—caught by memory, etched in prose—as a kind of deathlessness: 'All human passion seems furtive and feverish beside this still rapture. Time seems to have stopped and we are in the presence of immortality. The tumult of the world has fallen from us like crumbling cloud.'[61] This is the contradiction of change coupled with the need for something—anything—to grip the present, as good prose can. In this way—according to Roland Barthes—prose describes a seamless world. This seamlessness evokes dissolved boundaries, and paints the world as it is: slippery and in flux.

It was in the prose of Jules Michelet that Barthes observed this quality, perhaps emphasised by the historian's toying with the morganatic duality of endless impermanence. Thinking on Michelet, Barthes suggests a necessity: that there must be an impression of the past even in the knowledge that it is merely an impression. This, he says, is 'the real stake of historical labour': not to 'rediscover a Pointillist order of

[60] Lively. 123.
[61] Woolf. 'The Sun and the Fish'. 182.

details' but to find 'the vast unctuosity of the past'—that is, the way it feels.[62] Barthes thought Michelet was able to show this vast unctuosity through his method, through an understanding of the chemistry of a sentence, and of the alchemy of sentences wrought together.

In the hands of a writer like Woolf a seamless world can be enough to sense something gone, fleeting. The tanks where the fish live—the brief, small, tank-worlds at London Zoo—show a kind of perfection which is not the whole world, but one all the same:

> Each of these worlds too, which measure perhaps four feet by five, is as perfect in its order as in its method. For forests, they have half a dozen bamboo canes; for mountains, sandhills; in the curves and crinkles of a sea-shell lie for them all adventure, all romance. The rise of a bubble, negligible elsewhere, is here an event of the highest importance. The silver bead bores its way up a spiral staircase through the water to burst against the sheet of glass, which seems laid flat across the top. Nothing exists needlessly. The fish themselves seem to have been shaped deliberately and slipped into the world only to be themselves. They neither work nor weep. In their shape is their reason.[63]

What I want more than anything is to look closely at how Woolf—and writers like her—manage this sort of alchemy, in the hope that I can figure something of it myself. This might help me to sense something of my grandmother, who I love and miss, and perhaps even some of the history in which we are entangled.

Chaos is the only truth, but it can be mastered briefly: with eclipse moments; with object-subjects plucked from Eliot's tempting range of relevancies; with shifts of focus; and in prose. And, well, I hope—even if the only reason why I feel the need to recover Grandma from the past is to rescue something of myself in the process—that that might please her. It is a way, at least, to see something of her occasionally.

That day in the valley I was wrested from summer and memory by a knock at the door. Grandma did not wake up when the door opened; the nurse was close to her and talking loudly when she stirred. 'What time is it?' she asked. Bells rang in the valley outside, as if to answer: there was a church across the road from the home she ended

[62] Barthes. *Michelet*. 81.
[63] Woolf. 'The Sun and the Fish'. 182.

up in, and every quarter-hour its bells would chime mechanically. It was quarter to six—past teatime. I spoke to the nurse a little—so did Grandma—and then I microwaved our meals and we sat for a while in the strange, stretched twilight of the Calder Valley summer. Birds sang in the garden, and she watched through the window for strangers and shadows flung from her past.

2

Strange attractors

Like ashes the low cliffs crumble and the banks drop down into dust.
W.G. Sebald (trans. Michael Hulse). *The Rings of Saturn*. 160.

When the nurse left we talked a little more. Grandma asked about my friends, and, as I could not remember the names of hers, I asked about our family. Then she talked about Matilda Bay, and wondered if I still went to Whitfords to do my shopping, and she looked at the picture on her windowsill she couldn't see, of the dog and my mother, poolside at the bottom of the world. It was silent for a while then, until she mentioned the records she had given Dad the year before. He found them in a plastic bag in a small, full-to-bursting upstairs-room at the house where she used to live, before we moved her back to Hebden Bridge. She had let him take them. Her old house was at the other end of the valley—past Halifax, towards Huddersfield—in a part of the village of West Vale called Green Royd. And every so often she told me that she missed it, and that she wanted to go back.

Then she fell asleep. I closed the curtains—which were still ill-fitting on new windows—even though when she woke to go to bed I knew she would draw them tighter, to shim the gaps as best she could.

The room we were in was laid out as closely as possible to the one she remembered at Green Royd. But the ornaments and picture frames wouldn't tessellate the way they had: at Mytholm Meadows some were wrapped in paper and kept in plastic crates in the same cupboard as the Christmas tree and her rows of shoes. (That cupboard must serve the same purpose in each of the flats, for all the residents.) When she had moved,

at the start of my time in England, my uncle and aunt and I had had three days to get everything from one end of the valley to the other. We tried to settle her quickly, but whenever she stirred a little, she looked around and seemed not to know where she was. She would mutter about a cat she could see and sometimes smell, or children in the television who needed her help.

Dad had found the records when he was in England, visiting, the year before. He and Mum were there for a wedding—Aunty Pat and her childhood sweetheart somehow managed to meet again, after decades. When my parents got back to Perth and shared stories from their trip, Dad pulled out the drabs and dribs of all he'd managed to rescue from that crammed-in room upstairs at Grandma's; he placed each thing in tottering piles on the rug in the lounge. Once the piles were built he showed me the pictures he had taken on his phone of the photographs still at Green Royd, and of the room itself, stocked up with bin bags and boxes. He'd done a little sorting, made some kind of order, and had tried to keep all the photographs he found together. Some, he said, were now in boxes and bags, wrapped in elastic bands, and they were mostly all the same kind of sepia. It grew dark outside as he showed me his pictures, of pictures my grandfather had taken. In some of them you can see my father's knees, on which the old, tiny photographs were rested—most of them 1/16 plates, just a few centimetres square. There were hundreds. And he did bring some back, just a few, doubles of ones left wrapped at Grandma's. The ones he chose showed mostly Bradford, where he was born, and where my grandparents were born too. The pictures made a scattered sequence capturing a parade through cobbled, terraced streets, and I obsessed over them; made piles of them. I ranged and rearranged them, ordering as I thought fit, trying to plot a route I was distant from in time *and* space, through a town I didn't really know, and which had changed a lot since the pictures were taken. The small pile was less than a couple of centimetres thick. Through their roughness, their oddness, the photographs affected me; the people in them, none of whom I could identify—except perhaps a man who might be my grandfather, stood underneath a sign advertising a performance of *The Sleeping Beauty*—were all decked out in Sunday best; the pictures were strange, half-moving snapshots of children draped in white, veiled over like a tramping group of ghosts; of adults walking, heads bowed. I knew roughly where to place the parade: in Bradford, of course, around the church where my grandparents were married. But that was all.


THE SLEEPING BEAUTY


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Dad also brought back teeth and button boxes, cigar cases filled with trinkets, postcards, miscellaneous papers, a couple of books, and that small pile of records Grandma remembered. When he showed them to me it was close to midnight. The room we were in swirled with dust, and I realised it was the records I wanted, untethered as they were (and even though I had nothing on which to play them). They were brittle, made of shellac, and seemed to stare; they were heavier than I thought they would be.

I can remember the plumes of dust which swirled and seemed to settle, how they cast up around us as we sifted through the accumulated detritus; how each mote of dust see-sawed downwards to rest. But, as Woolf says, that rest is illusion: 'There is nothing staid, nothing settled in this universe. All is rippling, all is dancing; all is quickness and triumph.'[64] The triumph, perhaps, is in the dancing. The quickness of the ripple makes it difficult to detect: the light must catch the rocking motes just so.

While Mum and Dad told me about the wedding, I pulled the records from an orange Sainsbury's bag and rubbed my fingers over the grooves on each of them. The dust tickled at my nostrils and changed the colour of my fingertips. It climbed and spun and shone when it crossed the lines of light in the room, looking precisely like what Annie Dillard calls 'debris in the air'.[65]

Dust is mostly spider's legs, Dillard says, because they—the spiders—lack muscles. This means their legs are light enough to be pushed and pulled by whorling currents it is impossible to notice otherwise. It's hard to think how many spiders you'd need to make the piles of dust which clouded from those heaped-up things that night. But—of course—dust is not just spiders' legs: it's much of what is punctiform, or, what has become punctiform—soil particles, carpet fibres, skin. It's what decays (everything), and what breaks down and breaks up (everything, again). Occasionally, gusts of it feel like an attempted, failed seriatim: the end result of entropy caught in bands of light—the light Shattuck calls 'the source of our truth and error—and equally our poetry.'[66]

W.G. Sebald calls dust itself 'a redeemed substance'. That remark was in conversation—he was being interviewed in the *Harvard Review*—though I can't seem to track down the exchange anymore, other than through the screen shots I took the

[64] Woolf. *The Waves*. 38.
[65] A. Dillard. (2016). 'For the Time Being'. *The Abundance*. Edinburgh: Canongate Books. 211.
[66] Shattuck. 252.

first time I found it. Dust is redeemed because, like ash, Sebald says, it is 'the borderline between being and nothingness'.[67] Perhaps because of the way dust can swirl and dance, the way it casts itself into glorious, lamp-lit shapes?

Because of its particular quality, dust's inbetweenness, Sebald was able to use it in his writing to evoke a tenuous borderline between something and nothing. Discounting whatever nothing might turn out to be, he uses dust to reflect on how nothing can linger. In the interview quoted above, in which he describes that swirling, settling space between is and is-not, he describes a fascination with wasp nests, thinking of one he wrote about in his prose work, *Vertigo*:

> Do you know what a wasp's nest is like? It's made of something much much thinner than airmail paper: grey and as thin as possible. This gets wrapped around and around like pastry, like a millefeuille, and can get as big as two feet across. It weighs nothing. For me the wasp's nest is a kind of ideal vision: an object that is extremely complicated and intricate, made out of something that hardly exists.[68]

I guess the miracle of that nest, the wonder which it excites in Sebald, is that something still exists, despite all the universe being piled against it, despite the ruthlessness of earthly and unearthly forces and the brutal crush of time. An ideal vision, for Sebald, is something complex and fragile, something almost nothing. Like dust.

That night, when Mum, Dad, and I rummaged through the things Dad's whim and impulse had brought back—or, not quite brought back: best say brought somewhere else—I saw the shapes the piles made as a strange kind of intricacy, a baffling, patternless, *something*. They were removed—like myself—from the places they knew best, and they were a challenge. Yes, they were the very edge of nothing, but they were still, in fact, a bewildering something in its last throes of being. This Sebaldian duality is described by Carolyn Steedman, in *Dust*, as a quality of the matter which roused and settled in my nostrils, across the planet from the home of the spiders which became it: 'Dust is the opposite thing to Waste,' she says, 'or at least, the opposite principle to Waste. It is about circularity, the impossibility of things disappearing, or going away,

[67] Qtd. in S. Katafou. (1998) 'An Interview with W.G. Sebald'. *Harvard Review*. 15. 31-35. 32.
[68] Ibid. 32.

or being gone. Nothing *can be* destroyed.'[69] And yet, the very laws of the universe seem to make sure everything is, eventually. Though her even Steedman's italics get interesting: can nothing be destroyed, or is nothing the one thing which holds out against destruction?

Either way, the apparent impossibility of things disappearing completely is belied by the hopelessness of holding onto them; onto anything. As Lia Purpura says, 'It's nearly impossible to conjure up now for more than a second, or reconvene the circumstances leading to this particular displacement.'[70] Those things which littered the lounge room floor—precise in their particular displacement, like dust settled, each skerrick having found its windblown way to some kind of rest on fingers, on carpet, on couches, before leaping into dance again—caught the light and glinted. And all that, all that swirling in a room across the world and time from where I was, came listing as I sat with Grandma at Mytholm when we talked, and when she asked about the records. Perhaps because I didn't really know what to say to her: *Piano Medley No. R8* by Charlie Kunz—one of the records—sits in pieces.

I took it with me to a conference—we were encouraged to bring something that inspired us to be creative—and when I pulled it from the swaddling I'd drowned it in for the journey to Canberra, there were three neat lines dissecting the shellac. At first the disc held on, wobbled like a tooth ready to loose, but then it split and split again. Though I had managed to play it, once or twice, and so I told Grandma about that.

It was a cold Sunday morning, the kind of slick, sunshining winter day Perth can summon. My breath billowed, and the carpark seemed empty. I caught a whiff of coffee and sizzling onion, and then I found the stalls (which were mostly undercover, at the bottom of a multistorey carpark). People milled around, rummaging through old clothes, toys, DVDs, books, baby clothes, counterfeit handbags, tools. It was dark under the roof, but where the stalls spilled out into daylight the sun dazzled. Swapmarts are called car boot sales in England; I translated for Grandma.

I found a watch and put it back. I found a bag—all tattered, battered leather—and put it back. There was a man selling coins, laid in long rows, which glittered in plastic packets, and a woman selling lumps of Lego in zip-lock bags, priced for collectors.

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[69] Steedman. *Dust*. 164. (Italics in original).
[70] L. Purpura. (2016). 'All the Fierce Tethers'. *New England Review*. 37. No. 3. doi: 10.1353/ner.2016.0061. 12.

Some sellers kept their wares inside glass cabinets, while others had simply opened the boot of their car and stepped to one side. There were plants for sale, and board games, jigsaw puzzles, exercise equipment, electronics, kitchenware—everything, all piled up.

Against the wall of the shopping centre, at the back of the car park, I saw an old man selling bulkier items, like small tables, chairs, and golf bags. He had a record player, sat on its speakers, and he showed me that it worked. It was brown and scratched, made of a kind of wood-veneer, and it had a clear plastic case which closed over where the records spun. I asked the man if it could play 78s; he showed me which switch to flick and how to set a record spinning. I asked how much it cost; he thought for a moment—$20—and I carried it back to my car along with the speakers, wires falling everywhere, sunlight in my eyes. Then I strapped it into the front seat and took it home.

Now, of course, the player is in pieces too: wires have slipped, and its speakers have blown. This is the reality of entropy, which Ludwig Boltzmann—an Austrian physicist—described in the second law of thermodynamics. Entropy is simple and, by definition, destructive: the second law of thermodynamics states that disorder always increases, that systems only ever break down—even if the reason they do so is simply a matter of probability. But this force—entropy—is so pervasive that time itself, or at least the way time is sensed, is framed by it; our very memories are shaped by disorder and decay. Stephen Hawking calls this the psychological arrow of time, and it is the reason why the past is remembered, not the future: time is merely a measure of destruction, and this is the physical explanation for why 'we don't see broken cups gathering themselves together off the floor and jumping back on the table.'[71] But, as Purpura suggests, this can be useful, in a way: it produces a range of questions asking variations on the same theme: what was there before? What can be detected? Because what made up the past must have been beautiful and complex, if its remains are anything to go by: 'The most intricate systems are identified first by way of their ruin.'[72]

[71] S. Hawking. (1988/1995). *A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes*. London: Bantam Books. 160.
[72] Purpura. 'All the Fierce Tethers'. 16.

Those carpark lives, undercover or sun-spattered, show that intricacy is inherent to how we live, even if entropy holds sway, and no matter what bulwarks we try to erect against it. The patterns hinted at across each stall imply that the eddies we are, are brief. But there is beauty in knowing that brevity. Henry James says,

> I prefer in every case the ruined, however ruined, to the reconstructed, however splendid. What is left is more precious than what is added: the one is history, the other is fiction; … One is positive, so far as it goes; the other fills up the void with things more dead than the void itself, inasmuch as they have never had life.[73]

The past is a strange sort of ruin. It's necessary, for sense and sanity, but it is also only ever reconstructed: we shim gaps where we need to, elide, and rebuild. But the pure fact of it is that what we have left is void. Writing the past down is, of course, an attempt to shape that void, to manipulate space and time, and, as Gibson says, to 'hedge against entropy'.[74] But I think another particularity of the past is this: that what is void is not quite that. There *was* something once, and even if that something is beyond reach it might still be possible to evoke what is now empty space, to see if the gaps left between its disparate parts matter, or resonate: the nothing which is left of the past eddies and whirls into shapes we can detect. And while those shapes pale in comparison to what's been lost, there is so much in memories that always recalibrate, in dust which always settles. To sense the past is to feel the weight of time accreted and accreting, like dust—even if it is only reconstruction. It is possible to write it like this by dint of the very method of prose-making. Sebald, in *The Rings of Saturn*, talks of writing as a way to inlay gaps, even as a method of coping with the weight of memory—a method of setting shapes on the void, in constellations:

> The fact is that writing is the only way in which I am able to cope with the memories which overwhelm me so frequently and so unexpectedly. If they remained locked away, they would become heavier and heavier as time went on, so that in the end I would succumb under their mounting weight. Memories lie slumbering within us for months and years, quietly proliferating, until they are woken by some trifle and in

[73] Qtd. in M. Makarius. (2004). *Ruins*. David Radzinowicz (Trans.). Paris: Éditions Flammarion. (Original work published in 2004). 172.
[74] Gibson. *26 Views of the Starburst World*. 80.

> some strange way blind us to life. How often this has caused me to feel that my memories, and the labours expended in writing them down, are all part of the same humiliating and, at bottom, contemptible business! And yet, what would we be without memory? We would not be capable of ordering even the simplest thoughts, the most sensitive heart would lose the ability to show affection, our existence would be a mere never-ending chain of meaningless moments, and there would not be the faintest trace of a past.[75]

I'm not so much of a pessimist as Sebald seems, at least in his writing, to be. There are too many small miracles for that (and, truly, I have been lucky to avoid the tragedy that is his history and subject). But it is true that, without memory—brutal as it is—we would be lost, disordered. It's also true that what order memory allows is strengthened, tightened, by writing down what reoccurs—even if it is distorted.

In Sebald's work, memories are dustings off of the past—piling up and always sloughing away. Those memories find ways to thicken through his prose: they are made physical by his dwelling on dust, remnants, and ruins, so that there is a weight to his past, even as he writes to rid himself of that weight. It is a kind of contradiction, but it is a contradiction which apes the way the past is sensed—as a reconstructed ruin. Sebald captures the weight of what was by piling on and up almost-nothing memories into something intricate, into an ideal vision which manages to hint at what the rest of the void once contained. Ruth Franklin, in an essay called 'Rings of Smoke', describes the effect of his writing: 'Each sentence, bizarre or mundane, contributes another piece to the overall structure until that structure seems unable to sustain any more weight … the tug-of-war between what is and cannot be never stops.'[76] That is, until the book is finished and the work is made complete, when the structure is finally tightened, seeming-stable—until, of course, the last page is turned and the book itself disappears into memory. Then the cycle turns again.

Sebald's work is a demonstration of how the particular can shift from mass to mess to mass to mess, of how it can be shaped and moulded. This is a false shaping, of course: a redundancy, perhaps. But Sebald is a master of this kind of falsehood: his

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[75] W.G. Sebald (1998/2002). *The Rings of Saturn*. Michael Hulse (Trans.). London: Vintage. (Original work published in 1995). 255.
[76] R. Franklin. (2007). 'Rings of Smoke'. Lynne Sharon Schwartz (Ed.), *The Emergence of Memory: Conversations with W.G. Sebald*. New York: Seven Stories Press. 121-122.

prose works—*The Rings of Saturn*, *The Emigrants*, *Vertigo*, *Austerlitz*—are reconstructed ruins, evidence of circularity and of how patterns can be detected in the shapes the past produces. In this way, he is a descriptor of entropy and the patterns which result, which are described by physicists as chaos.

In an essay called 'For the Time Being', Dillard writes about another particular substance: sand. She describes the long journey it never ceases to take—a circularity, a kind of always-reconstruction:

> Sand plunges. Sandstone plates subduct. They tilt as if stricken and die under crusts. At abyssal depths the earth's weight presses out their water; heat and weight burst their molecules, and sandstone changes into quartzite. It keeps the form of quartzite—that milky gray mineral—to very great depths, where at last the quartzite melts and mixes into magma. In the fullness of time, magma rises along faults; it surfaces, and makes the continents that streams will one day grate back to sand.[77]

The records Mum and Dad brought back are on a similar journey. And when they were piled up there, on a rug in a lounge room across the world from where I was remembering—recalling to my grandmother—they seemed to re-begin the process of becoming particular, granular, specific, even as they still held onto a kind of false-shaping, a constellation of what was. This constellation, too, is a result of the thermodynamic arrow of time: this leaving of something is called, literally, a redundancy, and it is—according to the science-historian James Gleick—a useful thing: 'a predictable departure from the random'.[78] Gleick uses language, or the example of language, to describe what he means:

> Ordinary language contains greater than fifty percent redundancy in the form of sounds or letters that are not strictly necessary in conveying a message … Part of the redundancy in ordinary language lies in its meaning, and that part is hard to quantify, depending as it does on people's shared knowledge of their language and the world. This is the part that allows people to solve crossword puzzles or fill in the missing word at the end of a.[79]

[77] Dillard. 'For the Time Being'. 214.
[78] J. Gleick. (1987/1989). *Chaos: Making a New Science*. Bungay, Suffolk: Cardinal. 256.
[79] Ibid. 256.

Redundancy is patterns, constellations of what was before. It is an evocation of something Proust says, that 'the flying shuttle of the years weaves threads between memories'.[80] This natural process always produces new information which describes the past. The patterns we are—our bodies, the maps our memories weave—are the result of this kind of chaos, which suggests another contradiction: that we are, somehow, the result of things-breaking-down: of simplifications. Simply, what is left at the breaking down of a system are clues to that system, both a remnant of what was, and a new thing entirely. One engine driving this intrusion of order was envisioned by Robert Shaw, who called his ordering principles 'strange attractors'. Gleick suggests they partake in the creation of chaos, and, in doing so, produce something new which also comes from before:

> Strange attractors, conflating order and disorder, gave a challenging twist to the question of measuring a system's entropy. Strange attractors served as efficient mixers. They created unpredictability. They raised entropy. And as Shaw saw it, they created information where none existed.[81]

Strange attractors are a way of articulating the chaos which results from entropy; they help a system to be sensed from the information which is left over—Shaw's experiments analysed the dripping of water from taps, tried to explain the way flags flap in the breeze. Conclusions are hard, but the glimpses strange attractors give of complexity and structure and constant change are important. And they seem to work in a similar way to how Gibson describes the mechanics of a haiku: he sees haiku as a way through which complexity can be grasped, in a burst of comprehension which quickly disappears. This burst and disappearance mimics reality because 'Every present moment is always cohering while it is immediately disappearing'.[82] It is in that brief ecstasy of sensation that haikus have their hook. Gibson argues that the poems work best as the snapshot of a moment, and, for him, moments are events of enormous complexity. He says that, '[Haikus give] sudden and intense access to extra realities

[80] Proust. *Time Regained*. 185.
[81] Gleick. 258.
[82] Gibson. *Changescapes*. 107.

… [in them] messy experience can be rendered as an essence.'[83] Sebald was a master of this essence: he combined sequences of it into rings of smoke. But he also wrote short poems which feel a little like haiku, and which work in the way Gibson describes:

The smell

of my writing paper
puts me in mind
of the woodshavings
in my grandfather's
coffin[84]

When I read this poem it feels like an encounter with the fragile shape of just one of Sebald's rings of smoke. I smell the writing paper, see a pen poised, and sense coffin-wood under my fingertips. There is dust, of course, and the crispness of those curled shavings—perhaps even a body. But then it all disappears. This burst of perception is a way for Sebald to force connections and sensations into the consciousness of the reader, to make them feel both solidity and ephemerality, expanding in the mind a thing-described. This is the chemistry of the sentence, and hints at a method for blocking them together, into shapes. In another strange and hard-to-quantify oscillation, this process reminds me of the way Gibson calls into question the distinctness of things and words: when words meet the page they become things, objects to contemplate. He says that, 'To write is to manage words as things (and things as words)'.[85] Things do, I think, have similar explosive qualities. Of course, there is a finality to words on the page: each one is a tiny ending, a decision. But each word produces different combinations of results for every reader, and with each successive reading—like the way those records become space for new encounters each time they are handled.

Strange attractors, even if I do not entirely understand how they work or what, exactly, they do, present an alluring kind of metaphor. They feel analogous to the kind

[83] R. Gibson. (2015b). *Memoryscopes: Remnants, Forensics, Aesthetics*. Crawley, Western Australia: UWA Publishing. 49.
[84] W.G. Sebald. (2001). *For Years Now*. London: Short Books. (Images by Tess Jaray.).
[85] Gibson. *Changescapes*. 35.

of divination which makes up the interpretation of the past, in which there is no doubt pattern seeking plays a role. In Gibson's words, 'investigation is mostly a question of how you edit the glimmers … then make a pattern from whatever's remaining'.[86]

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One day, at lunch at Mytholm, a lady came to sit with Grandma and I. She was small and prim and held her hands cupped together under her chin. She reminded me of a small bird, with big eyes set wide apart. Her nose curled over ever-so-slightly at its tip, and her name was Dorothy (though she also went by Dot, like Grandma). Grandma didn't seem to know her, but Dorothy knew her from the monthly Catholic Mass at the home they shared.

At lunch, Grandma pushed and scraped her fork around her plate, every so often raising it empty to her mouth. When she saw something because of her Charles Bonnet Syndrome her eyes focused exactly, and she looked at a thing precisely where it was not. When she looked at something I could see she stared to the side of it, trying to catch it with the edge of her eyes.

I had cheese and onion pie, made especially. The waitress called me 'Love' until she'd learnt my name, and the crust of the pie was burnt: I couldn't cut through it so I had to break it with my hands.

I spoke to Dorothy. I told her I liked her scarf (brown and pink), and she told me her husband had dementia. She made small movements, and always ended them by bringing her fingers back together. She told me she had been to Canada on holiday to visit her daughter, Janet, who used to live there, and she told me a lot about Australia too: she knew about Australia because she loved *The Thorn Birds*, by Colleen McCullough—both the book and the television series. We discussed bush fires, the Great Barrier Reef, and how big Australia is.

When lunch was finished, Grandma and I went to sit in the entrance foyer, just for something different. There was a radio playing classical music, and Grandma fell asleep quickly; it was difficult for me not to do the same. I thought of getting my book, but ended up watching the world outside the window. On the radio a soprano voice sung a classical version of 'Danny Bhoy', and Brian—a man with no legs—wheezed

[86] R. Gibson. (2008). *The Summer Exercises*. Crawley, Western Australia and Sydney, New South Wales: University of Western Australia Press and Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales. 42.

himself past us in his wheelchair. Eventually he reached the button which opens the door into the sealed section of the building; on his way through, the door closed on the back of his chair, and kept trying to close until he'd made it inside. By then, Ravel's *Boléro* was squeezing from the tinny, tiny speakers.

It was the day of Olwyn's funeral (held at the church across the road). Posters and invites had been stuck around Mytholm Meadows, on noticeboards and in the lifts. The wake would be held in the lounge, next to the dining area. Grandma and I watched men and boys in ill-fitting suits head through the foyer to the dining room, followed by the ladies who had pointed them on their way. I could hear them all, eating and talking on the other side of the wall, and I could see why Grandma liked it in the foyer: there was company, and a little more light and space. People came there to sit and talk or watch.

They all loved to say how old they were. They compared ages like you might compare the books you've read: a little proud and a little boastful. But there was something else too. In *Ammonites and Leaping Fish*, Penelope Lively says, 'Maybe it is precisely because we find ourselves on this unstoppable conveyor belt that we are so much concerned with recollection, with reviewing all those memory shards in the head, brushing up time past, checking it out.'[87] I think spending time with Grandma made me more aware of that conveyor belt, of the way that time, somehow, speeds up when there is nothing to do but listen to clocks tick: hours may feel like months, but months pass by in minutes. Also, perhaps, of the way something, anything—even age—might be a thing on which to grip. In this way, each conversation I had at Mytholm seemed an exercise in resistance.

While Olwyn's family were eating in the main lounge, and while I was sat with Grandma in the foyer, a new couple was being shown around. 'You won't be able to see the room,' I heard. 'It would be a little ….' They've been here before, though, said the man; just visiting then, said his wife. So they knew what the rooms were like.

Connie, an Italian lady who didn't like to come down for lunch (and instead made pasta in her flat) was talking. 'Quite frankly, I wish I were dead,' she said. She was crying and serious. She was talking to a man I didn't know, who had sat down opposite Grandma and me; he walked slowly with a stick, and sat with a laboured expression. They were both mourning, talking about husbands and wives who were gone, and

[87] Lively. 131.

children who were as good as. When I stood up to walk Grandma back to her room I heard another man from the hallway, just settling into conversation. It was Peter, who shook when he walked and always wore a thick green jumper. He was talking about the Brontë sisters, and their brother: 'Charlotte, she were 39 when she died, and Emily, you know Emily, she was 30. Anne was 29, six months between 'em there was. And Branwell, he were a drunk and an addict, even though he worked the trains at Luddenden!'

A few days later, Grandma and I went to mass. It seemed a bit of a set-piece, really. Everyone knew their roles, and acted them precisely: the service could not start until everyone who should have been there was, so a search party was sent out for one or two residents. 102 year-old Teresa was found and brought; and so was Rita. All the cardigans were pastel-coloured. Dorothy was there, and together they all made up the eight Catholics at Mytholm Meadows. The priest, it was strange to realise, was the friendly man who had been my very first parish priest, in the early 1990s. His name was Father Gott, and he was still going at the Good Shepherd, even if (from what I gathered) the Good Shepherd itself had moved to smaller premises. That day it was his 77th birthday.

We were in the lounge room, which was also the dining room where the wake had been, positioned in a semi-circle around the priest in chairs of different shapes and sizes. Father Gott's stole was dirty, his nose had gotten bigger, he had a large belly, and he wore shining, gold-rimmed spectacles and black, Velcro shoes. But as soon as he spoke his voice brought back memories of his odd-shaped church. The residents gave him a card after the service, and they asked Grandma to sign it too. But, she whispered loudly, she couldn't see to write.

After Mass, over a cup of precisely-held coffee, Dorothy told me that we did, kind-of, know each other. She told me that she had a photograph of my brother. Her grandson, Chris, had been friends with him in primary school. She showed me the album it came from then, and I realised that I was in it too, eating cake from a plastic plate rested on my knees, in the corner of a picture taken at a 40th birthday party nearly twenty years before. She had told her daughter about the conversation we had had, and Janet had realised who I must be—had known, perhaps, that Grandma was at Mytholm, could have seen her in the halls, or in the foyer. There, in any case, were the photographs.

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If an experiment into chaos were to be conducted without such things as redundancy, or without the condensing of the world into strange attractions, the observations would never stop. What Gleick describes as 'the heat bath of the microscales, billions of molecules in their random thermodynamic dance'[88] would be indecipherable. But, because of the way larger systems can be spied through their ruins, 'information is transmitted back from small scales to the large … And the channel transmitting the information upward is the strange attractor, magnifying the initial randomness just as the Butterfly Effect magnifies small uncertainties into large-scale weather patterns.'[89] Words might be strange attractors, and so might objects: I could sense that even broken records might be used, like the photographs, to funnel information about the world that was. But exactly how—the precise parameters of the experiment, perhaps—was more difficult to conceive.

In *Orlando*, Woolf describes memory as a capricious seamstress (perhaps one who would struggle to achieve seamlessness in her work). But, like the crystals which result from all the weight and pressure in the heat of the earth, memory's work is clumps and fragments pushed together. Those fragments keep agitating, moving, dancing, swirling in a kind of Brownian motion:

> Memory runs her needle in and out, up and down, hither and thither. We know not what comes next, or what follows after. Thus, the most ordinary movement in the world, such as sitting down at a table and pulling the inkstand towards one, may agitate a thousand odd, disconnected fragments, now bright, now dim, hanging and bobbing and dipping and flaunting, like the underlinen of a family of fourteen on a line in a gale of wind.[90]

Woolf, like Sebald, finds a way to smooth, in her prose, all that's angular, sharp-edged, and cold; she takes the grim weight of the past and moulds it. Prose like this is an act of redundancy, and writing a way to combat entropy; it is a method from which a model can be built that calls the bluff of the universe through one of its processes.

[88] Gleick. 260-261.
[89] Ibid. 261.
[90] V. Woolf. *Orlando*. (1928/1967). Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books. 55.

Sebald and Woolf are both conscious of the weight of the past, and write to incorporate that weight: they write entropy through one of its processes.

In the last interview he gave before he died, Sebald spoke to Arthur Lubow. Writing about that encounter, and about the man he knew, Lubow describes how Sebald equated weight and dust and past, and showed a reason—a simple one—for Sebald's fascination with all three:

> Whenever he visited Munich, Sebald would spend half a day at the War Archive, calling up volumes that no one had touched in decades. He recalled the first time that the files that he had ordered arrived on a trolley. 'You have a visual sense of how much something weighs,' he said. 'You try to pick this up, and you can barely lift it. It's as if the specific weight of the paper they used is higher than the paper we use. Or it's as if the dust has gotten in there and insinuated itself, so they have become like a rock. If you have any imagination, you can't help but wonder about it. These are questions a historian is not permitted to ask, because they are of a metaphysical nature. And if one thing interests me, it is metaphysics.' He paused for a second. 'I am not seeking an answer,' he said. 'I just want to say, "This is very odd, indeed."'[91]

Sebald is happy merely to point out the oddness, the metaphysicality of the past (as well as, of course, its physicality). This is a way around an answer—a means to an end. But by being open to this sort of speculation, Sebald is able to parse a little meaning, as Ruth Franklin acknowledges. With his wondering, Sebald identified a process of reading (and transcribing) the past which folds extra complexities into an entropic system: the rings of smoke that build his prose become an 'ideal' version of what was; they produce a past on the page which is strung through with complexity and coincidence and pattern, and the effect redoubles and triples through his longer works. This is the contradictory result of entropy: that it is an intricacy produced by desuetude, and that it is the reason for the seeming increases in complexity Darwin noted in his spangling diagrams. When the focus is heightened, and the diagram looked at closely, complexity seems to increase; when the lens is widened, what seems beyond the reach of randomness becomes something like a whorl of dust.

[91] A. Lubow. (2007). 'Crossing Boundaries'. Lynne Sharon Schwartz (Ed.). *The Emergence of Memory: Conversations with W.G. Sebald*. 159-173. New York: Seven Stories Press. 165.

I told Grandma how I laid the record player on the counter top, in my kitchen—the kitchen she knew. I couldn't figure out how to reattach the speakers, but as there was a record left inside the player I turned it on, and watched the needle lift as though on strings and then push down on the vinyl. Scratched sounds whispered in imitation of Engelbert Humperdinck, *please, release me, let me go*.[92] Without speakers all I could hear was the needle vibrating along the tracks pressed into the record, the needle following its prescribed course along thin, etched valleys. I fetched the Sainsbury's bag; the 78s had much narrower tracks than Engelbert's 33, and they were harder to see and feel. The shellac discs were older and heavier.

Eventually I managed to clip the pluses and minuses of the speakers together. I tightened in the ends of the wires with a screwdriver and, when I switched on the power point, Engelbert came through crisp and clear and loud. I shifted the speed up to 78 rpm and he turned faster, high-pitched and distorted. The wheel clattered like the engine of a train.

I dusted the first of Grandma's records—Vera Lynn—and set the needle. You could hear the disc begin to turn and then, again, the needle moved on invisible strings, pulled up by invisible hands, and dropped, spitting static. It scraped around the edge of the disc and then settled on the track with a whooshing sound, like wind, and Vera Lynn's voice came through, muffled but loud. Then, 'Unchained Melody' flew through the kitchen, and I remembered things I could not possibly remember. *Oh, my love, my darling, I've hungered for your touch*.[93]

I watched the disc spin out. It seemed to spin faster as the needle tracked towards its centre.

The next record was the cracked Charlie Kunz piano medley, which was not cracked then, and which ends with a song called 'Chasing Shadows'.[94] I had to force the needle onto the track with a small nudge: it scraped around the edge of the disc until I pushed it. In three minutes it was time to flick the needle again, and I did, to hear once more the old piano tinkle. And all the time it played I heard that whooshing sound, spun at 78 revolutions per minute, and it did sound like a train, like a wheel turning, like the

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[92] Miller, Williams, Yount, Harris. (1967). 'Release Me' [Recorded by Engelbert Humperdinck]. On *Engelbert Humperdinck—Greatest Hits.* [Vinyl LP]. UK: Decca.
[93] A. North. and Hy Zaret. (1955). 'Unchained Melody' [Recorded by Vera Lynn and the Clubmen, with the Roland Shaw Orchestra]. On *Vera Lynn Popular Medley No. 4.* [Shellac LP]. UK: Decca.
[94] C. Kunz. (1935). 'Chasing Shadows' [Recorded by Charlie Kunz]. On *Charlie Kunz Piano Medley No. R. 8.* [Shellac LP]. UK: Rex.

wind. The medley was a kind of lullaby, one you think you've heard before (perhaps because you have). It started slowly, rocking backwards and forwards like a waltz, gaining volume and a little speed as the disc turned through the few abridged songs in sequence. 'Chasing Shadows' was more soft-shoe than anything else, and I imagined slippers on carpet in their terraced, Bradford house (where my grandparents would have lived when the records were new, when Grandma was young). The player did its own work—sprung the needle from the centre back to the edge of the disc, always starting again. Except for the tiny flick needed to push the needle back onto its track.

By the time I had finished telling her about the records, it was time to help Grandma up from her chair, so that she could go to bed. I left her then, and walked back towards my room. I was staying in one of the small visitors' flats at Mytholm Meadows—it was cheap, and meant I was close to Grandma. I had two beds, one of which was piled with papers, receipts, teeth, and the other souvenirs I'd salvaged from the room and the move. The other was the one I had been sleeping in for more than a month. And, as I walked down the corridor to my flat, I saw that it was still light outside. It was after 9 o'clock, but, as I was taking the car back the next day, I decided to go driving.

I turned out of Mytholm Meadows and thought about another night at the pub across the road: the Stubbing Wharf, where Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath had sat and talked about where they might live next—at least, that is how Hughes frames it in *Birthday Letters*. He was born in the Calder Valley, and Plath is buried at the top of it; in 'Stubbing Wharfe' (sic) he writes the foreboding of the place where I was:

> Between the canal and the river
> We sat in the gummy dark bar.
> Winter night rain. The black humped bridge and its cobbles
> Sweating black, under lamps of drizzling yellow.
> And the hillsides going straight up, the high woods,
> Massed with tangled wintry wet, and the moorland
> Almost closing above us. The shut-in
> Sodden dreariness of the whole valley,
> The hopeless old stone trap of it.[95]

It wasn't so grim that night, but still I aimed for the top of the valley. I needed to: it does seem to shut you in; it keeps you well-wrapped and blinkered, always wandering.

[95] T. Hughes. (1998). 'Stubbing Wharfe'. *Birthday Letters*. London: Faber & Faber. 106.

Even though it stretches barely seventeen miles from Todmorden to Brighouse (as the crow flies), the valley edges are elusive.

The terraces in Hebden Bridge were black because of years of grime and the natural way millstone grit—the local stone they're made of—reacts to the air around it. There were chimneys like obelisks, plunging up through the high woods choking the valley walls, woods which creep all the way to the edge of the canal and the road. Once, this valley had been the cradle of Victorian industry; it was, more or less, one continuous factory. Now the valley sides are a thousand shades of green, not just simple rock walls: they are cloughs and ravines and dales which jut, dip, cut; great crags of stone that fist and face upwards and inwards and downwards, claiming some kind of permanence. The valley's dry-stone walls—which split field from field and road from path—are moss-covered, and when the place is quiet, as it was that night, you can hear the rills and shuttles of water running. Of the valley, and its people, Hughes writes that, 'Gradually it dawned on you, that you were living among the survivors, in the remains.'[96]

At the top of the steep-sided town, after creeping up the valley side, I parked at a place called Pecket Well. The sun was turning red and the clouds away to my right were splattered with it. I found a path cut through knee-deep grasses and nettles, and, though I was wearing thongs, I walked on. My toes tickled and the beginning dew was cold. I could see a monument—the path veered down towards it. I called it a Pike in my head, because it was obviously modelled on the great Pike across the Tops—an obelisk itself, a brute, black finger you can see all along the valley, wherever you can see from the valley rim. The monument at Pecket Well lined up with the church at Heptonstall, where Plath is buried, and with that other Pike, across at Stoodley. Those towers, that night, were like planets in syzygy, like sacred stones rising from the earth. Each was as black as the other. As Gleick says, 'Somehow … [the universe] manages to create interesting structures.'[97] And those structures can be understood, a little, by reading redundancies, by understanding strange attraction; by taking a microscope to something seeming simple.

[96] T. Hughes. (1979/1994). 'Notes: Elmet'. *Elmet*. London: Faber & Faber. (First published as *Remains of Elmet*. Photographs by Fay Godwin.). 11.
[97] Gleick. 308.

The path I was on crossed a field. I could see it, trodden in the grass by all the feet which kept it there. Foxgloves were growing, little purple cups arrayed like bells on a stick. There were yellow flowers too, like tiny daffodils, like the ones I'd picked to keep in my diary on the Habberley Road. I climbed a stile or two, walked through a farm yard (there were lights on in the cottage and washing hung on the line—an apron, and school uniforms—bobbing, dipping, flaunting). I kept on. The grass grew tall again and the path dipped; I saw trees (long-established and new-planted) and, for just a moment, the back end of a small deer: it kicked off and away down the sides of the valley and I lost it in the forest, in the failing light. I could hear its honking bark for a while longer, the noise it made echoed like the voices which drifted from houses stuck like limpets on the opposite valley wall.

The sky was half red, half baby-blue. I walked alongside a wire fence; behind the fence were thick bushes which rustled and moved.

The Pecket Well monument was perched on the lip of a steep, woody crag, and while I stood there the valley bottom, crammed with midges and houses, faded. I walked around and around the thing, touching it, reading inscriptions for villagers who died in World War I, and those inscriptions added later, chipped clandestinely into the rock. I saw a rabbit spring off like the deer, and the always-singing birds seemed to welcome the night as a chance to finally settle. The place was still but alive, and the sounds of cars and trains and people drifted upwards, the odd shout curling like smoke from the bottom of the valley. I watched the Pike across the way and drew the line it made with the church and the rock at my back. Then the sun sunk and there was nothing left to do.

I followed the path backwards and drove down the valley wall to Mytholm Meadows. The next day I packed my suitcases—the one I brought with me, and the one I bought from a charity shop a few days before—and took the car back to Halifax.

The day after that I left early. Grandma made me call for her in the morning, and I said goodbye to her at the door of her flat. While I was waiting for the taxi which would take me to Hebden Bridge station, I sat and listened to Peter, who told me about the Brontë sisters: he knew all about them, he said. He knew where they lived—not far from here—and that they had died young, six months apart. According to Peter they all got tuberculosis, and Charlotte had been a teacher. And he knew that

Branwell—their brother—was once a station master at Luddenden. I had heard him tell the story before.

3

The unique assemblage of all things

> The slightest declivity now makes me uneasy and restless, and I slip into the shadow of the mood of that valley—a foreboding heaviness, such as precedes downpour thunderstorms on Sunday afternoons. It's a mood that seems to have saturated the very stones of the walls and houses—those scorched-looking West Yorkshire grits—the pavements and the soil of the gardens and even the dark privet leaves. Most of all the dark privet leaves. A slightly disastrous crumbly grey light, sunless and yet too clear, like a still from the documentary film of an accident.
>
> Ted Hughes. 'The Rock'. 124.

I felt an awkward sort of relief on the train heading south; every time I left her felt a little like that. But I missed her too, straightaway.

The train was old and the fabric on the seats felt like chin bristles. The carriage swayed from side to side and the wheels on the tracks, over the sleepers, made the sound of a record spinning. The woman next to me at the table I'd requested was travelling to Weymouth, for what she termed a 'nostalgic holiday': she was going back to the town her father came from, because he couldn't go himself.

I tried to write, but couldn't really manage it: my fingers were sore, and I was tired. The previous weeks had been for sorting and chasing, and the past churned behind my eyes. But I couldn't sleep either, even with the train rolling side to side. Mist clung to the windows and drops of water trailed backwards. The valley walls, again, were tight and close and every so often the train would rip through a cave of Victorian brickwork. Lights would dim and the carriage would rattle.

We passed through Halifax quickly, and I thought of *Austerlitz*. As soon as I saw the station I thought of the brief mention of that black town in Sebald's book, which stares at the brute remains of an industrial past. I did not think of all the pasts *I* have in Halifax, not then. It is strange how connections come to be made.

In *Austerlitz*, Sebald's narrator—a man very much like the author, and like the narrator who presides across Sebald's work—is sat in the bar of the Great Eastern Hotel, at Liverpool Street Station, in London. He is 'waiting for the next train home'.[98] But the reader would be forgiven for forgetting that quickly, as it is Jacques Austerlitz's story which takes over the book—the story of how a man named after a battle, a child-refugee of the Holocaust, tries to find his own past.

Austerlitz corners the narrator in the bar, happy with the coincidence of their meeting, especially after 'telling himself he must find someone to whom he could relate his own story'.[99] Later that night, after the first stage of Austerlitz's life is set forth, the narrator is left 'until almost three in the morning at a secretaire faintly illuminated by the street lighting … writing down, in the form of notes and disconnected sentences, as much as possible of what Austerlitz had told'.[100] When the narrator wakes up he reads the papers and finds:

> The story of an ordinary man who was overcome by such deep grief after the death of his wife, for whom he had cared devotedly during her long and severe illness, that he decided to end his own life by means of a guillotine which he had built himself in the square concrete area containing the basement steps at the back of his house in Halifax.[101]

I wondered—the mist was curdling around the town as we rolled through it—if the man mentioned in Sebald's book had seen the gibbet in Halifax, the one which sits close to the centre of the town in a courtyard wrapped around by terraced houses, pavers split through with tufts of grass. Or if, perhaps, Sebald himself had seen it. I imagine the answer to both speculations would be yes, because there is nothing quite like coincidence in Sebald's work.

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[98] W.G. Sebald. (2001/2011). *Austerlitz*. Anthea Bell (Trans.). New York: Modern Library. (Original work published in 2001). 39.
[99] Ibid. 43.
[100] Ibid. 97.
[101] Ibid.

Sebald has a habit—that's wrong: I have the habit—of glancing at, or noticing, places I know in his writing. Perhaps it's just a kind of Baader-Meinhof reading of his work, a search for patterns others might miss because they didn't learn the world from the middle of the Calder Valley. In *The Emigrants* he walks the streets of Manchester and, in *The Rings of Saturn*, he has nothing but bad things to say about Burnley ('a town whose black cobbled streets, derelict factories, and zigzag rooftops of back-to-back houses outlined against the sky like dragons' teeth, made a more forlorn impression on him than anything he had so far seen in England'[102]). Those two places circle the valley. But it is in *Austerlitz* that he looks most directly, for that plucked-out sentence or so, at the place Grandma lived for most of my life: the town close to the valley's end, where a man was so committed to ending his own life that he built a guillotine to do it. I remember her there. We would catch the bus from her home at West Vale and wander through Halifax town centre, past Marks & Spencer, through Woolworths and then to the markets where she'd once worked. Sometimes we would visit Grandad. Then we'd catch a bus or two back to West Vale, where we'd hop off in the middle of the village, close to a converted factory once powered by an offshoot of the River Calder: Black Brook. The factory takes up a vast proportion of the village and now sells antiques on each of its floors, even in the depths of its basements. Its bricks are black and its chimney is tall.

We would walk uphill along terraced streets back to where Grandma lived, past the hall where my parents had their wedding reception—or perhaps their engagement party—and she would tell my brother and I about the long walk she used to take to the house my father grew up in, at Dodnaze, at the top of Hebden Bridge (from where you can see Stoodley Pike line up with the church at Heptonstall, and with the monument at Pecket Well). But no matter how often you manage to walk to the top, the valley still closes you in; if you reach its lip, finally, there are still the moors to contend with. They squeeze the valley and crunch it, the last joke of the devil who made the place, and look a little like the way Rottnest does: bent over trees and shin-high scrub across a rolling kind of flatness. From the train that morning, which mostly skirted the valley floor, there were glimpses of them—the Tops—and of the freedom they promise but cannot fulfil. This particular Calderdale claustrophobia is heavy and lasts; Ted Hughes wrote about it in an essay called 'The Rock':

[102] Sebald. *The Rings of Saturn.* 185.

> Escape from the shadow trap was not east or west along the road—with the endless convoy of lorries loaded to the limit with bales of wool and bolts of cloth—but … upwards … you *could* escape it, climb past and above it, with some effort. You could not escape the moors. They did not impose themselves. They simply surrounded and waited … They were simply a part of everything you saw. Whether you looked east, west, north or south, the earth was held down by that fine line of moor, mostly a gentle female watery line, moor behind moor, like a herd of enormous whales crowded all around at anchor. And just as the outlook of a bottle floating upright at sea consists of simple light and dark, the light above, the dark below, the two divided by a clear waterline, so my outlook was ruled by simple light and dark, divided by the undulating line of the moor. If any word could be found engraved around my skull, just above the ears and eyebrows, it would probably be the word 'horizon'.[103]

This is a sentiment that Sylvia Plath echoes in her poem 'Wuthering Heights': 'The horizons ring me like faggots, / Tilted and disparate, and always unstable.'[104] The horizon line is female and watery, perhaps, because of the sisters who lived at the top of the valley. Charlotte herself felt this part of Yorkshire her own, somewhere she was free to roam. But she was haunted by the moors too—and by the ghosts of her sisters, for whom they were also home:

> I am free to walk on the moors; but when I go out there alone, everything reminds me of the times when others were with me, and then the moors seem a wilderness, featureless, solitary, saddening. My sister Emily had a particular love for them, and there is not a knoll of heather, not a branch of fern, not a young bilberry leaf, not a fluttering lark or linnet, but reminds me of her. The distant prospects were Anne's delight, and when I look round, she is in the blue tints, the pale mists, the waves and shadows of the horizon. In the hill-country silence, their poetry comes by lines and stanzas into my mind: once I loved it; now I dare not read it, and am driven often to

[103] T. Hughes. (1974). 'The Rock'. Geoffrey Summerfield (Ed.). *Worlds: Seven Modern Poets*. Harmondsworth, Middlessex: Penguin Education. 124-125.
[104] S. Plath. (1985/2009). 'Wuthering Heights'. *Poems Selected by Ted Hughes*. London: Faber and Faber. 27.

> wish I could taste one draught of oblivion, and forget much that, while mind remains, I shall never forget.[105]

Halifax sits in a shallow of the valley, and it is surrounded by the moors. It is a haunted place, but then most are.

The gibbet in Halifax has a street named after it. The scaffold which I remember, set up on the street, in that courtyard, is a replica built in 1974; the names of the executed who are remembered—many are not—are written on a plaque close by. The last time I went into Halifax by myself, after I had helped my aunt and uncle move Grandma to Mytholm Meadows, I tried to learn a little more about a woman called Anne Lister, a landowner in the region during the Georgian period. I found, at the house in which she once lived, a stone plaque, mossed and black, leant up against a wall in a courtyard. The plaque was difficult to read, and photographed badly. It had been moved, I think, from I-know-not-where, making its words almost entirely redundant:

THE REMAINS
OF THE HALIFAX GIBBET
WITHIN THIS ENCLOSURE
WERE DISCOVERED
IN THE YEAR 1840
UNDER A MOUND OF EARTH
KNOWN AS THE GIBBET HILL
AND WERE ENCLOSED
BY THE TRUSTEES
OF THE TOWN.
THE PUBLIC RECORDS
PRESERVE THE NAMES
OF FIFTY THREE PERSONS
BEHEADED ON THIS SPOT
BETWEEN THE YEARS
1541 AND 1650.

[105] C. Brontë. (2000). *The Letters of Charlotte Bronté with a Selection of Letters by Family and Friends: Volume II 1848-1851*. Margaret Smith (Ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press. 403. (Letter to W.S. Williams, 22 May 1850).

THE FIRST ON THE LIST
IS RICHARD BENTLEY
OF SOWERBY EXECUTED
MARCH 20TH 1541
AND THE LAST WERE
JOHN WILKINSON AND
ANTHONY MITCHELL BOTH
OF THE SAME TOWNSHIP
BEHEADED APRIL 30TH 1650.
THIS FENCE WAS ERECTED
AT THE COST
AND IN THE MAYORALTY
OF THE WORSHIPFUL
SAMVEL WATERHOVSE
A.D. 1852.

It is possible that the actions of Samuel Waterhouse were why I thought of *Austerlitz* that day, on the train.

The move from West Vale to Mytholm Meadows seemed to happen quickly—the decision to go back to help, and then the actual travelling, were made with only a few days' notice. Grandma needed to go, a room was available at Mytholm, and I needed to be in England in a few weeks' time anyway, for a conference. And, as well, there were things I needed to do before she left. So to say I went to help would be true—but it would only be half-true: I was going to help, but I was also going to satisfy some itch to see the place again, to touch and see and smell all the things my parents had told me were there. Of course, I wanted to see her too: it was the first year she hadn't come to Australia.

On the plane to England I read *The Invention of Clouds*, by Richard Hamblyn, and I watched the long, stretched-out twilight spread across the front of the aircraft compressed into a tiny screen pushed into the seat in front of me. It lasted hours, that sunset—we were chasing it—and all the time the clouds on the screen and through the window at the end of the row were forests, mountains, entire continents. Hamblyn says that, 'Every cloud is a small catastrophe, a world of vapour that dies before our

eyes.'[106] But that did not feel true as the plane flew on, seeming still, through those great, heaped up, particular worlds of a trillion raindrops frozen into monstrous shapes. Time is thick and stretched—or thin and fragile, depending on your perspective—on planes and when travelling.

When I got back to Halifax nothing had changed but everything had shifted. This feeling, which is linked to what's home and what's abroad, to the problems we have leaving and the impossibility of return, is built tightly into Sebald's work (and into his theories of space and time). James Wood suggests that Sebald has 'an exquisite sense of the varieties of not-belonging'.[107] In Sebald's writing, the passage through time is one way of sensing where we belong, where we don't, and with whom:

> It was only by following the course time prescribed that we could hasten through the gigantic spaces separating us from each other. And indeed, said Austerlitz after a while, to this day there is something illusionistic and illusory about the relationship of time and space as we experience it in travelling, which is why whenever we come home from elsewhere we never feel quite sure if we have really been abroad.[108]

So as well as being a measure of disorder, time can be a controlling principle; it is both solid *and* shifting, like clouds. Sensing the passage of time—the movement of the universe towards disorder—is also a controlling principle. But when that sensation is messed with, when places stick around in memory, for example, it's difficult to feel settled. Part of the exquisiteness (and part of the agony) of not belonging is the way time straddles the borders of solid and destabilising, like the watery line between moor and sky, or, again, like clouds: in *Mrs Dalloway* there is a scene where a puff of wind covers the sun in a 'thin black veil', a dusty particular screen. Then, on a London street,

> faces faded; the omnibuses suddenly lost their glow. For although the clouds were of mountainous white so that one could fancy hacking hard chips off with a hatchet … there was a perpetual movement among them … Fixed though they seemed at their posts, at rest in perfect unanimity, nothing could be fresher, freer, more sensitive superficially than the snow-white or gold-kindled surface; to change, to go, to

[106] R. Hamblyn. (2001). *The Invention of Clouds: How an Amateur Meteorologist Forged the Language of the Skies*. London: Picador. 91.
[107] J. Wood. (2015). *The Nearest Thing to Life*. London: Jonathan Cape. 106.
[108] Sebald. *Austerlitz*. 12.

> dismantle the solemn assemblage was immediately possible; and in spite of the grave fixity, the accumulated robustness and solidity, now they struck light to the earth, now darkness.[109]

It was strange to think of the clouds I was flying through being so much less solid than they seemed.

As the second plane, from Doha to Manchester, began to descend I woke to the sound of its wheels opening beneath my feet. A man was whistling 'Rule Britannia'. And then the world came fast: like a dream ended I fell into England, all dim skies, red bricks, and voices: 'Tickets please,' asked a man in a hat. 'Sweets or crisps?' said a woman pushing a trolley through a train, as green lumps of hills and tiny towns fled past—contoured towns, folded into the countryside. Then the red brick turned to gritstone, and the side-to-side electric rock of the carriage was the same as it always was; a pitch-dark tunnel built a century ago stretched and we swayed through it.

Uncle Kevin picked me up from the station in Huddersfield and took me over the Tops to Grandma's house which would, soon, no longer be in the family. Things were not quite as I remembered: the rooms were smaller; I could reach, almost, from wall to wall; and I could see the tops of wardrobes I used to climb on to look for Christmas presents. But there were two porcelain rabbits near the television, and a bell made from ruby-red crystal, and the plain, pretty landscapes in their frames were still on the walls. Though when I picked up one of the rabbits a trickle of sand dribbled from a crack between its ears. Objects, too, can be both stabilising and nauseating, less solid than they seem.

I remember looking out from my bedroom window: the lace curtains covered it, but, below them, the long dressing table only just made it above my knees. It was leant against a different wall, I thought, and it looked old. Out of the windows were the same houses as before; two dogs eyed me back from across the way, from behind glass, past a facing garden. And in the room next door to mine—the walls were touching—was that brimful space of boxes, bin liners, and suitcases my parents had barely managed to touch. Its door would hardly open.

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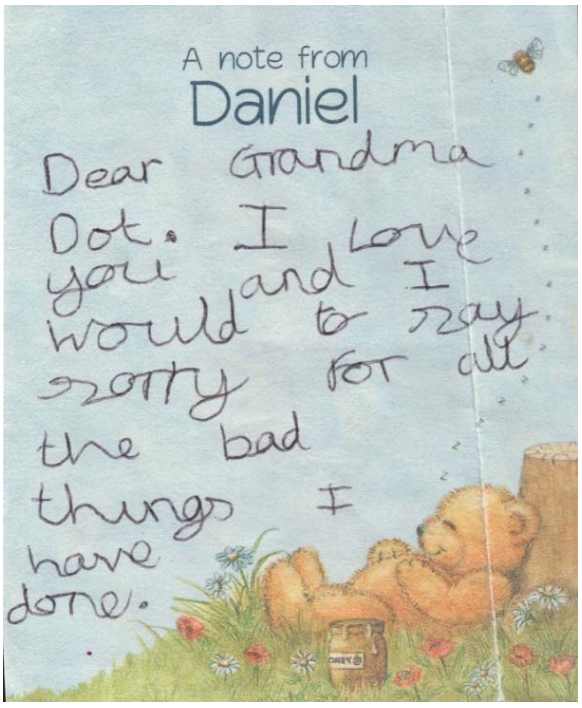
[109] V. Woolf. (1925/1974). *Mrs Dalloway*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books. 153-154.

That first night, after lunch or dinner or tea, I saw everything in its leaning piles for the first time. Like an old film, or a flip-book, things flashed up and disappeared: boxing gloves, glasses cases, letters, ornaments, and all those heaps of teeth.

I woke early the next day. The sun was bright and the curtains were thin, and my body did not know what time it was. I opened the drawer next to my bed, the same one I rested books on when I had slept there years before (after walking back through West Vale, after wandering through Halifax). The lace on top and the lamp were the same, and the books themselves were in the room next door, where Grandma was sleeping—or trying to. The handles of the drawer wobbled as it opened.

It was stuffed with old passports, shells (all curled and white and hard, tinkling together), photographs, postcards, and some leaflets from the church with the little priest Grandma liked, the one who lived down the road from my house a hemisphere away. There was a Qatar Airlines flight pack, unopened, with socks and toothpaste still inside, and a few travel wallets from the travel agent, holding details for the trips Grandma had made to see us. And, underneath this Australian layer, was a miscellany of linen, tea towels, and pillow cases. Underneath that, an envelope, the first of many with 'On Her Majesty's Service' stamped to the front. Inside the envelope was a small, silver boot, and a metal and enamel heart, both kept in Ziploc bags. There was a referral note for my grandfather (who died when I was nine), and another envelope, holding a note from me to Grandma, dated 1996—one year before Grandad died (on the same day as Princess Diana). The stationery was personalised; I used to keep it next to my bed, in the house we had at the other end of the valley, which sat under the shadow of Stoodley Pike. The notepad read, on each page, 'A note from Daniel'. The paper was pale blue, with a bear asleep at the bottom of the pages, leant against a tree stump next to a dribbling jar of honey; a small bumble bee circled the bear and the honey, caught still in the picture, the path of its flight dotted behind it. When I got back to Australia and told Melissa about it, she told me that she'd had the same notepad, but pink, and saying, 'A note from Melissa.' On the paper I had written, 'Dear Grandma Dot. I love you and I would to say sorry for all the bad things I have done.' The drawer, its layers, then the envelope had kept my writing, mistakes and all.



There was no order. Also in that drawer were letters, scarves, t-shirts, and old diaries—the kind that help you remember birthdays and dentist appointments. I kept looking out of the window, expecting the people across the way to nip behind their curtains: it was early in the morning and I was going through someone else's drawers. It's true that, as Steedman says, 'If you are a historian, you nearly always read something that was not intended for your eyes.'[110]

There were pictures of Jesus, pictures of family I had not thought about for a decade, Mum and Dad's wedding notices, and more glasses cases. There were cards, blank or written in, and three postcards—unsent from Australia, but brought back all the same—which showed Grandma getting more and more frustrated with the way her eyes made writing difficult. There was a nappy. And, near the bottom of the drawer, there was a letter written during World War II, from Grandad to Grandma, Neil to Dot. In it he tells her to listen to the song 'If I Had My Way', by Bing Crosby. In the letter Neil is jealous and in love and a little demanding.

There was wrapping paper, bandages, jewellery, and Christmas ornaments. And there was a green box which once held a souvenir from Haworth. I have been to the Brontë's parsonage, in that village. I saw the print of the picture Branwell painted, the one he rubbed himself from so that there is just an off-coloured patch marking the spot where he was. I remember walking through tiny rooms and seeing their shoes and

[110] Steedman. *Dust*. 150.

spectacles, their tiny writing. That was before I knew their books, but I think it is fair to say that that—in the end—did not matter so much: they made the valley in its image, and those books are almost superfluous next to the shadows the sisters continue to cast. Hughes and Plath, and Woolf, record the valley through the lens of the Brontës' story, Hughes and Woolf remembering the tiny things the sisters left behind: 'the midget hand-made books, / The elvish lacework, the dwarfish fairy-work shoes,'[111] and, 'The most touching case [in the Parsonage museum—] so touching that one hardly feels reverent in one's gaze—is that which contains the little personal relics of the dead woman.'[112]

Inside the green box, the ornament or plate or paperweight—whatever it was—was gone and what was there were photographs and leather pouches and more papers. There was a picture of my grandfather staring hard at the camera in a photo booth, his hair stricken grey. Rotten elastic bands curled and stuck to the lid of the box, and did not stretch without breaking. There was a penknife shaped and coloured like a cigarette, still sharp, and the leather pouches held prayer cards which unfolded into the shape of crosses. I laid them on the carpet, which was patterned in familiar orange, brown, black, and cream.

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A tap at my shoulder: another passenger had a seat at our small table—a woman who listened to the songs of *The Sound of Music* all the way to Oxford, and who sung just over her breath to most of them. I looked around. The train was busier and the mist had cleared. I did not know where I was, so I must have been outside the valley (it does not take long, really). The map I have in my head of England is restricted and specific: it's edgeless, certainly, but that does not mean it is anywhere near complete. I do not, for instance, know Haworth well. But I could tell you how to get there from Hebden Bridge. I could not tell you how to get from Haworth to Oxford, except perhaps to show you where to catch the train.

In 1851 Charlotte Brontë travelled southwards by train. She went to the Great Exhibition, in London, and wrote about her visit in a letter to her father dated June 7

[111] Hughes. 'Wuthering Heights'. *Birthday Letters*. 59.
[112] V. Woolf. (1979/1982). 'Haworth, November 1904'. *Books and Portraits*. Mary Lyon (Ed.). London: Triad Paperbacks. 196.

of that year. She portrayed the Crystal Palace, which housed the exhibition, as a wonderful place, '—vast—strange, new and impossible to describe.' She wrote, too, about the things she'd seen in the great glass halls:

> Whatever human industry has created—you find there—from the great compartments filled with Railway Engines and boilers, with Mill-machinery in full work—with splendid carriages of all kinds—with harness of every description—to the glass-covered and velvet spread stands loaded with the most gorgeous work of the goldsmith and silversmith—and the carefully guarded caskets full of real diamonds and pearls worth hundreds of thousands of pounds.

She wrote about the people too, the mass of people flocking to the exhibition every day, describing them as if they were birds, like 30,000 starlings shifting:

> The multitude filling the great aisles seems ruled and subdued by some invisible influence—Amongst the thirty thousand souls that peopled it the day I was there, not one loud noise was to be heard—not one irregular movement seen—the living tide rolls on quietly—with a deep hum like the sea heard from a distance.[113]

That day Charlotte decided something I have come to agree with: that the glory of the exhibition was cumulative; that 'Grandeur does not consist in *one* thing, but in the unique assemblage of *all* things'.[114] After going through the contents of that drawer in Grandma's spare room, I knew a little of what Charlotte meant. But with a small difference: the objects in that drawer were old and used and falling apart, not new and lauded. The objects I found were *kept*; they were preserved for some reason, archived haphazardly. Gaston Bachelard writes that 'Worn objects deny splendour and luxury … Having crossed the countless little thresholds of the disorder of things that are reduced to dust, … souvenir objects set the past in order, associating condensed motionlessness with far distant voices into a world that is no more.'[115] He describes the world, because of this motionless voyaging inspired by things, as more adjective

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[113] C. Brontë. (2000). *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë with a Selection of Letters by Family and Friends: Volume II 1848-1851*. Margaret Smith (Ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press. 630-631.
[114] Ibid. 630.
[115] G. Bachelard. (1964/1994). *The Poetics of Space*. Maria Jolas (Trans.). Boston: Beacon Press. (Original work published 1958).

than noun, swirling and continuing to make itself—without end, perhaps, always adding disorder to order and sometimes vice-versa.

I picked at the plastic around the edge of the table and tried to avoid looking into the eyes of the woman opposite, who had made it to 'Sixteen Going on Seventeen'. There was little conversation in the carriage; sometimes a bag would rustle, or someone would sneeze. When you travel long distances—by train or plane or car—the things other people do are screened by senses in a slightly more deliberate way than usual: it's time to *actively* ignore the world moving in close proximity, rather than the usual passive resistance. On the train I kept myself busy by thinking about the Brontë sisters and their brother, about their books and the place they managed to keep at the top of the valley (and, of course, the trickle-down of them into it, into drawers and into minds). At another lunch at Mytholm—one of the few, like that with Dorothy, which managed to avoid falling into composite—I shared a table with Peter, who seemed a little obsessed with the sisters and their brother. Along with his friend, Monty, we ate over-hardened fish and chips together. The restaurant was nearly full by the time Grandma and I arrived, but there were a couple of seats at their table, and Monty waved us over: I was a novelty. The restaurant was loud: the noise seemed to bounce off the windows and the beige-ish wallpaper.

Peter drunk his tea through a straw, because he could not control the shaking of his hands. He wore his green jumper and had a round face with a round chin. Monty was a light-coffee colour. He came to England from Jamaica in 1954, and he showed Grandma and I a passport photograph of himself from that year, which he kept inside his wallet. He reeled off jokes and stories and morsels of advice, and every so often Peter would jump into the conversation to talk about trains or buses or Benidorm; I think I was as annoyed about the interruptions as Monty was, but there weren't many men at Mytholm, so I guess he didn't have much choice about who he got friendly with.

Monty pulled a small piece of paper from his wallet and folded it out on the table between us. 'He's got heaps of these,' said Peter, and Monty did: jokes and phrases were kept neatly folded in his wallet or pockets, all about his person. He told us that he was once a bus driver in Leeds, even though he came from a rich family back on the island. His Yorkshire accent had a Caribbean lilt which was a little hard to follow,

but I remember one of his jokes, possibly because I didn't understand it: 'What is a bugger?' he asked. 'A man who can't fit both balls in a pint pot.'

Monty told us about his old pay packet—where he collected it, what it looked like—and how he had found, and handed in, a lost purse in the year 1962; how the plane he flew on to England had propellers, and how he was the youngest boy in his family. Peter had been to Calpe (I have) but he liked Benidorm more, and he knew where the trams used to pull up in Hebden Bridge (by the NatWest bank, the building which used to house my grandfather's office on an upper storey). That was close to where Branwell had worked, in Luddenden. And Charlotte—Charlotte Brontë, you know—she had been a teacher; Branwell was a drunk, an addict, and they all died young, Peter said, of tuberculosis.

There are no longer any trams in Hebden Bridge. But, like the way the tracks peak through the pavement in Fremantle, I imagine metal rails a short way under the surface of the streets. It is sometimes comforting to feel settled on a track. But it can be daunting too: how we canter, career forwards, bullocked by the 'ballast'—Lively's word—of the past.[116] What is daunting is how much we leave behind. Our coping mechanisms for this sometimes-always-calamity are our tricked brains, which make sense via redundancy.

In *Middlemarch*, Eliot suggests that,

> If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence. As it is, the quickest of us walk about well wadded with stupidity.[117]

I do not think it quite stupidity. More like sensibility, or so I decided while I watched the lips of the woman opposite, whose knees kept knocking into mine, and with whom I was sharing a power point. I thought about Monty and Peter and Grandma, about Haworth and the small green box with 'Brontë Country' written on it; how the dust swirled above those records which still played, somehow, even if one was now cracked in three. I felt that one way into a keener vision of the past might be through the piles

[116] Lively. 138.
[117] Eliot. 194.

of dust we cast off; through the memories we forget and the moments our senses elide, which hide in the shapes all those things leave behind, and which re-emerge briefly. Steedman suggests that dust helped Jules Michelet speak on behalf of the dead. Or, at least, to feel as if he was speaking on behalf of the dead, which is something like the same thing. It might even, she says, help him to 'interpret the words and the acts they [the dead] themselves had not understood.'[118] This is, perhaps, pushing it. But, for Michelet, when he was alive and vigorous, 'Dust allowed … a perception of time as a kind of seamless duration in which past and future could not be sundered.'[119] When Barthes talked about seamlessness in Michelet's prose, he was talking specifically about this kind of effect, this kind of feeling. He saw it as occurring through what he called narrative and tableau, or, more precisely, through a confluence of both. Narrative and tableau represent a burst of intense focus followed by a rush of redundancy, in a technique which lets the very words of a sentence shift about like windblown spiders' legs. Again, more precisely, these are not the words on the page, but the words on the page perceived. Like prose itself, dust, for Michelet, became a way of representing continuity; a metaphor for time, change, inevitability, and memory. 'In his journal,' Steedman says, 'Michelet recorded amazement at perpetuity itself, at the marvellous continuity of things that brought him the gift of experiencing history.'[120] One of the secrets of the past is in something like this seamless-seeming continuity. Woolf's experiments with stream-of-consciousness, Proust's ability to keep his narrator stood still for pages and pages, and even Sebald's reluctance to engage in paragraphing are, I think, attempts at it. But continuity is useless without the sticking places we use to settle down into stupidity, those tableaus that always end up mattering, and which become moments of being even as the universe continues, seamless, around us. We need stories to return to, motifs to build our selves from, things to think with, and ways to stop what is inevitable—if only for a moment. Perhaps that is why I go back to Peter, who went back to the Brontë sisters and their blotted-out brother every time I spoke to him. Or why I go back to something as abrupt as the slicing, stopping blade of the gibbet. This reoccurrence of symbol is part of how a past is plotted, whether deliberately and on the page, or involuntarily, in the mind's

[118] Steedman. *Dust*. 161.
[119] Ibid.
[120] Ibid.

eye. The past as it happens is edgeless. But our memories finish, like the map in my head of England, and we need ways to rub the two together. Sebald, pessimistic again, suggests that,

> All of us, even when we think we have noted every tiny detail, resort to set pieces which have already been staged often enough by others. We try to reproduce the reality, but the harder we try, the more we find the pictures that make up the stock-in-trade of the spectacle of history forcing themselves upon us … Our concern with history … is a concern with preformed images already imprinted on our brains, images at which we keep staring while the truth lies elsewhere, away from it all, somewhere as yet undiscovered.[121]

This fading of the past is an unfortunate effect of memory, or, of repeated, conscious remembering. This kind of remembering is the province of the intellect, and it is something Proust articulated (and revolted against):

> Since the facts which I should … have recalled would have been prompted only by an exercise of the will, by my intellectual memory, and since the pictures which that kind of memory shews us of the past preserve nothing of the past itself, I should never have had any wish to ponder over this residue … To me it was in reality all dead.[122]

Proust worked hard at letting the past surprise him, on finding the right conditions for it to do so. He wanted the shaping symbols and structures of his recollection to be involuntary, and bursting with a sense of something vast. But I am getting ahead of myself: what comes first is the way time might let the dead back into its flow—which is not quite a flow. Perhaps how it might let something dead linger within its seamless rush?

Like Michelet, Sebald thought that the dead linger, and that they can be spoken to. When talking to Lubow, he said that 'borders between the dead and the living are not hermetically sealed … There is some form of travel or gray zone. If there is a feeling, especially among unhappy people, that there is such a thing as living death, then it is

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[121] Sebald. *Austerlitz*. 71-72.
[122] M. Proust. (1922/1960). *Swann's Way*. Part I. C.K. Scott Moncrieff (Trans.). London: Chatto & Windus. (Original work published in 1913). 57.

possible that the *revers* is also true.'[123] The corollary of this is that time itself—that crippling thing which shapes and is shaped by pending, occurring disintegration—is an illusion:

> Time, said Austerlitz in the observation room in Greenwich, was by far the most artificial of all our inventions, and in being bound to the planet turning on its own axis was no less arbitrary than would be, say, a calculation based on the growth of trees or the duration required for a piece of limestone to disintegrate, quite apart from the fact that the solar day which we take as our guideline does not provide any precise measurement, so that in order to reckon time we have to devise an imaginary, average sun which has an invariable speed of movement and does not incline towards the equator in its orbit.[124]

This imaginary sun is a redundancy too. But it is necessary, in order to capture something of the way the world spins.

> If Newton thought, said Austerlitz, pointing through the window and down to the curve of the water around the Isle of Dogs glistening in the last of the daylight, if Newton really thought that time was a river like the Thames, then where is its source and into what sea does it finally flow? Every river, as we know, must have banks on both sides, so where, seen in those terms, where are the banks of time? What would be this river's qualities, qualities perhaps corresponding to those of water, which is fluid, rather heavy, and translucent? In what way do objects immersed in time differ from those left untouched by it? Why do we show the hours of light and darkness in the same circle? Why does time stand eternally still and motionless in one place, and rush headlong by in another? Could we not claim, said Austerlitz, that time itself has been nonconcurrent over the centuries and the millennia?[125]

For Sebald, then, time is nonconcurrent, and objects can be immersed in the stuff of it.

It is the job of the writer intending to evoke the past to show this immersion, this peculiarity; to give experience its fluidity and seamlessness. To write the lie that is the

[123] Lubow. 160.
[124] Sebald. *Austerlitz*. 100.
[125] Ibid.

truth that is a lie which is the truth: that the universe is seamless, though not in a way which can be fully sensed. But prose can flow like a river, forcing forwards in one direction, and so a good writer can find ways past the rips and tears their senses make in the universe's fabric; a good writer reads smoothness in eddies of dust, and writes the shapes they see. They are able to map the flows of unconsciousness (which also seem seamless, like the universe). For Woolf, one such capable writer (among others) was Emily Brontë. Woolf writes about the kind of prose required to map these flows in an essay called 'Impassioned Prose'—a review of the work of Thomas de Quincy; it's a subject she comes back to again and again, in short stories, and in lectures. She writes about the ways in which some writers manage seamlessness without strain—unencumbered by the kind of 'facts' 'novelists' might linger over. In doing so, I think she describes her own prose in the process (as well as Sebald's):

> Memory supplies but too many instances of discomfort, of anguish, when in the midst of sober prose suddenly the temperature rises, the rhythm changes, we go up with a lurch, come down with a bang, and wake, roused and angry. But memory supplies also a number of passages—in Browne, in Landor, in Carlyle, in Ruskin, in Emily Brontë—where there is no such jerk, no such sense (for this perhaps is at the root of our discomfort) of something unfused, unwrought, incongruous, and casting ridicule upon the rest. The prose writer has subdued his army of facts; he has brought them all under the same laws of perspective. They work upon our minds as poetry works upon them. We are not woken; we reach the next point—and it may well be highly commonplace—without any sense of strain.[126]

As a critic, she spent much of her time dissecting the way a novel—a novel!—might manage to avoid that Barthesian unctuosity which is the essence of the past. This is, of course, not a novel. But then, the work of Sebald and Proust are not quite that either, and they achieve the same unctuous effect. In 'Impassioned Prose', she jumps again onto her pet subject, and unpacks the dilemma further:

> But, unfortunately for those who would wish to see a great many more things said in prose than are now thought proper, we live under the rule of the novelists. If we talk of prose we mean in fact prose fiction. And of all writers the novelist has his hands

[126] Woolf. 'Impassioned Prose'. *Granite and Rainbow*. 33.

> fullest of facts. Smith gets up, shaves, has his breakfast, taps his egg, reads The Times. How can we ask the panting, the perspiring, the industrious scribe with all this on his hands to modulate beautifully off into rhapsodies about Time and Death and what the hunters are doing at the Antipodes? It would upset the whole proportions of his day. It would cast grave doubt upon his veracity.[127]

This casting doubt on veracity is key. It's what Nabokov was pointing out when he called Proust's work a fantasy—when he called any work a fantasy—and is part of the way Woolf thinks the screen of verisimilitude might be toyed with. There's nothing true about event on event on event: what's true, instead, is synthesis and seamlessness, an aping of perception which is itself only a fraudulent kind of seamlessness. Woolf rejects the functionality she sees in the work of 'lesser novelists', who

> trust that, if only the egg is real and the kettle boils, stars and nightingales will somehow be thrown in by the imagination of the reader. And therefore all that side of the mind which is exposed in solitude they ignore. They ignore its thoughts, its rhapsodies, its dreams, with the result that the people of fiction bursting with energy on one side are atrophied on the other; while prose itself, so long in service to this drastic master, has suffered the same deformity, and will be fit, after another hundred years of such discipline, to write nothing but the immortal works of Bradshaw and Baedeker.[128]

For Woolf, the secret to impassioned seamless prose is in an evocation of perception. Woolf's method, and Sebald's (and Emily Brontë's), help 'stars and nightingales' burst across the conception of the reader, who finds whole worlds beyond brute recorded 'facts' because of the seamlessness of modulated rhapsodies on time, death, and 'what the hunters are doing in the Antipodes'. Simply, this is not about the things discovered, but about the 'vast unctuosity' of the world described.

The world seen through a train window is seamless too, at least for a time. It blurs, so that the line between one thing and another is difficult to decipher. From my window seat I followed a black telegraph wire with my eyes as it dipped and raised, dipped and raised, sagging at each of its midpoints. And when the countryside flashed into towns

[127] Ibid.
[128] Ibid. 34.

and villages, even when the darkness of a tunnel swapped itself for daylight, the moment of cleavage was impossible to pick.

Inside the matchbox (inside the green, Brontë box, inside the drawer by the side of my bed at Grandma's) were medallions from Bethlehem and from other places of pilgrimage, alongside some buttons, a receipt for a family holiday taken in 1953, and *un souvenir de notre amitié*, from a woman called Jeanette. The picture of Grandad with streak-grey hair was stuck to the top of a matchbox by old elastic. The matchbox was from Amiens, where he spent some time during World War II. Dad had told me stories about the people Grandad met there, and I had seen pictures of a Christmas lunch from some time in the early 1940s. They were among the photographs my father showed me on the night we went through the pictures of pictures on his phone.

Then, in the green box, I found a small, black, leather case, the type you open by pushing a button on the front (which lifts a latch inside). The button was worn and the case was deckled at its edges, and it fit within the palm of my hand. I pushed down and saw, on the inside cover, the initials D.L. (Grandma's before she was married: Doreen Lord). Below them, printed in black and curling font, was 'Vaughton's Ltd., Goldsmiths, Medallists, Livery Street, Birmingham'. On top of a blue and velvet base impressed with a circular recess were two pieces of paper—one a thin fragile tearing newspaper clipping, the other a letter. As I smoothed the papers onto the swirling carpet I saw the face of the woman waking up in the room next door. It was a younger face, younger than I had ever seen it, but her smile was the same: lips pushed together in compromise. And she was the same too, despite each atomic shift. Atoms, like dust, circulate but are impossible to destroy. It's these which, somehow, breathe life. It's the endless combinations of these miniscule particles which gives the impression of seamlessness, whipped as they are into shapes like us, until a system breaks—just as moments of perception build into a conception of continuity. In *The Years*, Woolf writes 'Atoms danced apart and massed themselves. But how did they compose what people called a life?'[129] By chance, I guess. By chaos, by redundancy. By the passing on of information in the shape of patterns, by strange attractors, by something like the way a snowflake forms—each complex and different but something like the rest. And each atom—mostly gaps and space, remember—is packed in, whirled and flowing, the assemblage giving an appearance of seamlessness, always curling in ecstatic patterns.

[129] V. Woolf. (1937/1968). *The Years*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex. Penguin Books. 295.

In *Moments of Being* Woolf attempts to answer her question from *The Years*: life, she thinks, is composed step by step, particle by particle, seriatim. But even if it was possible to painstakingly reassemble each moment, the brute reality is this: that the 'immense task of piecing together all the torn fragments … would progress by the breadth of an atom.'[130] This is the problem with a prose consisting of 'and then' and nothing else; its slowness and impossibility cannot be overemphasised, and the seamlessness of our lives' shape would be gone because of the painstaking effort each 'and then' requires. Hence the need for redundancy, for narrative and tableau. This does not mean that individual particles are unimportant though: each is brimming with potential. In that passage from *Moments of Being*, Woolf's 'atoms' are feelings which, when looked at closely, 'stretch, like the finest goldbeater's skin, over immense tracts of substance'.[131] Because of this quality, the things which survive the beating entropy dishes out can stand in for the rest, can be made to stretch like gold. In Woolf's prose (in novels like *The Waves*, and *The Years*, and *Between the Acts*, and nonfiction like her essays or autobiographical writing) stretched moments are carried over years in the consciousness of characters and through the minds of her readers. When moments or objects reoccur, like the 'walrus with a brush on its back' in *The Years*,[132] a spark sets off like a memory among the rustle of her 'unfused, unwrought' impassioned, seamless prose, a single mote causing the rest of the work to shimmer. As Brian Dillon says, in *Essayism*, 'In [Woolf's] writing, you have a sense of the world becoming particulate, everything airborne and efflorescent or friable, turning to dust, powder, shingle, sand. This writing seems to release spores.'[133] This is the trembling power of impassioned prose: it's an evocation of the way things can jut through the seamless rush of time—briefly and with the pulse of a haiku—yet still fail to break the surface tension.

The face staring back from a page of the *Bradford Telegraph and Argus* was the one from behind which my grandmother (waking slowly in the room next door) had watched the world for longer than I can think about comfortably. She was six years old when the picture was taken, at a presentation ceremony for a slogan competition run by Uncle Bucky, who organised the Nignog Club on the children's page of the paper. Grandma was—still is—Nignog 14,121. That will not change. And on May 17,

[130] Woolf. *Moments of Being*. 59.
[131] Ibid.
[132] Woolf. *The Years*. 30.
[133] B. Dillon. (2017). *Essayism*. London: Fitzcarraldo Editions. 30.

1930 she was awarded a gold sovereign; one moment plucked from the skein of all the rest, flattened and beaten.

The sovereign was gone. This is not unusual: Rebecca Solnit suggests it is, in fact, the reverse which is true:

> It is the nature of things to be lost and not otherwise … We should be able to find our way back again by the objects we dropped, like Hansel and Gretel in the forest, the objects reeling us back in time, undoing each loss, a road back from lost eyeglasses to lost toys and baby teeth. Instead, most of the objects form the secret constellations of our irrevocable past, returning only in dreams where nothing but the dreamer is lost.[134]

Through the thin walls of her home, I listened to my grandmother press a button on her clock. It spoke the time for her in a loud, alien voice. She had been pushing that button every ten minutes for a while, waiting for a time at which she could respectfully be out of bed. I remember I could hear people in the house next door too: they plugged something into the wall to my left. Their voices were muffled, but they were voices all the same. And then, that morning, I realised I was surrounded by debris—all that I had pulled from the drawer—and I had no idea how I might squeeze it back into the shape of the layers it had once taken. I realised I was tired and hungry too, and that there was no such thing as time, not really, even though the passing of it flickered in the things stacked around me on the carpet and the bed. But in that flicker was something deeper: time itself was a constant, a redundancy designed to help our senses cope. And the way we experience it is not as it should be: we shouldn't experience what's finite. Instead, the universe should feel like something akin to Michelet's seamlessness and Sebald's rings of smoke, to Woolf's atom-sized, swirling complexity—her impassioned prose. Because the seamlessness they manage is a version of what was. That morning, despite entropy, despite the necessity of redundancy, the past was crystallising around that empty black case, and each thing pulled from the wreckage could have worked in the same way. There is, I think, no greater evidence of now than the piles of things in that room, in that small, black case with a space for the sovereign it once held. That is, in the way we experience time as decay, but also in what we know time to be: a

[134] R. Solnit. (2005/2006). *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*. Edinburgh: Canongate Books.185-186.

redundancy. The strange attraction of the empty case twists a sort of mis-sensed logic: despite the past and the future, it still persists.

The seamlessness of prose and the experience of time may be analogous, but only one is constructed. And Sebald gives an eye on the method. In *The Emigrants*, his difficult-to-pin novel-memoir described by Jonathan Coe as being about 'displacement and homesickness',[135] the Sebaldian narrator encounters an artist called Max Ferber. Like the narrator, Ferber is a German emigrant in England; he works in a studio in Manchester, deep in the post-industrial depths of the city, next to its decaying canals—in amongst what Coe calls 'the city's soot-blackened ruins, the haunted mansions of its industrial past.'[136] Ferber draws and paints, but his method is not usual. His process is one of accretion and layering, of creating and shaping dust:

> It had always been of the greatest importance to him, Ferber once remarked casually, that nothing should change at his place of work, that everything should remain as it was … He felt closer to dust, he said, than to light, air or water … And indeed, when I [the narrator] watched Ferber working on one of his portrait studies over a number of weeks, I often thought that his prime concern was to increase the dust. He drew with vigorous abandon, frequently going through half a dozen of his willow-wood charcoal sticks in the shortest of time; and that process of drawing and shading on the thick, leathery paper, as well as the concomitant business of constantly erasing what he had drawn with a woollen rag already heavy with charcoal, really amounted to nothing but a steady production of dust, which never ceased except at night.[137]

Ferber comes across a little Canute-ish in his attempts to let nothing slip away (discounting the fact he is not trying to repel the tide, but to keep it there on the beach). The heaps of dust which make his murky pictures heavy, and add to an accumulation of feeling which builds through *The Emigrants*, are a response to tragedies which lurk in Ferber's past—they are the artist fighting against forgetting, against the puny conceptions allowed by the way we experience time's arrow. Sebald's topic is the holocaust, which Coe describes as the ultimate test of a writer's tact. Being without Sebald's delicacy, I'd like to use dust not just as an emblem of tragedy—something of

[135] J. Coe. (1997). 'Tact'. *London Review of Books*. 20 March. 24.
[136] Ibid.
[137] W.G. Sebald. (1996/2002). *The Emigrants*. Michael Hulse (Trans.). London: Vintage. (Original work published in 1993). 161-162.

which I know little, besides the usual accretion of life's small disasters—but as an emblem for history itself: of the past, and of how it lingers as something more than nothing, of how it is fragile and complex and very near impossible to parse. But also of how we continue to persist in our attempts to try, because of the way patterns always form. At least, I've continued in *my* attempts to try. Though it's difficult, now, to realise who my grandmother was even through the most detailed observations I have of her, including through the recordings that I made.

For Sebald—who wrote that 'In a grain of sand in the hem of Emma Bovary's winter gown … Flaubert saw the whole of the Sahara. For him, every speck of dust weighed as heavy as the Atlas Mountains'[138]—the mass of the past is oppressive. We live surrounded by great piles of it; it never goes away, but simply changes form, settles, and swirls again. Ferber himself calls time nothing more than 'a disquiet of the soul', and suggests, like Austerlitz, that there is no such thing as past or future.[139] But still, what the past is thought as, considered as, matters because its weight is felt. In an interview with Volker Hage, Sebald opens up a little on this kind of approach (and on how he thinks the past might best be written about). He describes the patterns of history as drifting and chaotic, the action of writing it as something like deciphering the whirls and swirls the past inhabits:

> We now know that history does not function as the historians of the nineteenth century told us, that is, not according to a logic dictated by great individuals, not according to any kind of logic at all. History has more to do with completely different phenomena, with something like drifting, with natural historical patterns, with chaotic things that for a certain time coincide and then later go their separate ways. And I believe that it would be important for literature as well as for historiography, to work out these complicated chaotic patterns. This is not possible in systematic ways.[140]

The way Sebald writes—an impossible-to-pick-apart, unclassifiable concentration of history, fiction, memoir, and more—helps him to draw the past as it feels. This is his version of impassioned prose, of seamlessness. By accumulating and accreting, hoarding anything and nothing particular, he makes the past feel weighty.

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[138] Sebald. *The Rings of Saturn*. 8.
[139] Sebald. *The Emigrants*. 181.
[140] Qtd. in L. Wolff. (2014). *W.G. Sebald's Hybrid Poetics: Literature as Historiography*. Berlin: de Gruyter. 53.

If you read the past like this, as dust, you do what Steedman thinks narrative and history must do because of something inherent in their nature: you novelise. That is, you 'create harmony out of discordant, non-sequential, meaningless events.'[141] Perhaps, I'd argue, this reading of the past is novelisation in the broadest, loosest, most Sebaldian sense—a way of writing I think Woolf would approve of.

Lynn Wolff acknowledges that Sebald's notion of time is seamless: she says that 'Sebald conceptualizes time in such a way that it dissolves linear progression and allows for the simultaneity of past, present, and future.'[142] Dust is how Sebald thinks about this non-separation. In *Austerlitz* he articulates the sense specifically:

> It does not seem to me, Austerlitz added, that we understand the laws governing the return of the past, but I feel more and more as if time did not exist at all, only various spaces interlocking according to the rules of a higher form of stereometry, 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, that only occasionally, in certain lights and atmospheric conditions, do we appear in their field of vision.[143]

It is strangely comforting to know that we—along with everything seen and thought—might be hallucinations too, visions of the dead. That grandmothers might, in fact, really never forget. Because grandsons certainly do.

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When we were both out of bed and downstairs, drinking tea and eating breakfast, I read Grandma the letter Grandad sent her. I asked about the song he mentioned, and she did not remember it; I asked again and that did not help. I felt less secure in my own skin, but that did not seem to matter. I wished that I could share her things with her. I tried, but she could not see the pictures or read the letters herself: she could only feel what she would once have known. So I gave her little things to hold, and we talked about the past.

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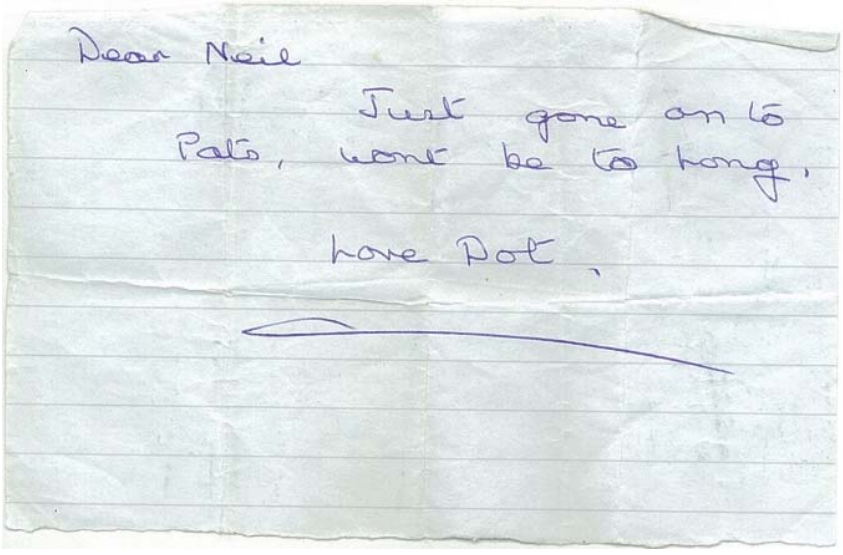
[141] Steedman. *Dust*. 167.
[142] Wolff. 64.
[143] Sebald. *Austerlitz*. 185.

I could not tell her precisely *why* I found each thing so mesmerising, only that I did. She was curious as to the reasons, but also, I think, a little nervous. More than once she asked why I wanted to look through all that old stuff, and I could only say that it was, simply, because I *was* interested, because I needed to point out the oddness of it all. But that was not quite true enough: I needed something to hold onto, a story, a motif, some kind of tether, because the referral in the drawer, for Grandad, was a note from a doctor signed in 1989, the year after I was born. It requested a CT scan. I know what that scan was for and I know the ramifications of it, and I cannot bear those amnesiac consequences (which were the reason I did not know him as he was). Writing seems one way to reject those consequences, even if it also becomes a way of losing some of her through the process of firming moments like these.

One of the last things I found that morning was a note once-left on the kitchen top, or pinned to the fridge, or put by the tissue box on the small glass table in Grandma's lounge room. It was written on plain, lined paper—tinted blue—and hand-torn halfway down the page: Dear Neil, Just gone on to Pats, wont be to long. Love Dot.



How long was she gone? Why did she go? And why is the note still here? This moment, snipped from the long sequence of everything, is another once-lost and, now, not-lost. Once a skerrick of the seamless world, it is the evidence of a very particular moment, a kind of eclipse-moment, a lining up of past, object, and present. It was written by the woman who slept in the room next door, who pushed a button on her clock to hear the time, who went downstairs one-at-a-time and holding both bannisters, who listened to me read her a letter she'd read before in the lost, not-lost past, which she failed to remember. By the woman who came for the summer; the girl in the photograph who

received a gold sovereign (lost) for Uncle Bucky's slogan competition. The same woman clanking her fork around a plate thousands of memory-miles distant. The precise oddness of that note is, perhaps, this: that the past is not something which can change, that is why it is the past. But when we find it again we change what we think it was, and that does change it, by tying a skerrick of it down a little tighter than before, and by pushing everything else into a different shape. That's the crippling power of the kind of focus an eclipse presents: it allows a shifting of the way the world feels.

The dust that is the past does not stop shifting shape. Those teetering piles made the room at Grandma's a maze which reeked of time. They were ominous, those things. They felt overwhelming, like the objects I'd seen before on the floor of my parents' lounge room, when the old records first caught my eye and stopped my throat a little. The task at hand is to freeze curling motes for a moment, at the risk of losing everything else.

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On the train, things felt fragile. But solid too, like a wasp's nest. And each then (the lounge room, in my bedroom at Grandma's, reading her that letter, and travelling south on the train away from her) was somewhere close. The dust of it all weighed heavy. It was a kind of foreboding heaviness, like that which Dillard warns of in 'For the Time Being':

> Earth sifts over things as dirt or dust. If you stay still, earth buries you, ready or not. The debris on the tops of your feet or shoes thickens, windblown dirt piles around it, and pretty soon your feet are underground. Then the ground rises over your ankles and up your shins. If the sergeant holds his platoon at attention long enough, he and his ranks will stand upright and buried like a Chinese emperor's army.[144]

'Quick,' says Dillard, 'Why aren't you dusting? On every continent, we sweep floors and wipe tabletops not only to shine the place but to forestall burial.'[145] Yet, as Steedman points out, dusting can mean both the removing of dust, and the sprinkling

[144] Dillard. 'For the Time Being'. 209-210.
[145] Ibid. 210-211.

of it, the layering of it.[146] And by sprinkling a little dust it's possible to shape patterns yourself.

The train heading southwards clattered and rocked, and I kept picking at the plastic surrounding the window. Rain raced backwards on the glass. Fields flashed. I waited for the next station and did my best to remember.

[146] Steedman. *Dust*. 161.

Filling in

> With the troubles of memory are closely linked the heart's intermissions.
>
> Marcel Proust (trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff). *Cities of the Plain*. Part I. 225.

The last time my grandmother and I went out together we drove up the steep sides of Hebden Bridge to reach the roads which cross the moors at the top of Calderdale. I aimed the car at Oxenhope, and saw the mist come fingering its way over the starting valley, which sometimes spreads for miles and sometimes shuts you in. The mist crawled quickly, laid over the place sheet-white, and brought the curves of the road closer, until each next-corner became the only thing worth looking at. Then, out of the mist, a man appeared, waving at the road. There had been a crash and the front of a silver car had torn open and buckled in; the car was up on the bank by the side of the road, half through the dry-stone wall at the edge of a field. 'Terrible,' said Grandma. The mist had kept its secret until the seconds it took to drive past.

By the time we got to Oxenhope—not long, it is just a few miles from Hebden—the hills and moors were spread once more. Clouds were set in rows and shifted between white and grey; thin bands of rain flickered off into distance. We were going to catch the train, the old stream train which still runs between Oxenhope and Keighley, the one used in a filmed version of *The Railway Children* which Grandma remembered. The station was small and old and Grandma thought it quaint.

We were both tempted in the gift shop—she bought a tea towel, I bought a book (*The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*), and we bought a DVD of *The Railway Children* which,

later that night, we would try to watch. But it unsettled Grandma, and she saw strange shapes on the screen.

On the platform we shared a pot of tea in a repurposed carriage, until the engine chuffed up alongside us, and then we climbed on board as the clouds thickened again. The guard had to push a ramp off the stairs, so Grandma could lift herself up the metal gangway from behind the safety of her walker.

The steam sounded like rain, or even a kettle on the boil. It was not as loud as I thought it would be, and not as thick: more like mist or fog. Small, silver puffs followed the engine until it hooked up with the carriages. Then, after a whistle and its answer, we shifted forwards out of the station, picking up speed. Rain fell, slanting across the windows. Grandma fell asleep.

We were sat on velvet seats, blue, green, purple-checked. All the finishings were wooden, neat, and a little worn. The carriage rocked from side to side. The walls next to the track were mossy and low, and on my right shoulder a small river wound through buttercupped fields. I thought of *The Waves*: 'Down in the valley the train draws across the fields lop-eared with smoke.'[147]

The first stop was Haworth. The train pulled up at the less-cobbled, less-pretty end of town. Black engines sat in the sidings, by the sheds, and coal was piled up in stalls. I saw the old iron gates of the station and the rain came harder. 'I wonder where that is', said Grandma, who had woken when the motion of the train ceased.

Whistles blew again, and we rolled out and on; water leaked through the window and onto my arm; and the valley walls were steeper then, they closed us in then opened out and flattened. There were silver dials all over the carriage, an old heating system I think. It didn't work, but I could still turn the knobs. The steam from the engine curdled in the longer tunnels we passed through; it snuck through the windows. And I thought about the urge that makes people want to take this journey, which forces them to keep old stations open and steam trains running, and I watched Grandma sleep.

The siding at Ingrow West was piled with rusted lamp posts, like the ones at Oxenhope but not painted and preserved, just rotting. The train cut through. Then were chimneys, once-factories, green-flashed green-edged trees, lengths of wood, and bits of metal.

[147] Woolf. *The Waves.* 247.

Keighley was the end of the line; it only took 20 minutes to get there (the journey was less than five miles, but we had long left the valley: somewhere on the moors on the drive over, that place had ended). I leant out of the window and let the smoke and steam that lingered in the air fill my nose. I got off the train to go to a bathroom which had black stalls and cold, white tiles. The engine eased off into the distance so that it could come back and attach itself to the new front of the train. The noise and steam was loud and thick and people appeared through white gusts of it. I got back on board.

'Where are we now Kev, er Chris, er …' 'Keighley.' 'What time is it?' The smoke and steam made the air taste like metal. The air tugged at the back of my throat. The steam, released when the train docked, gushed from the engine and the mist of it headed back down the tracks in the direction we had come, and the direction we had now to go. And of course this is all about tracks, about how—if we are lucky—we might grow old enough to tumble like a train gathering steam, breathing restless whistles, down a straight track through a dark valley. 'The Dark River', Hughes calls it. Metal and water are indistinguishable, sometimes, in that valley-world—or perhaps most things are, like the thin watery line of the horizon suggests. Time is a kind of dark river, flowing on, leading forwards, edging off and petering into distance, the way through the valley always 'Keeping … strange depths alive and attached to me'.[148] But that's just one way to imagine it: time is only kind of like a river.

There were children playing in the carriage; there were announcements on the platform, but the glass of the window, the steam, and the noise of the children muffled them. Ink smudged down the page. My pen bobbled on the petals of a poppy, and on the white wisps of a blown away, stuffed-in bit of cottongrass I'd snaffled—that's the flower I associate most with the long climb up to the Pike.

And the slow edge forward began again, but backwards, back towards Oxenhope. Each sleeper creaked; wood warped under the weight of the engine. A whistle sounded. We went slowly at first, with water falling from the chinks in the window. Interested men watched from the platform. The buildings I could see close to the tracks stared through cracks in their windows, winked at the train. And, now the engine was closer to our carriage, I could hear the breaths of it; Grandma was asleep, and I could hear her breaths too.

[148] Hughes. 'The Dark River'. *Elmet*. 13.

The train panted and pulled, gained speed; the steam pushed upwards as we passed through it, but seemed to go backward. And the noise of the engine was a drum roll and the steam felt sharp in my throat, dry in my throat, and the table between us rocked and pulled my pen forward and backward, suggesting letters. Rusted bits of track were piled outside the windows and we were back at Ingrow West; the train exhaled. When stopped it spoke in whispers.

Another whistle, and then off. Going backwards, it was darker and longer through some of the tunnels because the train gained speed at different times. Then, terraced houses in diagonal strips to the right. The river weaving. Newer houses, still in terraced strips even though the mills are broken, collapsed, or gone. Huge-leaved plants low to the ground. Trees and thick nettles and ferns. Thistles. I saw the same things as before, but flipped backwards.

The steam clouded off, shapeshifted. It flew too fast to allow patterns. Piles of mossed-over sleepers, slate grey and all surely useless, sat thick, concrete, and settled.

The guard shouted 'Oakworth!' Doors slammed. Another whistle. Cars were stopped at a level crossing; the windows of a dead factory stared starry-eyed; a man waved from a field; clouds floated by the tunnel we ran through and the fringed trees almost touched the train. Everything was shaped to the rolls and dips and cracks of the land, to the crevices of it, the steep v-shaped sides of the track running through blasted-out, false ravines. Haworth.

'What have ya been writing over?' said Grandma. 'Just so I can remember where we've been,' I replied. She sat, head on hands on table or arms folded, right over left, right in a fist, her veins showing through. Skin mottled like pale marble. There was a parked-up carriage, some black engines. Then back down the line and on, on to the next stop, the last stop, walled in by stone, by river, by valley walls. A whistle. Oxenhope.

Back at the flat we boiled the kettle. 'I'm glad to get back. It'd've been a lovely ride if it'd been decent.' Rain fell the whole time, constant, sometimes drizzling, sometimes harder. 'The rain spoils everything, dunt it?' 'The flamin' weather.' 'I am glad I went, but …', then she felt tired and unwell, and she fell asleep instead of watching *The Railway Children*.

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There's a moment in B.S. Johnson's novel *Albert Angelo* when the narrator yells into the sky, directly at the reader, 'Oh, fuck all this lying!'[149] I can remember little of the book—except perhaps a very wet camping scene, and a small rectangle cut from the middle of a page, so that the reader can see ahead to the denouement.

Johnson puts his exclamation in caps, I'm sure. I won't go that far. But I do need a moment like that, from which to take stock: the story I've pulled you from is true, as far as these things go, but it is also not true: it is an act of narrative and tableau, a miniature world, a novelised model I've used to proffer a version (and interpretation) of the universe. It is an attempt to manipulate time and space by turning words into objects, simply by putting them in order on the page. I'd like to talk to that process for a moment.

The previous steam-train paragraphs had their impetus in a mixture of the banal, the structural, the manipulative, and the desperate, each urge part of the pulse of where my writing comes from. Most literally, perhaps, they were powered by an old story, written about a day in August 1934, which was kept folded-up for over 80 years. The story, which I will come to in due course, was written about a long train journey taken by my great-grandparents. And, simply, I wanted to know what it would be like to ride the kind of train they took, because that story has become a touchstone for me, for how I think about the past. So I suggested to Grandma—on one of those last days with her in England—that we ride the heritage railway not far from where she lived.

I think, as well, I saw something in the way that old story was preserved: it represented a method by which I might keep something of my grandmother, in a way perhaps more vital than other methods of preservation. This kind of book is not cryogenic, for example. Neither is it, I hope, pickled.

On writing and revising, I realised that this filling-in chapter had a genesis, too, in the fourth volume of Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, and, specifically, in a chapter called 'The Heart's Intermissions'. The chapter records the narrator's return to Balbec, a place on the coast of France where he travelled with his grandmother. Except, when 'The Heart's Intermissions' begins, he is back there without her. Her absence produces a kind of primal grief in him, and I, through my writing, have been able to process, and perhaps use, that kind of grief. 'The Heart's Intermissions' did not come into my work deliberately, but surreptitiously. I realised I had written a chapter with

[149] B.S. Johnson. (1964/2004). *Albert Angelo*. London: Constable. 163.

essentially the same function as Proust's, even though I thought I was doing something different. I had thought I was writing a chapter similar to Johnson's short and angry shout, but that's not quite the case: the lying hasn't stopped, even if more of the narrative—more of its conditions, more of its impelling agents—have been filled in. And I do mean 'filled in', like that process which occurs in vision and memory. Here, for example, is another attempt at a little of that: up to now you might have the impression that I am—or, the narrator is—travelling alone. That is true. But he is—I was—not quite alone: I was glued to the phone in my pocket, which both burned hot with a thousand photographs taken, and with attempts to keep in touch with people back home. The impression of loneliness is a narrative device, and it is useful for the kind of mood this book requires. Of course, there were times when I *was* lonely. On the Habberley Road, for example, where I didn't have any phone reception, and where I found myself funnelled forwards and backwards only by the twisting hedgerow, as if in some kind of warped version of space: the world that day was missing dimensions, or constantly adding them, and while I might not have wanted to *speak* to anybody, I wanted to know that, at the same time, I could. I remember, too, the last night I spent at Grandma's house before moving furniture the next day. I slept on her couch, in the living room, and listened. There's also a rather embarrassing incident, recorded in detail in my journal, of what can only be described as grumpiness: it appears that, one night—in my small room at Mytholm Meadows—I was so bothered with life, and sadness, and loneliness, that *Carrie & Lowell*—Sufjan Stevens' maudlin, beautiful album about grief and death—was the only cure.[150] This could, of course, be an example of what Geoff Dyer calls reality running ahead of the metaphor.[151] Or it could be an inversion of that. Simply, it was not all loneliness.

One of the funny things about life writing is how I find myself pre-plotting the kind of moments which might make good memoir-fodder. Life writing is about the truth, of course—whether that's an emotional or literal truth is a different debate. But that notion of what's true has become something I sometimes try to fix. I took the steam-train journey with Grandma because I hoped it would leave me something to write about, as well as something to remember her by and time to be with her. This competition between a real kind of experience from which art comes, and one which I

[150] S. Stevens. (2015). *Carrie & Lowell*. Asthmatic Kitty.
[151] G. Dyer. (1994/2011). *The Missing of the Somme*. New York: Vintage Books. 46.

anticipated might make good art, is a difficult contradiction to think through. The truth is, if I had wanted to spend time with Grandma that day, I wouldn't have brought my notebook. But instead I wrote, and now I have this solid thing with which to remember my memories. The fading and partial nature of the experiences I choose to write about become, by this conscious pre-imagining, something even more fleeting, even if they, perhaps, will endure—like that story written on old paper that Grandma kept for so many years.

Having said all that, I do feel under pressure to keep as much as I can. Hence, this filling in. I'd like to strike a better balance between narrowing the focus and widening the lens. So, here is one more missing thing:

One night at Mytholm I woke to strange sounds, a little like crying.

It always feels like a dream, at first, when you wake in the middle of the night. I guess the strange bed did not help, but it was the sounds I could hear—which did not go away—that forced me up. Someone was sobbing.

I opened the door of my bedroom; it was dark outside in the valley and the office windows were dark too, but the corridors were bright and electric-lit. There was an old, stooped lady wandering about and holding her hip. Her sobs pinged like a metronome. She wore a striped top and her hair was grey and white and clumped on her head like a helmet. Her eyes were dark and silver and her cheeks were wet. She was pacing, going from handrail to handrail, breathing fast and shallow breaths. She was worried, and told me she had just got up out of her chair or bed, she was not sure which, because there were two old ladies in her room, and she wasn't sure if she had hurt them. She wanted me to come back to her flat to check if the ladies were dead.

I took her arm and she walked me back to where she lived, which was opposite Grandma's front door. I imagined Grandma sleeping in her bed, or muttering her prayers.

The woman's apartment was musty and colourless. There was a little bookcase, but the only book I remember seeing was *Little Women*, clad in one of those Edwardian-ish hard covers, once illustrated brightly but faded now. There was a light on in her bedroom. She showed me where she had been sitting and where the other people never were. Somehow they had all been sat on the same chair, an armchair worn deep by one body. She could see that they were not there now, and this scared her; she asked me not to tell anyone, as they would think she had gone crackers—that was what she said.

She wasn't crackers, I don't think, but something had appeared and spooked her. And even with a bad hip she had launched up into the corridor and had not been able to go back, or even to decide what to do next.

There, in her life and in her flat, I felt like I was intruding. I offered her a cup of tea from her own kitchen, and she said no, and then asked if I wanted one, and I said no, and then she said to go, that she'd be okay. I went. I hope she found her bed or her chair and I hope, one day, I feel less guilty for leaving her flat—I should not have left. I hope all she wanted was for someone to see what she saw, or didn't see, and to show her (besides the pain in her hips and the years in her eyes) that she was okay. I hope that I did some of that.

In the morning I told the warden. She knew, or knew who it would have been—that sort of thing had happened more than once: the lady has dementia. I thought of all she'd lost; then I thought of all the overdue bills and the notes about money owed or paid littered on the second bed in the room where I was staying at Mytholm, all those notes I'd pinched from Grandma's which had been kept and never opened, all those official documents which aren't even memories, just evidence, and which somehow tell a story. That morning I ripped most of them up: it's offensive, that what can last is all of that. And it's offensive that the core meaning of our lives is one we have to make for ourselves, that most of the time the trails of chaos we leave are only misshapen lumps of matter, swirling. That is why I would like to make clear that, in the synthesis of this kind of story, I've made all my own connections: these are all my own claims. And all that's left from which to make those claims are the dregs of what came from before. The only sense that can be made is in the patterns we sometimes see, in the way things line up in strange constellations.[152]

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[152] When I showed my father this chapter he asked me if I had read Pierre-Simon Laplace's *Philosophical Essay on Probabilities*. I had not. But I did—or, at least, I read some of it. From what I could follow came an even more zoomed-out version of what cause and effect might mean:

> An intelligence that, at a given instant, could comprehend all the forces by which nature is animated and the respective situation of the beings that make it up, if moreover it were vast enough to submit these data to analysis, would encompass in the same formula the movements of the greatest bodies of the universe and the lightest atoms. For such an intelligence nothing would be uncertain, and the future, like the past, would be open to its eyes. The human mind affords, in the perfection that it has been able to give to astronomy, a feeble likeness of this intelligence. (2)

The kind of intelligence Laplace speaks of does not seem enticing—those dissolved boundaries between events and past and future would be horrifying. It was interesting to realise this, because it complicated even further the urge I have to line things up; to make patterns. Perhaps that is why this novelised form of pattern-making, which comes from somewhere entirely subjective, appeals: I can make a line which feels convincing and yet is not, if it is examined close up. As well, I am reluctant to

When I was with her I tried to pay close attention to what Grandma did, and to how she did it. When she drunk her tea she swallowed with a gulp followed by a small exhale; she held her cup in two hands and lifted it to her mouth while steam still whorled from the liquid. Her fingers were thick and there was a thin gold band on her ring finger; it looked fragile but was not. Her hair was tight to her head, if she had had it set properly. She used to squeeze her lips together and roll them around in circles, and then put her tongue into her cheeks and all around her teeth. When she coughed the top half of her body bent over and her eyes closed, and she would lift her hand to her mouth with her fist open. And, always, she would look out of a window, see something turning, or a shadow forming. But even now I am caught a little, novelising: sometimes she only saw a garden, or the rain. The lying helps though: I couldn't bear to be without it because it lets me back a little.

There is a vitality to the past which I am yet to be able to articulate. My best guess is at something *like* chaos theory: that there is a strange, ineffable beauty in what we consider the present, and that those actions really are something like the result of a transmission of data. But that would make the present merely a ruin, shaping itself again and again, and would mean that the past is where substance was—if it wasn't, once, the present itself, of course. Though even if there is some kind of perfect past (the living thing, before it fossilises) it is impossible to gain, and certainly impossible to write down, even if there is something in this type of extended untruth—that is, if the shapes made can feel persuasive.

In an essay called 'Against Sainte-Beuve', Proust sets up the case for an attempt to capture the past—that attempt being his monstrous novel, which spans more books than can be comfortably added to carry-on luggage. The opening paragraph to the essay—which is against Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve, a literary critic in the nineteenth century—is surprisingly upfront, at least for me. But then, I struggled through *Within a Budding Grove*. The essay gives an important sense of what Proust believes is vital for a writer looking for ways to 'repossess something of our past

admit the possibility of an encompassing intelligence. Even the possibility of a feeble likeness of it seems improbable: astronomy is as flawed an attempt as all the others. The known universe now is a very different place to the one Laplace thought existed, even if the urge to pull secrets from it will not go away. This is, again, the conflict between miniscule and mammoth—between the gnat's breath moment and the story which has no end.

impressions'.[153] The trick, Proust says, is to pay less heed to the intellect (whatever he means by that). Because, 'What the intellect gives us back under the name of the past is not it.'[154] Not the past, that is. We find that in other places: in unforeseen orderings, in morganatic associations which pulse involuntarily. But this work—any kind of prose work—is inevitably one of the intellect. The trick, perhaps, is in the way or ways the intellect might be sidestepped, in the ways the truth of a story can be called into question. I hope these episodes of filling in do something like that. Perhaps they do, perhaps not. What's true is that this chain of words—to twist a sentence of Lia Purpura's—is nothing more than the conscious creation of ruins. And, 'to ruin a thing, one must behave like time and weather, assume the prerogative of the elements.'[155] That is, one must erode, whittle, and give new essence to past impressions: this is nothing more than a cluttering of memories into one shape, a working of them into something while knowing that they will never be more than nothing. Filling in like this lets me take a lens with higher focus to the story being told—to look more closely at moments skimmed past for the sake of narrative. To see again the strangeness of something which has passed.

[153] Proust, M. (1988/1994). *Against Sainte-Beuve and Other Essays*. John Sturrock (Trans.). London: Penguin Books. 3. (Original work unpublished).
[154] Ibid. 3.
[155] L. Purpura. (2006). 'Falling Houses: mise-en-scene'. *On Looking: Essays*. Louisville, Kentucky: Sarabande Books. 86.

4

This was something I had waited for

> Remembering is … an attempt to sense cohesion, cogency, and vitality in the model of the past you are making. When you remember persuasively in a space where decay or disappearance has occurred, you are working to make that space a place.
>
> Ross Gibson. *Memoryscopes*. 29.

The train pulled into Oxford and the doors opened. It was sweat-on-sight hot, and the station precinct was a building site. I was booked to stay in a backpackers' close by, so I thought I'd try to walk the distance. But as I hauled my two suitcases and backpack across a pedestrian crossing, and then over those knobbly bits at the side of the road, I regretted the walk immediately.

The backpackers' was, inevitably, upstairs. The light was glary until I closed the door onto the street. I got a tatty white towel and a room key, and a locker for my second suitcase.

The room was small, a four-bed dorm, and the window was open. The sounds of the street floated in, a man snored from one of the bunks, and the heat was thick enough to stink. I dumped my stuff, showered, and walked back down the stairs into the light.

Oxford is a town that knows its own beauty. All the cobbles and the stonework and the hidden tiny green spaces seem exactly aware of how handsome they are. This awareness worked a kind of separation on me. Perhaps it was the heat or the time or my hunger, but the place failed to enchant even when, all around, other people were taking photographs, drinking, smoking, eating, walking, owning the space in a way I couldn't. I don't think I thought about Grandma; I thought mostly about how much I

did not like all the people I saw enjoying themselves. I walked past the Bodleian Library, the Natural History Museum, the Ashmolean, and the Pitt-Rivers Musuem, and they were all closed. There were locked doors everywhere, private accommodations for other people, and I did not like, either, the policy of funnelling tourists in one direction and students in another. I think, more than anything, I resented those who were allowed behind locked doors. I was jealous of them, of the way they got to spend their time wandering the cobbled streets of that old and beautiful town.

That first night I found my way to a park, and from there to where the conference would be. I walked around the park and watched people circle a tent where a circus was performing; I found a canal to walk beside, but had to head back to the street because of the clouds of midges I managed to kick up. I did not speak to anyone until I worked my way back towards where I was staying and found a Pizza Hut. I remember being excited at the prospect of the cheese-stuffed crust, and not wanting to eat anywhere else because each of the places I passed overflowed with those smiling people I had decided not to like, all with white or pale-blue shirts and fawn chinos and brown shoes with no socks, or dresses which flowed and flowered and faces which smiled and knew that they were beautiful.

I spoke to the waitress in Pizza Hut. She was not from Oxford, at least she didn't sound like she was, and that made me like her. I remember giving her a tip, and then immediately regretting giving her a tip when I realised that I would not be on conference food for at least another 36 hours. I ate by myself, and watched the only other people in the restaurant—a family of four or five—bother themselves with the self-serve ice cream machine. I thought of a friend back in Australia, and sent him a photograph of the machine, and of the buffet—dine-in Pizza Huts are an extinct species in Perth, so whenever I get chance I visit them and send photographs. He replied almost immediately, he was on a night shift, and I made an effort to make my response sound enthusiastic.

At the backpackers' that night I sat in the common room and wrote down the day. Then I found the print-out of my speech for the conference at the bottom of my backpack, smoothed out the paper, and started to read.

You can't do anything in a common room without somebody asking exactly what it is you are doing. I told two or three different people about the conference, which would be about nostalgia, and at Mansfield College; that I was doing a PhD in

Australia. They all told me that I didn't sound Australian. I knew that, but wasn't sure how I felt about it; I'm still not quite sure. I know that whenever I go back to England, and especially when I end up back in the valley, the way I sound changes quickly. I get a little self-conscious of it sometimes: I can hear the way my voice changes, the way certain words are squeezed out. Whenever I swear, for example, I sound like I used to—accents can be great revealers.

Trying to sleep in a dormitory is always difficult. We made a group decision to keep the window open, and I made my own decision to sleep without a blanket. The room was small and tight and loud; I could hear the street—music, voices, and traffic—and I could hear the sounds of the common room. It was still early, and almost light outside. The man in the bunk above me, a Russian whose name I forgot immediately, was snoring loudly and my mattress was made of the kind of plastic which stuck; it glistened with sweat.

The next day was for being a tourist. Of course, I didn't feel much like that. Instead I took an almost strange kind of glee at the fact that there were people without homes on the streets of Oxford, that it was still the sort of town which had that kind of problem.

I decided to go to museums, and that I would try to see as many as I could. That meant a particular strategy: reading everything would be difficult, so I would wander, walk even-paced, and see what I could find, what stuck out. I got to the Natural History Museum as it opened; the main hall was grand and sweeping, and wrapped by almost-cloisters. The room was vaulted and the ceiling was made of glass. There were busts and statues and skeletons and specimens, like taxidermied badgers and foxes, and there was a great blue book laid in a glass case. On the front of the book, written in gold, was the name Michelet: it was his book about insects.

I went to the Bodleian and raided the gift shop, and I went to the Ashmolean and felt a little bored. Then I aimed for the Pitt-Rivers Museum, close to the back end of the day—or, close to the time that museums in Oxford close. It was still hot and sticky, and I could feel wet patches underneath where my backpack sat. I didn't quite want to go, but I wanted to feel like I had seen enough to justify not seeing much the next day or the day after.

It is difficult to describe the collection at the Pitt-Rivers Museum; it's even difficult to describe how it was arranged. I remember dark rooms, perhaps to keep all those

colours bright. I remember vast glass cases and tall ceilings, cases of masks and costumes and pipes and spears and ornaments, and one entire section of tiny Japanese *netsuke*—one of which I would be speaking about at the conference: my paper was about Edmund de Waal's book *The Hare with Amber Eyes*, about the nostalgia inherent in inherited family objects. About the muteness of those things, and the way they always seem to speak.

The museum was a maze of cabinets and staircases, and the dim light meant the whole space was disorienting. It felt like everything, everyone must somehow be pin-stuck like a butterfly. It felt like a perverse kind of collection, an odd obsessive kind of vision, piled in as though at random then aestheticized—a whirlpool of dim-lit colour which cracked and spun and shocked at each turn and I was lost, surely, in that place, but felt again that if only I could read exactly each and every single object in a kind of constellation then I might find something worth knowing. There was something else too: in *The Sweet Cheat Gone* Proust tells that 'There is in inanimate objects, in events, in farewell letters a special danger which amplifies and even alters the nature of the grief that people are capable of causing us.'[156] It felt like that, even if I am not quite sure Proust was actually attempting to describe a feeling. That sense in things might be why there is a smallness to self in those kinds of places, a kind of grief built cumulatively.

Another line from his books came then, from *Time Regained*: Proust says, most appositely, that 'Stuffing people's heads full of words means nothing.'[157] The museum felt like that. Stuffing brains and eyes with objects caught in cases meant both nothing and everything that day, seemed to hint at all I couldn't parse, perhaps hinting at what he describes as, 'That immense scene, in which both we and the human body we desire are the tiniest atoms.'[158]

I felt small that day, that week, at the end of my time with my grandmother. I thought nothing, really, as I tried to find some sense, or at least my way around, that collection. But every way it seemed to be organised was wrong, everything about those rooms incorrect, even if it was at once right and good to see everything ranged as it

[156] M. Proust. (1930/1957). *The Sweet Cheat Gone*. C.K. Scott Moncrieff (Trans.) London: Chatto & Windus. (Original work published in 1925). 40.
[157] Proust. *Time Regained*. 93.
[158] Ibid. 169.

was. The museum was a kind of hectic map of this ridiculous spinning world: even in its order there was evidence of chaos.

And then I saw the wave. A wave: Hokusai, in the gift shop actually, where I bought a small waxy model of the hare with amber eyes (which wasn't in the Pitt-Rivers, but which they realised they might be able to flog). Yes, out of all those piled up, piled on things-in-cases I remember most Hokusai's wave, stamped on a tea towel in the gift shop. Something pranged when I saw it, something turned and churned and I missed the beach, I missed the coast; I missed even the crannies of the valley, and the Oxford-bloody-melancholy I'd somehow been quaking under broke a little when I understood: I was sad about leaving, not just one place, but both. And not just one person—not just her—but all the people I'd left at home too, even my friend who likes dine-in Pizza Hut more than is normal.

I left the museum and walked back to the hostel. I didn't try not to talk to people in the common room, instead I went straight to the locker I had that was wet with steam coming from the shower opposite. I dragged the suitcase from where I'd tried to stow it, and I took it to my room and I started to go through everything inside, all the things I'd salvaged. I needed something to hold onto. Something to stick me to the world I was on, some way to grip what was swirling. And of course I didn't manage that. I rolled and spun on my bed, and then put every thing back in the space I had found for it in the case. Then I went for dinner at a pub about ten minutes' walk from the hostel. But I felt a little better for the walk and the contents of that suitcase, and even that wave which is the only single thing I can remember from that day, except perhaps the board game I bought from the gift shop at the Bodleian, which, still, no one will play, and that is shrink-wrapped even now.

When I got back from the pub—the Gardener's Arms—I was looking forward to sleep. The world seemed quieter. It was still warm as hell in the dorm, but that didn't matter so much. I am still not quite sure why, but that wave on the wall on the towel somehow helped, after all the chaos and confusion of the museum. Perhaps it made me settle on things I know: on the coast, on the ocean, instead of that landlocked valley which I had left. It helped add a modicum of order to the day, as did the contents of that heavy bloody suitcase I'd decided to tote around—I liked the way it kept each thing in place. 'Tumult is vile,' says Woolf in 'The Narrow Bridge of Art', 'Confusion

is hateful; everything in a work of art should be mastered and ordered.'[159] Life is not ordered though, not in any useful or useable way. Though, often, a sense there is some structure is enough.

In the same essay Woolf goes on to say that 'Every moment is the centre and meeting place of an extraordinary number of perceptions which have not yet been expressed. Life is always and inevitably much richer than we who try to express it.'[160] I knew that to be true. But, despite that, she still believes that the best writers somehow manage to express that richness, instead of just complaining about profusion and chaos. The trick, she seems to think, or seems to have thought, is in the sense we come to after considering chaos, in the explication of the way that feelings make us feel. In 'Impassioned Prose' she says that, 'It is not the actual sight or sound itself that matters, but the reverberations that it makes as it travels through our mind … it is only by gathering up and putting together these echoes and fragments that we arrive at the true nature of our experience.'[161] I wish I could tell you that it was on my bed, in the dorm, that I thought through this kind of method, this tracking of reverberation. It wasn't—it was perhaps a year or two later.

I think that somehow the way my mind bounced from theme to thing through place and time that day says something about the gathering of echoes and fragments, something about the twisting of those echoes and fragments into useable shapes. The fact that Hokusai's ubiquitous and screen-savered wave stuck fast, after wandering the Pitt-Rivers, is tethered irrevocably in my mind with a sequence of events that happened a week or two before I went to Oxford, events impelled by one piece of the detritus I had in my suitcase: a postcard of a wave crashing over the sea wall at Scarborough, sent at 5:45 p.m. on October 16, 1943. This is the kind of echo I think Woolf talks about in 'Impassioned Prose'. 'Of facts', in prose, she says, one has been told 'scarcely anything'—the list of facts describing my time in Oxford attests to this. They are not important: it's possible to write in a way which tells the reader what they need to know without them, or with just a choice skerrick instead:

> And even that [small fact] has been chosen for the sake of some adventitious quality—as that it fitted in here, or was the right colour to go there—never for its

[159] V. Woolf. 'The Narrow Bridge of Art'. *Granite and Rainbow*. 22.
[160] Ibid. 23.
[161] Woolf. 'Impassioned Prose'. *Granite and Rainbow*. 40.

> truth. But nevertheless there grows upon us a curious sense of intimacy. It is an intimacy with the mind, and not with the body; yet we cannot help figuring to ourselves, as the rush of eloquence flows, the fragile little body, the fluttering hands, the glowing eyes, the alabaster cheeks, the glass of opium on the table.[162]

She's talking about De Quincy, and the opium is his—part of a world miraculously conjured in prose, which, she says, yields next to nothing about the man. He talks of confessing, but 'is always self-possessed, secretive, and composed'. And yet, even despite (or because of) this intimate-but-not way of writing, the man is glimpsed:

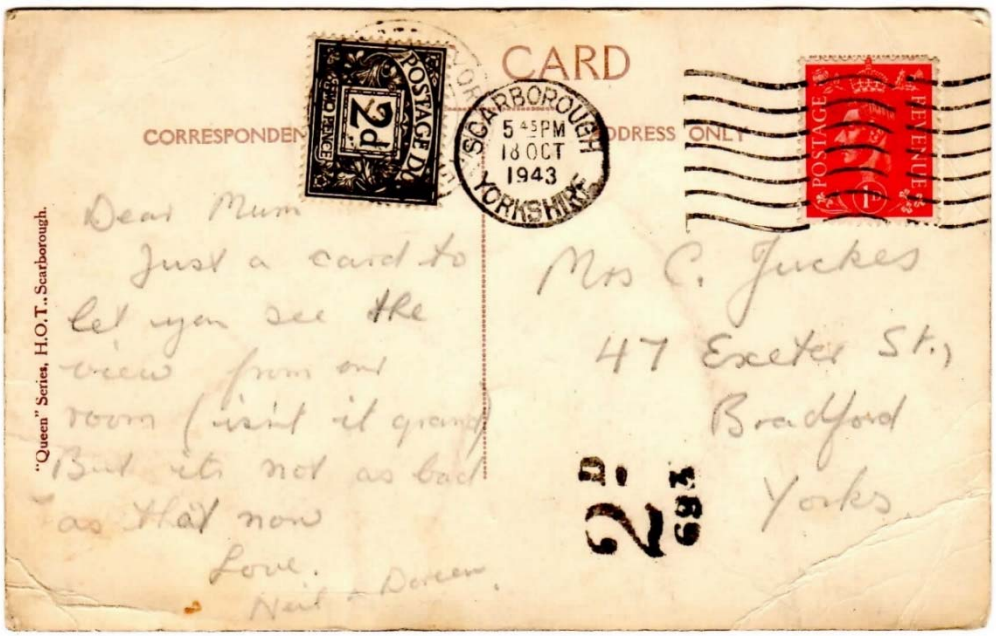
> His most perfect passages are not lyrical but descriptive. They are not cries of anguish which admit us to closeness and sympathy; they are descriptions of states of mind in which, often, time is miraculously prolonged and space miraculously expanded.[163]

That expansion is, I think, the nature of reverie. And the selective prolonging of space and time is vital to that process, part of the reason prose works as it does to batter moments down into golden discs. Perhaps it is even a kind of nostalgia? In any case, it leaves space to pluck patterns from the welter, to try to make connections that perhaps are not there, but which do exist as reverberations, as redundancies—even as shapes which form when the past is thought on. And that is why the coast matters, why the beach matters, why the world at its edges has become important—at least to me. When a moment is lived through it's impossible to partake in, or create, connections with each of the thousand other moments it might branch off into, cavort with, and concatenate around. But, later, we make sense of a moment by piling it amongst a hoard of likely others, and memories work on each other to change the shapes of the past.

There is a small caption at the bottom of that postcard sent in October 1943. It reads, 'Rough Sea, Scarborough'. A great wave crashes over the ocean defences at the foot of cliffs which hold the knuckle of a castle, which looks like Mount Fuji in the background of Hokusai's woodcut. A person, perhaps, is standing in the midst of all the spray, and the water is cold and frothy. On the back of the card—which was sent

[162] Ibid. 39.
[163] Ibid. 38-39.

by Grandad and Grandma, from their honeymoon, to my great-grandmother, Kitty—Grandad has written: ‘Dear Mum, Just a card to let you see the view from our room (isn’t it grand). But it’s not as bad as that now Love, Neil & Doreen.’ I’m still not sure if ‘grand’ is the right word, but I get the impression that the way I use it has a different inflection to the way Neil might have—I don’t say it with that Yorkshire sense anymore. The wave in question is undoubtedly different to Hokusai’s, but when have two waves ever been exactly the same? Despite the way that oceans ripple restlessly, despite the almost monotonous and meditative clutching-at-shore of each and every cold claw of foam, there is a uniqueness to every lap at every beach, cove, or cliff face.



I went to Scarborough in the week before I ended up in Oxford; I went to see anything I could of that card and wave. But the day did not go exactly to plan.

The landscape became familiar when the A164 opened out onto a kind of plateau. There were wide fields and small villages, and I could sense the sea on the horizon. I started to see signs for Scarborough, and for Filey too, but this was less than 20 miles from the coast, as though the space between Hebden Bridge and the ocean was nothing more than space, the distance simply waited out until it was time for the world to work again.

It was early, cold, grey, and the seagulls were wailing. I parked up and walked towards the sea front; the only people out were window cleaners and bin men. The streets in Scarborough tip downwards quickly and rows of high terraces kept cutting off the ocean view.

At eye level the buildings were shopfronts. But above the signs and miscellaneous window displays each was high and white and yes, perhaps, grand. They were Edwardian or Georgian, and if I had the right kind of knowledge I could say exactly which. But, of course, Woolf says that facts are the stuff of fiction, that, in a novel, Mr Smith wakes up, does this, does that, eats, drinks, goes back to sleep. And this is not a novel. But how to get around that? In Proust's 'novel', the narrator talks about something very similar, and offers a possible route:

> How can a literature of notations have any value since it is beneath the little things it notes that the reality exists (the grandeur in the distant sound of an aeroplane, in the outline of the belfry of Saint-Hilaire, the past in the savour of a madeleine), these being without significance in themselves if one does not disengage it from them?
>
> Accumulated little by little in the memory, the chain of all the obscure impressions where nothing of what we actually experienced remains, constitutes our thought, our life, reality, and it is that lie which a so-called 'lived-art' would only reproduce, an art as crude as life, without beauty, a reproduction so wearisome and futile of what our eyes have seen and our intelligence has observed.[164]

[164] Proust. *Time Regained*. 246.

So perhaps those kinds of facts are a little necessary, if only to help illuminate ‘reality far removed from the one we live in’, through the mode of art—that is, the kind of reality which exists in memory.

The clouds were thick but high. It was windier down on the front, out from the shelter of the winding, diving terraces, each locked in a slow race upwards, aiming for ocean glimpses. I remember the taste of the air as it gusted: slightly salty, a little rotten. The word ‘putrid’ kept occurring, and I wrote it down in my journal with shivering hands. I thought I knew where I might have to go to find the snatch of coast from which the postcard-picture was taken, and so headed left—north—away from the great ‘Grand’ Hotel which looms over the town and the beach. I walked past closed arcades and shops and a deserted Luna Park. I walked towards that knuckled castle on the cliff, a scape of bursting rock, short trees, waving grasses, and calling gulls. The sound they made gusted memory as much as the taste of the wind.

The sea was a darker grey than the sky and dead flat. But this was the ocean trapped by sea walls in the small bay which makes up the main beach at Scarborough, not the wilder stuff out behind the cliff and the castle, where (I hoped) waves would be breaking high and hard over the wall and railings.

The wind bit. The Ferris wheel in the park was still. I remembered the two-pence machines behind peeling roller-shut doors; I could even hear a little the electric noises of the arcade, and I remembered flashing lights and plastic prizes. It does not take long to lose a cupful of two-pence pieces to the rocking-back-and-forward draws of those infernal things: the un-tessellated coins always seemed ready to tip, but if you nudged the machine it would scream and blare, and the lights would flash brighter and longer and still the coins never seemed to fall, at least as surely as they should. Somehow the edge they were gripped on did not give up more than a fraction of the copper piled on the other side of glass.

I found a food van, the only one open. It was surrounded by a small crowd of men in motorbike leathers, all gathered close. I had to elbow my way through to order a cheese and onion toastie. The wind nibbled, infiltrated; the birds were dogfighting. Memories licked. A man was picking up pieces of rubbish with a metal claw, putting them into a bag he dragged behind him, and I could hear the sound of it scraping, mingled with the seagulls and the wind and the sea and the men eating and drinking.

I took my toastie onto the wall which stopped, for now, the sea battering the town. I was underneath the castle, on a kind of headland—an artificial headland—part of the pincer arms of the harbour keeping all the fishing boats from the open ocean. The sea wall was thick and concrete, and curled off around the cliff face in the direction I needed to go. Huge rocks were stacked up to try to stop the waves, though they were not bothered so much that day. Still, the cliffs seemed relieved at the bulwark. I looked up the coast at the way I would be walking, and saw that the road had changed since 1943. It had been pushed out and beefed up, but that too felt like a delay of the inevitable. It all looked vaguely military, and I remembered the bunkers which dot the cliffs you can walk along, just outside of Scarborough. If a bunker is not about to drop into the ocean, you can still go inside—if you're brave enough: they stink of piss. They are left over from the war being fought through 1943, and now they are cracked, pocked, and covered in graffiti. The cliff paths by the bunkers always have to be pushed backwards because of the tipping away of the coast, the tumbling down of rocks and gravel and grass and birds' nests into the water.

To the south, and directly below me, safe in the harbour, were the boats. Small, rusted, and yet still bright-coloured in blues, reds, and whites. They seemed ornamental. You could see the shapes of the rust on them, like clouds; they puffed like spores exploding. My hands shook with cold as I tried to photograph everything.

From my spot on the wall above the harbour I could see a lot of the town and I could see, too, the cliffs which stretched out past the town to the south, making up the bay in which Scarborough kind of sits.

And then, in a moment of clarity, memories which were threatening finally broke. Perhaps they curdled, made themselves into something more than what they were, but certainly they broke like waves. I looked across the town to the south and realised that I was not looking south, but west. I was looking towards West Cliff, and I could see the gap, the space, the great green divot where a hotel had been, where the cliffs had finally fallen in a kind of jackpot of dirt and rock and sand and brick and wood and glass. It was close to the edge of the town, just past the terraces and guest houses, out towards where things got a little wilder. It was a patch of bare grass depressed into the cliff face, which was mostly brown and grey and only fringed in green. I knew it, but I did not know it as it was. I knew it as it was years before. That patch of grass held no trees, no chunks of rock: it was hollowed out earth, concave, like a great, green eye.

That place at the edge of town, at the edge of the cliffs, was a place I remembered; I remembered rowing out to sea in grey drizzle, the water brown and green, and the waves low, long rumbles, capped and briefly choppy. A hotel had fallen into the ocean and its mud and stone lay stretched, ripped, and white-boned, like a chalk engraving breaking through the cliff side.

Then—in my memory—it was raining. I remember that we walked across the road from one of the fish and chip restaurants on the front. It was cold but would get colder, even though it was summer. I can't remember hearing seagulls calling but I must have done, because they always call. And then we walked down a concrete runway and the moss and seaweed underfoot was brown and slippery. There was only one boat left, or it was late in the day, or the sea was too choppy; what matters is that we were lucky to get out. I do not remember who rowed the boat. I remember the path to it though, and the cold, wet rain and the feeling of the waves and the low creak of the plank I sat on. The sea was grey and rising, falling. We bobbed out into the curve of the bay, past the safe sea walls, and I don't remember what the town looked like, just the grey water and the rain dotting and spreading; there is the sound of water lapping in my memory, but it is a silent sound (like the way dreams are, not made of noise but with all the sound of the scene simply there). My brother is rocking the boat in my memory, and we are all watching the cliff side and its brown gouge and the white bones of the hotel—which, I remembered, while watching the great green eye where it had been, was called Holbeck.

Grandma is in the bow of the boat in my memory, wearing a piece of plastic over her hair. I do not think any of us were happy: I remember feeling scared and sick. How could we be happy when the hotel lay stretched like that, and we were so cold and wet out on the North Sea? A simple answer: in the photographs, which I found later, she was not there in the boat. The sun shone and my brother smiled at the camera. Then the hotel's bones were forced by the images into the muddy mess they were, just an odd limb or two poking from the rubble. Rebecca Solnit says, 'Memory … is a shifting, fading, partial thing, a net that doesn't catch all the fish by any means and sometimes catches butterflies that don't exist.'[165] That's true, but there's surely something fluttering in the fact that I imagined her there, some kind of reverberation? When Woolf wrote about Proust in 'Phases of Fiction', on this theme, she says that,

[165] R. Solnit. (2013). *The Faraway Nearby*. London: Granta. 12.

> If one begins to analyse consciousness, it will be found that it is stirred by thousands of small, irrelevant ideas stuffed with odds and ends of knowledge … In any crisis, such as the death of the grandmother or that moment when the Duchess learns as she steps into her carriage that her old friend Swann is fatally ill, the number of emotions that compose each of these scenes is immensely larger, and they themselves much more incongruous and difficult of relation than any other scene laid before us by a novelist ... The common stuff of the book is made of [a] deep reservoir of perception. It is from these depths that his characters rise, like waves forming, then break and sink again into the moving sea of thought and comment and analysis which gave them birth.
>
> In retrospect, thus, though as dominant as any characters in fiction, the characters in Proust seem made of a different substance. Thoughts, dreams, knowledge are part of them.[166]

And really, truly, now that Grandma is gone what is she but thoughts and dreams and knowledge, some wave in a reservoir of perception? Of course, perception, and the nature of it, are Proust's main theme; he is a master of the way in which the past is considered and processed. And even though what he wrote was a novel, I still think there's space for me, here, to consider how that level of understanding of perception works as an understanding of the past. It's also true to say that Proust's novel is not entirely fictional, as is certainly the case with Sebald's work, and as is sometimes the case with Woolf—just as this is not a novel but is, sometimes, novelised. The way that fiction and nonfiction seem to lose a kind of meaning when examined close-up is interesting because that too apes—I think—the process of remembering and accreting; perhaps even glancing and looking, and the way our senses addle. The closer a thing comes the more fantastical it seems.

In 'The Narrow Bridge of Art', Woolf dwells a little on the powers she observes at work in Proust's prose; she talks about his novel specifically, but I think she talks in general, and presciently, about a form of the novel we have come to know as the false fiction of writers like Sebald:

[166] V. Woolf. 'Phases of Fiction'. *Granite and Rainbow*. 123-126.

> The novel or the variety of the novel which will be written in time to come will take on some of the attributes of poetry. It will give the relations of man to nature, to fate; his imagination; his dreams. But it will also give the sneer, the contrast, the question, the closeness and complexity of life. It will take the mould of that queer conglomeration of incongruous things—the modern mind. Therefore it will clasp to its breast the precious prerogatives of the democratic art of prose; its freedom; its fearlessness; its flexibility. For prose is so humble that it can go anywhere; no place is too low, too sordid, or too mean for it to enter. It is infinitely patient, too, humbly acquisitive. It can lick up with its long glutinous tongue the most minute fragments of fact and mass them into the most subtle labyrinths, and listen silently at doors behind which only a murmur, only a whisper, is to be heard. With all the suppleness of a tool which is in constant use it can follow the windings and record the changes which are typical of the modern mind. To this, with Proust and Dostoevsky behind us, we must agree.[167]

There is a method to this glutinous collection and shaping of fragments of fact and mass. There is a way in which Proust managed to compress the bursts and explosions of life and the past onto the page, producing what Woolf describes as a 'whole universe … steeped in the light of intelligence [in which] the commonest object, such as the telephone, loses its simplicity, its solidity, and becomes a part of life and transparent.'[168] That method, though, could be complex enough to refuse translation—a whole book, a whole sequence of seven novels across twelve volumes, is necessary to try. The dissolving of boundaries between things would be one important facet, no doubt. This use of objects is a way for Proust to theorise about the shapes and questions of history, to emphasise the complexity and the porousness of binaries like 'present' and 'past', or even 'fiction' and 'nonfiction'. In the Sainte-Beuve essay, he does just that:

> Several summers of my life were spent in a house in the country. I thought of those summers from time to time, but they were not themselves. They were dead, and in all probability they would always remain so. Their resurrection, like all these resurrections, hung on a mere chance. One snowy evening, not long ago, I came in half frozen, and had sat down in my room to read by lamplight, and as I could not

[167] Woolf. 'The Narrow Bridge of Art'. *Granite and Rainbow*. 20.
[168] Woolf. 'Phases of Fiction'. *Granite and Rainbow*. 123.

> get warm my old cook offered to make me a cup of tea, a thing I never drink. And as chance would have it, she brought me some slices of dry toast. I dipped the toast in the cup of tea and as soon as I put it in my mouth, and felt its softened texture, all flavoured with tea, against my palate, something came over me—the smell of geraniums and orange-blossom, a sensation of extraordinary radiance and happiness.[169]

That toast became the madeleine of the novel. It shows that the past lies in sensation, away from the intellect; it lies in sensation produced by an object encountered. And, while the entirety of that sensation cannot be recaptured, some of it can: with imagination, and in the glutinous mixture of prose which Proust splattered across thousands of pages. It is a method of reconstructing the past which relies on bursts of consciousness and inspiration, and on an ability to write in a way which mimics the mechanisms of the mind, which brings objects together—whether millisecond moments or old records—into the shape of a life. One way to mimic that constant burst is through an evocation of the way a material object is experienced, the way in which a thing can shift apart the 'tottering partitions of … memory'.[170] This is something Helen Macdonald articulates in *H is for Hawk*:

> I once asked my friends if they'd ever held things that gave them a spooky sense of history. *Ancient pots with three-thousand-year-old thumbprints in the clay*, said one. *Antique keys*, another. *Clay pipes. Dancing shoes from WWII. Roman coins I found in a field. Old bus tickets in second-hand books*. Everyone agreed that what these small things did was strangely intimate; they gave them the sense, as they picked them up and turned them over in their fingers, of another person, an unknown person a long time ago, who had held that object in their hands. *You don't know anything about them, but you feel the other person's there*, one friend told me. *It's like all the years between you and them disappears. Like you become them, somehow*.[171]

[169] M. Proust. (1958/1984). *By Way of Sainte-Beuve*. Sylvia Townsend Warner (Trans.). London: The Hogarth Press. 17. (Original work unpublished).
[170] Proust. *Against Sainte-Beuve*. Sturrock (Trans.). 4.
[171] H. Macdonald. (2014). *H is for Hawk*. London: Jonathan Cape. 116. Italics in original.

What's interesting is that the memories which part for sensation are sometimes more than memories which are only your own: the brain does not necessarily discriminate between the directly experienced past and something else entirely.

Proustian memory relies on its involuntary, coincidental, surprising aspects to be successful. He says, 'The moment you have been living will not find asylum in the object to which you have sought consciously to connect it. What is more, if some other thing is able to resurrect them, when they are resurrected with it, they will have been stripped of their poetry'.[172] This is a danger, and shows that the intellect can fight back against the senses. But there are ways to eke more from those dulled objects: as Bachelard says, with a close examination of the details of a thing, 'a narrow gate … opens up an entire world … which, like all worlds, contains the attributes of greatness.'[173] That greatness, an intimate immensity, can be found again by daydreaming, by tricking yourself into a dreaming state.[174] That's what I am trying to do through this interrogation of a postcard—though I began, quickly, to shift my thoughts to the scarred remains of a cliffside.

*

I once went to a workshop with Ross Gibson at an art gallery on the campus of the University of Western Australia, not far from the School of Physics where Alexander Ross worked. There, Gibson gave three precepts on the best ways he knew to activate archives. Or, as he said, 'to draw the charge of stuff'. Those precepts were: that the past knows more, and is smarter than, any of us will ever be; that things in archives are archetypal; and that it's worth trying to remain as baffled and skittish with archival material for as long as it's possible to do so. Have bewilderment, was the message; resist interpretation in the Keatsian sense. In this way, it's possible to use artefacts to help divine larger systems, and to do 'remembrance work [which] is maintenance against erosion.'[175] It's worth pointing out that this is not easy: Proust's entire novel is about the conflict between sensation and crippling habit.

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[172] Proust. *Against Sainte-Beuve*. Sturrock (Trans.). 5.
[173] Bachelard. 155.
[174] Ibid. 184.
[175] R. Gibson. (2015c). 'The Poetry of Archives'. City of Perth WINTERarts Festival. 21 August. Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery, University of Western Australia.

For Gibson it is important to relish the inconclusivity each second glance brings; that is, the way things alter each time they are looked at, touched, sensed. That postcard, for instance, still sometimes changes, even though I've long been thinking of it, and writing down my thoughts about it. This re-glancing at the past became a method for Gibson, something he pursued using haiku and the burst of a brief world those poems represent: only by maintaining bewilderment, he argues, by refusing to let things settle, can a history be unexploitative, and representative of the nature of history itself. The complication is that a history should be bewildered, speculative, and bursting with potential, but also that it should be presented to an audience—it should be told and useful. A history must be both precise *and* speculative. Edmund de Waal called the objects of his family history 'tough explosion[s] of exactitude'.[176] He's right, but what he could have added is that those explosions are mutable things which can—if allowed—burst again. And each time they do, the thoughts which materialise are different, unless bafflement is lost and habit reigns. Then, in Proust's words, a thing loses its poetry. The challenge is to maintain bafflement: what I think happens in the work of Sebald, for example, when a reader wraps themselves in rings of smoke which are layered and curdled details, the meshed and warped facts he presents, is that the bursting and disappearing of a haiku keeps happening; the past keeps losing its substance. Each detail shadows the next, producing an always-shifting world-on-the-page which is an evocation of memory. One example comes from *Campo Santo*, a posthumous collection of Sebald's prose, which includes four essays about a trip to Corsica. In one, called 'Campo Santo', he slips the detail of the wood shavings in his grandfather's coffin into the narrative (that which pulses from a memory triggered by the smell of writing paper, described briefly in the small poem I quote in Chapter 2). In 'Campo Santo' Sebald lets a detail pulse, and then moves on seamlessly:

> I remember very well how, as a child, I stood for the first time by an open coffin, with the dull sense in my breast that my grandfather, lying there on wood shavings, had suffered a shameful injustice that none of us survivors could make good. And for some time, too, I have known that the more one has to bear, for whatever reason,

[176] E. de Waal. (2010). *The Hare with Amber Eyes*. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux. 16.

> of the burden of grief which is probably not imposed on the human species for nothing, the more often do we meet ghosts.[177]

The way Sebald writes maintains the illusion of bafflement, so that the reader feels the past as inconclusive and speculative, but populated by memories which recur under new guises. The same thing happens in the work of Proust. Woolf says that, 'the number of emotions that compose each … scene is immensely larger, and they themselves much more incongruous and difficult of relation than any other scene laid before us by a novelist.'[178] Yes. But still, patterns form: things butt up against each other in *Remembrance of Things Past*, like church towers aligning, or three trees aligning: motifs occur and reoccur in the mind of the narrator. Patterns repeat and perpetuate, producing explosions mingled in an onslaught of glutinous prose. The same is true in Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn*: a sense of what silk means is layered into the text, so that each connection mimics patterns of cloth and patterns of consciousness. The knotting together of things—of the way the brain reacts—maintains bafflement in the mind of the reader, and mimics the gut reaction when a thing is sensed with instinct. This bafflement is the process of living, the very progress we make through the messy shimmer of our own existence:

> We have, if we turn to Proust, more emotion in a scene which is not supposed to be remarkable, like that in the restaurant in the fog. There we live along a thread of observation which is always going in and out of this mind and that mind; which gathers information from different social levels, which makes us now feel with a prince, now with a restaurant keeper, and brings us into touch with different physical experiences such as light after darkness, safety after danger, so that the imagination is being stimulated on all sides to close slowly, gradually, without being goaded by screams or violence, completely round the object. Proust is determined to bring before the reader every piece of evidence upon which any state of mind is founded.[179]

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[177] W.G. Sebald. (2005/2006). *Campo Santo*. Anthea Bell (Trans.). Sven Meyer (Ed.). London: Penguin Books. 33. (Original work unpublished).
[178] Woolf. 'Phases of Fiction'. *Granite and Rainbow*. 125.
[179] Ibid. 128.

Of course, Woolf is exaggerating: there is no way Proust can bring up every piece of evidence, even if that was his goal. This constriction is a facet of the very nature of words on the page, a feature of writing things down. He does, however, manage to suggest the effect. This is another way prose can use entropy: as both a recorder of decay and an emblem of it. In *26 Views of the Starburst World*, Gibson describes the good, and perhaps the bad, of this quality:

> To write is to stop the amnesiac leaching that can be caused by time in cultures that rely on shared memories to keep wisdom; also to write is to bank on benefits blooming in the future. Comparably, to garden is to work a clean edge against time's lapse to wildness, to hedge against entropy while anticipating a coming, meaningful harvest. So, in addition to giving the writer 'a taste of what it would be like to control time,' the page is a place where the delineation of space can make a world of knowledge and influence.[180]

Prose can firm up a world for the time it takes to describe that world fading. It is a form of gardening; of curating wildness. But when a book closes the work is done, and whatever was locked and stockpiled wisps off in shapes like rings of smoke. The fact that endings are implicit is not a diminishment of effect, it's simply a newer, more fragile, beginning of effects—like the fluttering of a butterfly's wings.

*

That day, in Scarborough, the wind whipped all the tiny flags and ropes on each and every rusted fishing boat. Metal tingled. Memories lingered. There were lobster pots and ropes piled up on the side of the harbour, and they stunk of the bottom of the cold grey sea. Across from the harbour were shuttered doors and dark glass; the town was, for the most part, asleep. The bin man kept on picking at litter: crisp packets, cans, paper. The water in the harbour was still and clogged with seaweed and plastic. It smelled like the ocean but stronger, richer, and more rotten. I faced up the coast, where I had intended to walk, and then turned back towards the town.

The fishing boats got bigger as I walked further. It—the place—was all somewhere I had been before, but never by myself, and never while it was this quiet and waking.

[180] Gibson. *26 Views of the Starburst World*. 79-80.

All I could hear was the wind and the tinkling metal and the dragging dustbin and the seagulls, screaming at the place, through the wind, yelling at the people behind their doors and windows.

I do not know how long I stood and watched the harbour. My hands were clenched in my pockets to stop them turning blue, and there were a few cars passing when I turned back towards the town. I knew that if I walked a little more I would see the cobbled landing leading down to the water where we went that time, on an old boat, to see the hotel that had careered down the cliff side.

It was drier than I remembered, and less steep. There were no rowing boats, just a small fleet of fishing boats which looked better kept than some of the others out by the harbour wall. The terraces of the town, craning for the ocean, tiered up behind me, and the bunting laid back and across the road added a flutter to the sounds making up the place. I could see the Grand Hotel ahead of me, and I did not really know where I wanted to go, just that I had to chase memories which flickered. I don't think I had given up on Grandma and the postcard, I just think I had found something else I needed to do, and my brain had done a quick re-ordering of priorities.

When I reached the beach I walked down onto the sand. I followed tractor tracks—the beach was ready for the day, all flattened and scraped clean of litter. There was a woman ahead, and I could see exactly where she had walked because of the marks her feet left in the sand. The beach was flat like the sea pretended to be; birds crawled at the waterline and sometimes hung in the air. The Grand seemed to loom over that woman ahead, and the sand was hard and damp and stuck to the edge of my shoes. It was not just one colour, but a hundred thousand all churned together, grey and gold and brown and black, and where the water lapped at the beach the sand was darkest, like a long stretched birthmark. The town seemed crenelated. I started to follow the trident feet of birds, and then I aimed back towards the road at the top of the wall at the top of the beach.

I saw a small garden bed on the promenade, little more than a tub of tired flowers. The bed itself was decorated with a golden row of letters; up close they read, 'Dedicated to God for His Dumb Animals'. Scarborough was the satire of an English coastal town. Opposite were seagulls spaced evenly along the roof of a huge building with 'Futurist' written on its flank, though its half skin-tone panelling and half

weathered-brick façade took the piss of the fading red letters of its name. Apparently the Beatles played there once.

I could hear the flap of bunting, the call of the birds, the tingle of rope and metal, and the sound of the wind as it shook the atoms of the sky and the settled, wet sand. I had lost the woman on the beach, even though I could still see her footprints leading off in a curve around the bay. I walked up the stairs of a steep park next to the Grand, and when I got to the top there was a Verdigris-ed statue of Queen Victoria holding her mace and orb.

I walked past the hotel, past the few cars parked by it, and past the few people still visiting. I saw a man cleaning the windows of a small building next to it. He was standing at street level underneath some filled-in archways and had extended a long squeegee so that it reached nearly three stories up; it wobbled and he struggled to keep it against the window. He was not dressed for his job, and he seemed to be working without a bucket; the squeegee was at least five or six times the length of his body, and he strained to hold it. Next to him, in between the arches under the windows of the building he was cleaning, was a blue plaque which read, 'Thomas Hinderwell 1744-1825 Historian and Philanthropist was born in a house on this site'.

I realised I was walking towards the library, and, as that registered, I realised my surprise at knowing where the library was. I couldn't remember the street—Vernon Road—but I could remember how to get there: I had to walk up into town, away from the front, into the part of the place hidden from tourists.

Well, I could remember mostly how to get there. After wandering around for a little too long, I plugged the library into my phone and found my way to where it was. I wanted to triangulate and verify the memories I had of that great cliff catastrophe, which seemed too large inside skull. And yet, there was the gouge like an eye in the side of the cliff at the edge of the town.

The library was opening as I reached the building. A couple of men were waiting at the door, one of whom looked as if he had slept on the bench outside. I looked around for a while and then asked at the desk if there was anywhere I could go for information about the hotel which fell so obviously into the ocean; I was told there was a file on the Holbeck landslip, and that it was kept in the Scarborough Room, which was busy already (as far as local history collections go). People were turning microfilm; some picked at huge volumes spread on cushions, the books all sourced

from a small room behind a door where I saw piles of them, labelled and laid horizontal, crammed onto shelves. All of us sat there in silence, surrounded by filing cabinets and bookshelves.

The file was actually three: three plastic blue files crammed with photocopies of photocopies of newspapers, pamphlets, and book extracts. The first copies were the most recent, so I went back in time, initially in large increments: the fifteenth anniversary, the tenth, the fifth. And I realised that, in that room on that day, it was almost exactly twenty-two years since the hotel fell. When I try to remember, that is about as far back as I can reach.

Next to a picture of the scattered bones of the hotel, printed in a newspaper ten years on from the landslip, was a story about roses plucked from the hotel gardens as they began to slide down the cliff face. 'As the Holbeck and its gardens were gradually disappearing to the beach below,' a former gardener took some of the rosebushes home to his wife, who dried the petals. To mark the tenth anniversary of the collapse she gave them to the former owner of the hotel, Joan Turner.[181] I wished a little that some of those petals had been pressed into the box file kept inside the Scarborough Room at the library on Vernon Road. But each page across the three folders was badly photocopied in stark black and white, so that the mock-Tudor stylings of the Holbeck Hall Hotel looked like piano keys, all neat and uniform—until the edge of it began to crack and then crumble, of course. But there was no colour at all, except the blue-plastic covers and those imagined roses.

After the commemorative pages came stories of the court case which followed the landslip. And then, in the *Scarborough Evening News* from March 21, 1995, there was a story about a plaque, set in a granite boulder on the clifftop next to the site of the hotel. 'The boulder symbolised the 30,000 tons of rock used to form a new sea wall at the foot of the Holbeck Hall Hotel landslip which swallowed the four-star hotel in June 1993.'[182] At the tenth anniversary this 'solitary memorial' was already weather beaten.[183] When I visited later that day, close to the twenty-second, the engraving was difficult to read. I had to trace some words with my fingers:

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[181] *Scarborough Evening News*. (2003). 'Rose petals gift to hotel's owner'. 5 June. 16.
[182] *Scarborough Evening News*. (1995). 'Symbol of the Holbeck disaster'. 21 March. 1.
[183] S. Jones. (2003). 'Solitary memorial to a once-glorious hotel'. *Scarborough Evening News*. 6 June. 16.

THIS PLAQUE WAS UNVEILED
BY

THE EARL HOWE, PARLIAMENTRY SECRETARY (LORDS)
MINISTRY OF AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

IT COMMEMORATES THE COMPLETION OF NEW SEA DEFENCES
AND CLIFF STABILISATION WORKS FOLLOWING THE
LANDSLIDE WHICH OCCURRED NEAR THIS
SITE ON 3/4 JUNE 1993 AND DESTROYED
THE HOLBECK HALL HOTEL.

THE REMEDIAL WORKS COST £2 MILLION AND WERE
JOINTLY FUNDED BY
MINISTRY OF AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD
SCARBOROUGH BOROUGH COUNCIL

20 MARCH 1995

CONSULTING ENGINEERS	CONTRACTORS
RENDEL GEOTECHNICS	TARMAC CONSTRUCTION LTD

I could not help but detect a mite of hubris in the pronouncement of the council and the government. And I could not help but think, in the Scarborough Room of the library on Vernon Road, that this granite boulder was not the solitary memorial to the Holbeck: what about those dried and pressed roses? What about the great gouge in the cliff side? What about the memory-wisps of that hotel which exist inside my skull? What about the pieces of the place which fell down the cliff and landed in the broiling sea, which spread or sank or stayed, bits of the hotel which will be covered now in molluscs, in limpets, in tiny things which will last as fossils in a million years?

You can find footage of the hotel falling off the cliff, or of the cliff slipping into the ocean and taking the hotel with it. My favourite clips are those filmed on shaky, handheld cameras. People on screen postulate what happened and why, though

sometimes they watch in silence. There are zoomed-in views of the town from the cliff and of the cliff from the town, all splashed in messes of pixels. And there are, in the videos, thousands of people crawling over the cliffs and the beach, trying to get a look at the hotel collapsing. Mostly the sun is shining and the sea is calm. One video I found is a compilation of news reports and personal footage, and a reporter, Hywel Jones (on ITN), likens the hotel to King Canute shouting the sea back and failing.[184] There were, apparently, great creaks as the chimney fell, as the conservatory crumbled, and as the land groaned at the weight of itself. The hotel manager, Nicholas Head, remembered the first slip of the land, when the rose gardens tipped off the cliff and into the ocean:

> It was like a child's slide, all curves. When I looked, 150ft below me, everything was there—every bush, every plant, the whole thing was laid out down there, but rippled like the sea.
>
> The heartbreaking things for me are the memories, everybody's memories. It was such a wonderful place. That's the saddest thing, knowing there'll never be another Holbeck Hall.[185]

The actual cause of the landslip was a 'build-up of moisture deep beneath the surface' of the cliff.[186] There are layers of clay and layers of sand and gravel in the cliffs above Scarborough, and if the sand and the gravel take in too much water then they 'create a lubricating effect between the beds of clay. Eventually … the clay will slip until it finds a flatter angle and stabilises.'[187]

On the morning of the first day—June 3, 1993—just the garden had gone. But cracks had begun to appear in the hotel building. At breakfast on June 4 all the guests were evacuated and, while they made attempts (along with staff and the hotel's owners) to remove what they could, police intervened and ordered the place abandoned. In the *Scarborough Evening News* Doreen McAllister complained about having no luggage left: she was only able to rush back into the building for her husband's medication. Doreen's husband, Reg, seemed to take a kind of umbrage at

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[184] 'Holbeck Hall Falls Into The Sea 1993 East Coast Scarborough'. (2012). *YouTube*. Uploaded by Ortorea Screenname. 10 May. Retrieved from www.youtube.com/watch?v=Irio374T5gE. 14:02.
[185] N. Head, qtd. in E. Johnson and A. Pearson. (1993). 'Holbeck Hall: the end of a dream' (a special publication from the *Scarborough Evening News*). June. 15.
[186] E. Johnson and A. Pearson. 6.
[187] Ibid. 6.

the hotel and the cliff face, which had the temerity to collapse when he was there on holiday. He told the paper that he and Doreen would not be coming back to Scarborough.[188] And, of course, in the aftermath of the paintings and ornaments and crockery and chairs and beds and tables and pipes and carpet falling into the North Sea, the letter writers of Scarborough were compelled to act by what they saw from their windows and in their newspapers:

> **Society is falling to bits as well**
> Isn't it awful watching something beautiful and seemingly permanent crumbling before our eyes (Holbeck Hall)?
>
> I guess the Turner family would at least have wished that they had had a bit of warning so that they could have rescued their treasures before the building collapsed.
>
> Just suppose that you were a 'treasure' and that you were about to be lost and that nobody had warned you. Have you ever thought where you would end up as society continues to crumble and the world is in such a mess? I do not trust man's wisdom. Do you? Even 'freedom of choice' is abused.
>
> Take Sunday trading for instance. If man uses his freedom of choice selfishly here, then any future generation will be deprived of a 'special day' altogether!
>
> When the love of money matters

[188] *Scarborough Evening News*. (1993). 'Guests caught in drama'. 4 June. 3.

more than God and man, we can
only expect to crumble and fall!
Ruth Taylor
3 Givendale Road,
Scarborough[189]

My hands were hurting by that point, and my eyes were too. I had tried to photograph everything I could from the file, and that meant I had read little. My phone was hot in my hands, burning through its battery, and the power point in the library was not working as well as it should. I closed the folders and looked around the room and at the books on the shelves and at the men and women working and writing around me. And as I mooched and looked and wandered my eyes locked on a book by the man whose plaque I had seen on the way to the library: *The History and Antiquities of Scarborough, and the Vicinity*, by Thomas Hinderwell, historian and philanthropist. And it occurred to me then, in the library, that the words on that blue plaque were not exactly all that could be said about that man, and that, of course, he was not just a philanthropist and historian; that the way of bookending him by date of birth and date of death was itself completely flawed.

*

The reason I didn't want to feel guilty about not exploring Oxford is because I had decided to use the day before the conference to catch up on some work. I had a backlog of emails and a couple of books I wanted to look through, so I found a spot in a corner of the common room and did my best to concentrate.

I had an email from my friend Melanie, who lives in Adelaide. We went through a phase of sending long and convoluted emails to each other, the kind which got longer and longer with each response as we tried hard to make sure to acknowledge each and every facet of conversation; those emails were full of the kind of enthusiasm which greets a new friendship, and were necessary because we lived so far apart. They were the kind of emails which would have been letters had postage not been so expensive, and had the year started with '19' instead of '20'.

[189] R. Taylor. (1994). 'Society is falling to bits as well'. *Scarborough Evening News*. 11 June.

In her email, Melanie was talking at length about the ideas of David James Duncan, a man I had never heard of, but whom she liked because of a notion he called 'river teeth'. She included in her email a section from a paper she wrote ('I'm being lazy so I'm just pasting in a chunk from my research proposal last year') which gave a description of those teeth. I didn't mind the laziness, and I was intrigued by what she wrote; it seemed to get at something which was beginning to bother me, an itch I needed to scratch:

> Duncan likens our experience of the present to a living tree. Our memories of our experiences are trees that have fallen into a river, whose current is the passage of time. The wood of the tree begins to be washed away by the water; stories, and details of memories, are lost or silenced, and begin to break down into mud that washes away.
>
> 'There are, however,' Duncan writes, 'parts of every drowned tree that refuse to become part of this cycle' (1995, p. 2). These knots in the wood are what he called 'river teeth': whorls of matter that do not break down in the water, moments that are 'time-defying knots of experience that remain in us after most of our autobiographies are gone' (1995, p. 4).[190]

I'm not sure I agree with Duncan one-hundred percent, but I think I like the gist. I prefer the way Gibson articulates our experience of the past. And it was one of his books I wanted to finish that day in the common room in Oxford. Though what Melanie wrote about what Duncan thought made me think of Thomas Hinderwell too.

Those 'whorls' of wood that somehow refuse to be caught up in the dark river they fall into (of which, of course, they were already a part) are not separate. They do not exist apart from anything else, and cannot be their own: they are impinged upon by the whole world around them and are active participants in it too; they are impacted even by those bits of boles which break off and flee towards the ocean, or that break down on the river bed itself. Our experience of the past is not made solely by things remembered. Although perhaps that is what Duncan is arguing, and I am coming at this from the wrong end of things? That postcard, for example, even though it was forgotten, is remembered now. Either way, I think it's fair to suggest that some

[190] M. Pryor. (1 April 2016). Personal correspondence. Eagle-eyed readers will notice a small discrepancy in some of the 'whens' of this narrative. It is not a novel, but it is sometimes close.

attention should be focused on the stuff which drifts off or falls away, all the dead and beaten sucked-down detritus of our lives, because that's where secrets lurk, and where the past explodes. And even if that past seems dead and gone it isn't, or isn't all gone: a taste of it lives briefly in dust and swirls and redundancy.

The patterns we make of the past help to make sense of it, but they are not literally what the past was like; they are simply how we feel it to be, and that is why a novel like *Remembrance of Things Past* can feel like the past: because its form apes what it's like to dive into memories. And when that dive is taken it becomes clear that it is not just the memories we have which form us, but the memories we have lost that work alongside each we have not yet had chance to lose. That's why, I think, I am enamoured with postcards and notes and broken records and missing gold sovereigns, because of the potential those lost, now found, things have to rescue something of the past from a sort of suspended animation. Each separate moment—according to Gibson, a perceived event 0.3 seconds long; 0.1 according to Sacks—pulses the next, and the task becomes something like what Duncan describes: a plotting together of the moments we have, a weaving of patterns and a sifting off of all that's extraneous. Those things saved are extra moments, extra pieces—missing links, perhaps.

The book I had to finish in Oxford was a collection of Gibson's essays, *Changescapes*. In it he talks about the invisible legacy of the past:

> All times—the past, present and future—are always in each other … the dead can give us what we need for making our living if we refuse to allow the ancestors to fade into oblivion. In other words, we have to heed the energy of the invisible. We have to absorb the legacy of the past while enacting our most noble rituals so we can make sure that all those people and actions that have composed history can be activated again and again in the eternally unfolding now.[191]

I finished his book, closed it, and turned it over in my hands. I had a couple of books by or about Hinderwell I wanted to look through as well, but I could not rid my head of Gibson. So I worked backwards through it then, and stole what I could, ripping quotes and notes and typing them into my computer:

[191] Gibson. *Changescapes*. 227.

> Every portion of the world is inextricable from every other portion and must be construed as part of a set of changeful possibilities, all interdependent and constantly determined by environmental conditions. Transmogrification is the rule.[192]

The past we think we have found will not stay that way for long. The next time we go back to it, it will have shifted, and our thoughts will pulse some other clue which hooks, and which will describe a different story because:

> Historical time is … a hydra-headed thing which fragments and proliferates as you examine it. Or more precisely, there is no one system of time: each character inhabits and activates a flurry of time scales and events, all inter-related but individual.[193]

This is true, as far as these things go. It's how time operates in our Relative universe, a universe which has been tested and re-tested at the eclipsing of the sun or in the rippling of intertwined space and time, and which makes each enclosed body (i.e. your own, or, perhaps, a postcard sent from a seaside town) the centre of the universe. That's perhaps a little too much to take in, especially in a text like this, but think about it: what is this work if not an attempt, by me, to convince you of my own centrality? And, at the same time, to convince you of the ridiculousness of that notion. That's what the fragile 'I' at the centre of a memoir should do.

What this bifurcating version of time implies is that the present is fractured constantly, and that the narrative we make of the past is the only chance that exists of stability; that memories, despite the way they change, fracture, loop, and pattern, and the way they mess with when and where, are the only way we string what is ourselves together.

I think one of the reasons those things in the bedroom at the back of Grandma's house matter, those things which I continue to hoard and keep, is that each and every one of them, even the most random scrap of a thing, expands the experience and memory I have of the world. There is no way for me to understand them all on their own, but the patterns which are produced by sifting through that mass are something like a constellation of the past—though think, for a moment, about that complexity,

[192] Ibid. 169-170.
[193] Ibid. 157.

about the sheer tumult of life as it is lived. Take, for instance, the sixty-five million year history of one species: the Australian Flatback Sea Turtle (*N. depressus*). Unchanged since birds were dinosaurs, depressus has lived through (cumulatively, approximately) 6,149,520,000,000,000 present moments, each colluding with the next, concatenating by necessity (to steal Proust's phrase) into what follows, all those 'long oblivions' of first impressions domino-ing into now.[194] In that sense, each present moment is a kind of end which calves off like a cliff face; each is a notch cut into spacetime which alters all the others, and is altered itself by all of the others. And if there is some part of me that suspects the evolving present experience of an ancient-eyed reptile is more stretched out than mine—with a slower burning flash of comprehension—the number of zeroes at the end of the cumulative and probably incorrect equation scribbled onto a page of my journal would still be large. And even though consciousness is this kind of seriatim thing, it—because of the way senses fail—seems seamless. Consciousness is a string of present moments elided: it is enabled by filling in and redundancy: how many of those billion moments have been lost? However many, if a turtle were to writes its past, it would still be left with the same method of forging a path through it: relying on memory and coincidence to make patterns that make sense of what came from before.

> Complexity must be grasped contingently, impressionistically. Investigating complexity, one can best hope to get a feeling for what is going on using continuous narrative accounts, speculative animations and open-ended 'possibility charts'. To still these kind of systems renders them no longer complex or dynamic.[195]

Gibson sometimes seems to argue that we need something more than books to make a version of the past which is complex and dynamic. I do not quite agree. Books can be closed and finished, yes. But as soon as the cover swings shut the book changes shape. (An alternative conception might be that a book loses all shape when it is closed, and takes a new one when it's encountered again.) Even though the page is a way of locking words into shapes, those shapes differ for each and every reader because of the collusion of their own consciousness.

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[194] M. Proust. (1922/1976). *Swann's Way*. Part II. C.K. Scott Moncrieff (Trans.). London: Chatto & Windus. (Original work published in 1913). 228.
[195] Gibson. *Changescapes*. 105.

Words *are* forceful events, and written words particularly forceful because of the way they seem to take a definite shape. But even that shape shifts and changes, in the way that objects—definite and shaped themselves—change and decay, become lost, become found, stop working, or perform different functions. An example might be the false teeth I found in their thousands upstairs at Grandma's house: they were, for my grandfather, moulds and models: as a dental technician, he made false teeth. But for me they were bizarre and a little creepy—completely, utterly useless, except to imagine with. Another example is the way I mean a slightly different thing to my grandfather when I say the word 'grand'. Objects *and* words are prey to flux:

> Understanding how subjectivity can operate in a collective and integrative manner, one senses mutual responsibility as a force at work amongst all objects and subjects in space and time, so much so that the entities an Englishman might want to call 'objects' are indeed always potentially changing to become 'subjects' and 'agents' too … A scene is always ready to alter.[196]

Things are part of the same fluxing patternless fabric we must stitch lines into in order to understand, because there is no sense in chaos until redundancies start to work, to make whorls of matter. They also seem, perhaps, a little like plucked-out swatches of that fabric. And yes, of course, narrative can be stultifying, simplifying, boring, dull; but when consciousness is tracked and memories are strung together it can pulse with the potential of life, in mimicry of the actions of the universe. And then, something of the past is kept. For instance, to say that Thomas Hinderwell was born in 1744 and died in 1825 is not enough. Hinderwell, for example, spent twenty years at sea in his youth, and in one story told about that time he pulled a firelock from the arms of a Russian sentinel. He was chief patron of the '*Humane Society* for the recovery of Persons in a state of suspended animation'[197]—that is, the drowned or drowning, all up and down the east coast of the north of England. He did not marry, but, as his biographer John Cole points out,

[196] Ibid. 39-40.
[197] J. Cole. (1826/2015). *Memoirs of the Life, Writings, and Character, of the Late Thomas Hinderwell, Esq*. London: British Library, Historical Print Editions. 31.

> He was not insensible to the charms of the fair sex, or impenetrable to the tender passion. [And] there are frequently impediments (as in this case) to the union of congenial minds, which it is not expedient should meet the eye of the public.[198]

In his later years Hinderwell developed an interest in Natural History, and built a small museum, 'select and well arranged', containing minerals, fossils, and pebbles, along with a 'miscellaneous assemblage of Antiquities'.[199] The museum included 'a curious capital belonging to a carved cross' unearthed from the foundations of the chapel in the yard at Scarborough Castle, and 'The Head of a Crocodile from the alum beds near Whitby, which [was] considered a very interesting specimen'.[200] He was an etymologist too, and wrote an essay called 'On the Derivation of Raincliff'. Raincliff is an edge of hill and woodland near Scarborough. Etymologies show how words mutate and become new, how the world always turns and affects itself. But of course etymology, as a method of tracking back, is flawed like all the others: it is impossible to plot the usage of a term uttered a thousand times by as many mouths, written into a million new contexts, each voice taking the word its own way, moulding it to syllables uniquely expressed.

*

When I went to Scarborough that day I did not have in my head an entirely sanguine version of Neil and Doreen's honeymoon. When I trawled through all the things at her old house, all the letters and papers and clothes and teeth and junk and tools and chemicals and bags and bills and bits of broken jewellery, I scanned almost 4000 separate pieces of paper. I started with the letters she kept inside her wardrobe, a bundle which included one torn to pieces. Perhaps I should have sewn it back together, like the letters written by Charlotte Brontë to Constantin Heger? He ripped them up and threw them away, but they were stolen from the dustbin by his wife, Zoë, who carefully stitched them up.

The letters from that wardrobe were correspondence from the time just before Neil and Doreen's honeymoon, and then from just after; in the small period they cover, Grandma goes from Miss Doreen Lord to Mrs N. Juckes, at least on the envelopes.

[198] Ibid. 56.
[199] Ibid. 41.
[200] Ibid. 42.

She moves from 41 Tennyson Place, where she lived with her parents, to Exeter Street—the two streets ran parallel in their Bradford, terraces backing onto each other, houses separated by small backyards and privies.

In one letter, addressed to Tennyson Place and Doreen Lord, I felt that Grandad, who was writing from Fenham Barracks in Newcastle-on-Tyne, was a little manipulative. The note read nothing, really, like a love letter should: it started with an admonition that Grandma should have written sooner. Then: Newcastle is grand and the food is grand too, and they/he—the army—are very busy. 'If it wasn't for the work,' he says, 'Newcastle would be the best place I've ever been in.' He talks about the extra sheet on his bed, and says they haven't had any bombs since he arrived, but that there have been sirens and 'guns with flares dropping'—which Grandad, somehow, managed to sleep through. He went to visit one of his friend's ex-girlfriends, and he saw Will Fyffe on stage at the Empire Theatre. Fyffe was a music hall artist from Scotland. In the letter Grandad talks to Grandma about when they can get married, and the things they might be able to do when they are. Those things are a recurring theme in his letters. Writing from Newcastle, he talks about the time they need to have alone when he next gets leave, and can come back to Bradford. Grandma (I don't have her reply, I am imagining) seems shy, prudish, and that fits with the person I knew. She would have felt entirely uncomfortable with that line of questioning, and with Grandad's tone, which was a little pushy. What I kept imagining when I read his words was the man I knew, who was once the man behind the letter, the one we visited in that house at the end of a gravel path a short walk from the bus stop in Halifax, a man who held a tissue tightly in his hand, and who died on the same day as Princess Diana. 'Don't forget to tell me if it's happened yet, will you?' says Grandad, and I know what he's talking about, even though he slips into the kind of language a couple might share. There's something in the fact that these letters were kept separately, and that one was torn to pieces, which is difficult.

There's another letter, from Joan Ryan, a friend of Grandma's. It was written on November 21, 1943. She wished Grandma congratulations on her wedding, and said, 'I slept on a piece of your cake so I guess I'm fated to be a spinster. Oh well, it will be nice and quiet, if nothing else.' Joan tells Grandma about the Americans she's been going around with, and about the Canadian boy she gave up: 'Now don't tell me I'm a little b—; I've been told before.'

I don't know Joan, but I liked her, in her letters. I think that feeling comes from the same place which makes me dislike the Neil writing to Grandma. To Doreen. And so, you can see, it is difficult to remain baffled with the past, especially when it is so entangled in your own—when it is your own: I can't help but feel that each of those letters played a part in what resulted in these words, my words, and that is a very strange thing to wonder at. These words which are, of course, a kind of manipulation themselves.

On September 15, 1943, Grandad wrote again to Grandma. He can't, he says, come to visit her on Saturday, but he can come on Sunday and he wants her to be alone: he 'will be mad if the house is full'. That's how the letter opens. Then onto any other business:

> I hope Nellie is a lot better now and everyone happy again instead of arguing and rushing about like last week.
>
> Please excuse the pencil but I'm in a hurry to catch the post so that you get it in time.
>
> Please don't forget Sunday.
>
> ALL my love and kisses
>
> Love Neil
>
> XXXXXXX
>
> XXXXXXX
>
> XXXXXXX

We are told and taught not to push the values we have onto the persons of the past—they lived in a different place, and were different people. Perhaps that's what Gibson means about bafflement? But it's a hard thing to practice, especially when they have sat opposite you sleeping, or occasionally wandered past you into the kitchen or the bedroom, pushing a Zimmer frame which clatters and clunks, the back legs of which have started to wear down. One thing is true: however I feel about the contents of those letters, each played a part in the relationship my grandparents had, which affected the person my father was, which made me who I am. We are all buffeted forward by times like these, which are sometimes not entirely sanguine; in this way each moment becomes wrapped up in us, and we are swollen with history. Every second passed adds to the mess and mass of it all.

It was tough to watch my grandmother slowly separate from her past. As she lost her memories, her sight and hearing, her movement—even the precision of sensations like touch and smell—she became untethered from the crushing, rolling wave of things behind her. What's strange is that it was all there still, forcing forwards, invisible and impossible and integral, every single piled-up thing imperative. We teeter at the crest of this wave until it calves off.

I think I will always remember wondering, when I talked to her, how she would feel if she knew what I knew. That I knew such private things, that I had been prying and sneaking, doing history even in her presence, always taking notes. That I had read those letters, but also that I had seen a diary in which my grandfather noted the day on which he had kissed her for the first time. Although I do think I know a little of how she felt: she would always ask what it was that I was writing.

I had not wanted to read his diary, and not just because I did not know if it was the sort of thing I should have been reading. I had spent the day flicking through letters and postcards and bills, I was bored and uncomfortable, and I had found nothing new besides years of Uncle Mac asking the same questions, and making near-identical comments about the weather in Bridlington, on decades' worth of annual postcards.

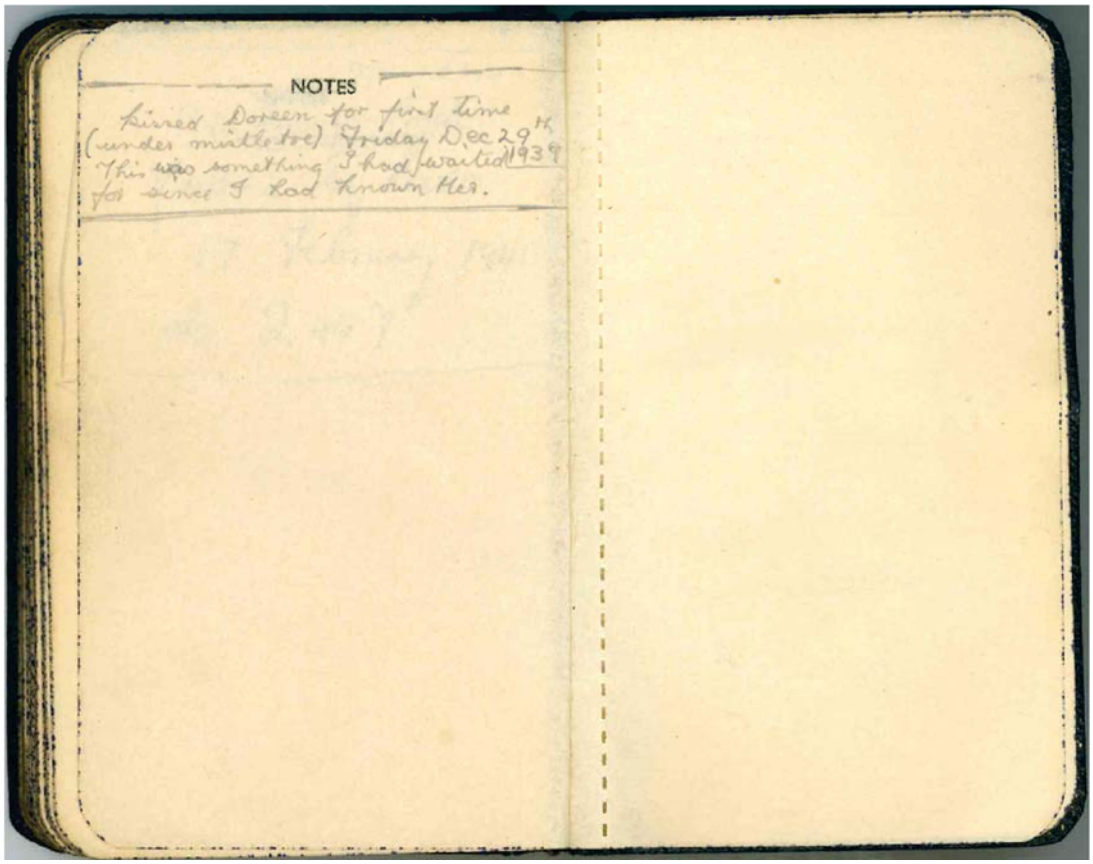
The handwriting in Grandad's army-issue diary is tiny. It was difficult-to-read, written in Brontë-sized pencil marks cribbed into each day, at first, until he gave up. The pencil which he used still pokes out of the spine; as you turn the pages it is pushed further and further out of its nook, squeezed out, yellow paint peeling, the very same thing made to fit seventy-five years before. It can be difficult to parse any sort of meaning from it, the diary, especially when he filled up each day-box—about the size of a couple of postage stamps—with crammed, private things.

The diary runs from January to April, 1939. And then, for whatever reason, Grandad stopped writing. I am more familiar with the stopping-of-writing than I would like to be, and so I don't begrudge him that.

I remember turning each page, not as carefully as I should have, sat opposite Grandma at Mytholm. The paper did not rip. After the daily entries finished I kept flicking, turned each thin and stiff paper leaf. Things fell out: a blotting paper sheet, which my grandfather could not have needed as he wrote in pencil; then some blue carbon-copy paper. I turned again, and just before I reached the end, on the last NOTES page of the book, very close to where the paper stops and the marbling of the boards

starts (of course, that sounds a little fancy: this was a cheap diary and a million were made; the boards were not marbled, they just looked like they were), Grandad had written,

> kissed Doreen for first time
> (under mistletoe) Friday Dec 29th
> This was something I had waited 1939
> for since I had known Her.



There's a gorgeous kind of romanticism here, close to the end of a military-issue diary, but it works against the things I read (inferred) in those letters. Desire is a funny thing. I am not sure I understand it, or how it works inside my own body, so it seems remiss to think I know anything of how it worked in the heart and mind of someone else. And, of course, I did not know my grandfather well. But still, I am both glad and guilty that I could not help myself, could not keep myself from reading his words, even if they have worked to shapeshift my sense of the past. Complexity makes pattern-seeking more interesting, and I have tried to stay as baffled as I can.

When I found out her secrets I could not bring myself to ask her of them, because I knew she would not like whatever it was I had found, nor the finality finding out might bring. Perhaps I also thought she would disagree with my conclusions. Certainly, I know, she would like some of those things to still be private.

And I remember wondering, on the floor of her flat, as I flicked through her secrets and talked to her about her eyes and what she remembered, if my reluctance was something I would come to regret. But the past, as I see it, as I seek it, has taught me that regrets are futile, even if it has also shown that they are not so easy to avoid. Perhaps, that the act of writing history *is* an act of regret, because there is nothing we can do with the past except watch closely as it eludes us, and then react as best we can.

5

Grandmothers

> The illusion is upon me that something adheres for a moment.
>
> Virginia Woolf. *The Waves*. 204.

In the common room in Oxford I spent some time trying to order my thoughts about Scarborough; I googled Thomas Hinderwell, found a couple of paintings of him, and read through my notes on Holbeck Hall—which was built in 1880, became a re-settlement home for prisoners of war returning from service in World War II, and then was turned into a hotel again in 1949. It would be entirely unremarkable except for the fact that it fell into the ocean and became one of my earliest memories—a great swarm of non-existent butterflies: the bones of it on the cliff side, the boat tipping and creaking, my brother held tightly by one of my parents, and my grandmother in her plastic rain hat. I must only have looked once or twice at the cliffs we had pushed out to see.

When I left the library in Scarborough I aimed for the cliff top. Up there, past all the houses still tempting fate, the wind was thicker and colder than it was in town. From there you can see the waves which Scarborough does its best to cloister: at the bottom of the cliffs they crash and froth and whisper. The scar where the cliff was is a little like a meadow, but steep and creviced. There are paths cut into it, official and not so, and fences wrapped around, rusting, salted, and bent. I picked up a small rock and put it in my pocket.

Watching over the town, watching over where the hotel was, are commemorative plaques, the granite boulder, and some information for tourists and visitors. Behind a

concrete path split with cracks is a row of benches stretching off into distance, each placed for someone gone, marked with a plaque of their own, and jostling for the best view across the bay.

The memories I have of what that place looked like from a boat rocking out on the waves are muddled. They've been infected by what I know and by how I have come to know it, and I am sure that they have shifted. But I can still see that cliff side as jagged and wrecked. And I can remember, too, the drive we took just before we headed back to Filey, to look at where the roads were closed and hundreds of people were gathered, waiting for the rest of Holbeck Hall to tip into the water. And there is, now, a great, rugged eye in the cliff, coloured green and speckled with tall weeds and flowers. Where rock fists through if it can, and where the whole tumble-down place must be nervous because the waves are unrelenting. The people who sleep in the guesthouses which watch the coast must hear the creaks and shudders of those grand old buildings, and there is only one way this can end: the cliffs will crumble, calve off forever into dust.

*

In Oxford, on my last night at the backpackers', I dreamt about the valley. In my dream I was in a car leading up the wooded road to the house where I used to live, a house sat midway up the valley wall, underneath the great black obelisk called Stoodley Pike. Once, that was the name of the hill it sits on, but over time the Pike appropriated the name for itself.

The road is winding and steep, and, in my dream, it was all iced over. The trees in the wood were thick with snow and their branches covered in clear ice, wrapping them in kind-of cobwebs; the valley sides which grip close to the road were half-drowned in dark slushing water. The Pike itself was small until the car rounded the last corner onto Lee Bottom Road, past Stansfield View Hospital (which was not demolished in my dream). And then the Pike stamped itself huge on the hill, a great finger pointing. There were no clouds in the sky.

I had fallen asleep reading again Ted Hughes's essay 'The Rock', and that perhaps explains the dream—or some of it. He writes about the cliffs above his first home, in the bottom of the valley, but for me the essay is only ever about the Pike:

> If a man's death is held in place by stone, my birth was fastened into place by that rock, and for my first seven years it pressed its shape and various moods into my brain. There was no easy way to escape it. I lived under it as under the presence of a war, or an occupying army: it constricted life in some way, demanded and denied, and was not happy. Beneath it, the narrow valley, with its flooring of cricket pitch, meadows, bowling greens, streets, railways and mills, seemed damp, dark, and dissatisfied—dissatisfied because the east-west traffic poured through it on a main route, converting our town to a mere corridor between places of real importance, such as to the east, Halifax, with its formidable backing of Bradford, Huddersfield, and Leeds; and to the west—after a grisly false start at Todmorden—Rochdale, backed by Manchester, Liverpool, and New York.[201]

I love the fact that the town I come from is dismissed as nothing more than a grisly false start. And that the great rolling lengths of the Atlantic are elided entirely.

In 'The Rock', Hughes talks about where his poems emerged. They were produced, he says, by that brooding landscape which dominated his childhood, 'where the division of body and soul … began'. He says that 'What excites [his] imagination is the war between vitality and death', and that his poems 'are attempts to prove the realness of the world, and of myself in this world, by establishing the realness of my relation to it … [that] the poems celebrate the pure solidity of my illusion of the world'.[202] In tracking the past, bewilderment is important. But there are such things as bedrocks: there are places where our memories always go, where body and soul come together, even if they are less solid than they seem.

Woolf says, in *The Waves*: 'Unless I can stretch and touch something hard, I shall be blown down the eternal corridors forever. What, then, can I touch? What brick, what stone? and so draw myself across the enormous gulf into my body safely?'[203] This craved solidity is reassuring, but it can also be deceiving: our bodies are liars, after all. I think it's this contradiction which makes the solid objects I write about interesting: they do no more than celebrate the solidity of illusion, while somehow keeping me as close as possible to the confines of my body, settled in the world.

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[201] Hughes. 'The Rock'. 122.
[202] Ibid. 126.
[203] Woolf. *The Waves*. 135.

I checked out of the backpackers' in a kind of dream-daze and walked through town to the college where I would be staying until the conference finished. It was relatively new, but built on the Oxford model: courtyards, dining hall, garden, flowers. When I got inside my room I spread the contents of the second suitcase on the bed and let the smell of dust permeate. Occasionally there were voices from behind the door, or on the other side of the window.

The colours of the things on the bed seemed a range of browns, from the lighter, yellower shades of paper and card, all the way to black. Towards the end of the spectrum were two glasses cases, one which belonged to Neil, my grandfather, and one which belonged to Alfred, my great-grandfather. Both are black leather, though Alfred's is smaller than Neil's, which came from C.F.B. Forshaw, an optician on Otley Road, in Bradford. Both my grandparents were born in Bradford, and did not move to the valley until my father was a toddler.

It is an oddity of the archive kept by my grandmother that most of the things in it are not hers, and that even the things that were—the sovereign, for example, or the letters she wrote—are lost. History can be like that. But she's there in each of the stories all the same. Solnit is literal on the reasons why:

> I think sometimes that I became a historian because I didn't have a history, but also because I was interested in telling the truth in a family in which truth was an elusive entity. It could be best served by not claiming an authoritative and disinterested relationship to the facts, but by disclosing your own desires and agendas, for truth lies not only in incidents but in hopes and needs. The histories I've written have often been hidden, lost, neglected, too broad or two amorphous to show up in others' radar screens, histories that are not neat fields that belong to someone but the paths and waterways that meander through many fields and belong to no one … Just as the purely patrilineal Old Testament genealogies leave out the mothers and even the fathers of the mothers, so these tidy stories leave out all the sources and inspirations that come from other media and other encounters, from poems, dreams, politics, doubts, a childhood experience, a sense of place, leave out the fact that history is made more of crossroads, branchings, and tangles than straight lines. These other sources I call grandmothers.[204]

[204] Solnit. *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*. 58-59.

In plotting a path through the things she kept, I've tried to tell a less tidy story than I could have, emphasising crossroads, branchings, and tangles.

Inside Neil's glasses case is a label which reads: 'N.R. Juckes. 12 Exeter St., Otley Rd., Bradford. Yorks. (June 29th 1950).' The lenses are a little dusty and the frames are brown and tortoise-shelled; they sit snugly on my head.

There are no glasses inside Alfred's case (which came from Hartley Shaw, of 37 Tyrrel Street, Bradford). His label is the same shape as Neil's, and says 'Mr. A. Juckes. Ref. 4982.' Alfred was not from Bradford, he moved there from Shrewsbury—after a brief stint in Canada—following events which culminated on the Habberley Road. What's inside *his* case seem not the kind of things he would have kept: I think it might have passed onto his wife, Kitty, even if it's still labelled as his.

I never knew Kitty, nor her husband: they died before my father was born. I have some of the cards and letters Kitty received, but I do not have any of those she sent: the great lacunae in my unkempt archive are things written or owned by women. It does feel dicey, sometimes, to infer my way into their hearts without solid objects, but even with those things it would be that way too: this is all a somewhat dicey enterprise. I looked for ways in which I might talk about those missing grandmothers, and Dillon, in *Essayism*, gives a hint. Listing, he says, is 'evidence of some vexation, a clue that something is missing'.[205] It might help, then, to do some cataloguing, to show the gaps where grandmothers lurk. Inside the glasses case which once belonged to Alfred are:

- Bits of jewellery—either necklaces or bracelets—made of tiny plastic beads which cause the case to rattle. Some are pink, others clear; the metal running through them is rusted and brittle;
- Two calling cards belonging to Vincent Clare, a nephew of Kitty's. He lived with Kitty and her family at 47 Exeter Street. Both of the cards have that address printed on their bottom left hand corner, and one has a list of names and figures written on its back: Dean 2-6, John 2-6, and then—perhaps—some bought things (or things to buy): Meat 1-0, Coal 3-2;
- Next is a calling card from the Revd. George H. Clare, Kitty's brother. Underneath his printed name he inked: 'Because of this is authorized to

[205] Dillon. 25.

receive & keep my child—G.H.C.' Vincent was George's son. Each of their calling cards is plain, dust-coloured, and cracking;

- A folded up and almost broken paper cover, from *Taylor's Mutation Singing Method: The Child's First Catechism of Music*, by John Taylor, published by George Phillip and Son, 32 Fleet Street, London, 1873. On the reverse, George Clare has signed his name, and written 'St. Edmund's College' in now-brown ink. There is more writing where the page is folded, but the words are obscured by time. One may say 'France';
- Four photographs of women, one of whom is Kitty. The others are her sisters. Sometimes I am not sure which is her: I have to compare the photographs with those I know definitely are, those taken later, when she was older, in the small yard on Exeter Street where she sits with Alfred underneath a canopy of dark grey leaves. She did not like having her photograph taken because, apparently, the side of her face was strangely swollen. But that is not something I can pick in the pictures kept inside the case, nor underneath those dark grey leaves;
- Finally, a newspaper clipping. No word of date, no places named I know; no sense of who kept it, what paper it came from, or even what some of the time-obliterated words say:

Obituary[206]

The sympathy of all our people goes out to Rev. George H. Clare, the excellent pastor of the Unitarian church in his deep bereavement in the death of his beloved wife, Eleanor M.H. Clare which occurred on Sunday last, being ill only a few days. She leaves behind a husband and infant son. She was only 22 years of age and had resided here for about a year. To pass away thus in a foreign land, far away from home and kindred and familiar associations is indeed sad, and its sad-

[206] Crosses mark obliterated text or rips and tears in the paper. Any mistakes are transcribed directly unless they are my own.

ness is reflected on a sorrowing husband
bereaved in a strange land, and left with
the care of the first dear pledge of wedded
+++++ without the support and +++++++
ing help of relatives. All have been
touched with the thought of this calamity
a calamity somewhat unusual even in this
world of sorrows.
The funeral was held on last Tuesday
afternoon from her late home, and was
attended by many friends, including the
Unitarian church and parish, the local
clergy, and a number of friends from
out of town. Rev. W.H. Fish of Ded-
ham conducted the funeral services, read-
a beautiful poem and reciting words
of comfort. Rev. F.J. Marsh of the
Congregational church, Rev. Mr. Lamb
of Sherborn, Rev. Mr. Halloway and a him,
and we think that if his friends had
number of clergymen belonging to the
Norfolk Unitarian Conference were pres-
ent.
The floral tributes were profuse and
were of a most beautiful character.
Around the form of the deceased and
in and about the casket were scattered
roses, lilies of the valley and maiden hair
ferns. On the casket was placed a cres-
cent of ivy and immortelles with the
word ‘MOTHER’. Another tribute

And here the paper rips completely. There are four pieces of it altogether—very nearly five. I think what follows is the correct order:

a garland of roses and calla lilies. The

ladies of the church sent a large basket of roses and maiden hair fern. This tribute covered a large table. Flowers were grouped profusely around the room and there were several tributes from out of town friends. The remains presented a beautiful and strikingly life-like appearance.
The bearers were Robert S. Gray, F. O. Pilsbury, Calvin Hartshorn and C.H. Hartshorn. Only the bearers and Rev. Mr. Clare attened the remains to Maple Grove cemetery where they were deposited in the tomb. The bereaved husband is awaiting a cablegram from Europe before deciding on the disposition of the remains. They may be sent across the sea for interment.

Here I could not help but feel that those remains included Vincent, who was sent across the sea. But perhaps that is unfair.

Deceased was of a quiet and retiring disposition. Coming into our midst an entire stranger, as she did about a year ago, she had won the respectful esteem of us all, and the very warm and affectionate regard of an inner circle of personal friends. Her sudden and utterly unexpected death has cast a shadow on our whole town, and filled our hearts with
++++++++++++++++++++++++++++
++++++++++++++++++++young husband whose sole companion she was in this land of strangers and a strange land to them both. A few fleeting happy

> months these two walked hand in hand, and now one of them has again gone forward to yet another strange country to await the coming of the other. In that land there shall be no parting forevermore and there the weary and the mourning shall find rest and joy and peace such as this world knoweth not of. May the promises of that land and visions of its ineffable beauty bring peace and calm once more to the storm swept, sorrow tossed soul of this bereaved and broken hearted husband.—Ed.

All this fits precisely inside Alfred's glasses case, folded to its shape by only time and hands; the paper is so delicate that small flakes of it come lose.

On my bed at Mansfield College I swept up the pieces with my fingers and brushed them back into the case. If it was not something which belonged to Kitty, then it must have belonged to Vincent once, and I wonder sometimes when he or she decided they could take this case and use it. I think the piece of newsprint comes from America, and that Vincent came to stay with Kitty's family when she was only twelve years old. He would have been much younger, and George would have brought him to England on a boat, before turning back to his parish in America without a wife and without a son. Of course, all this is just another avenue of what is left to prove, and even if I do, or can, I am not sure doing so will help: the realness of the world and my relation to it is not confirmed by facts like these, or even by the lines I can draw between them. Like Proust's idea of where the past resides, I can't help but feel that realness—in the way Hughes describes it—exists at a deeper level, past the intellect. Woolf thinks that the seamlessness of prose is a way below that surface level, where the essence sensed is not just life, but an intensification of it:

> What art can the essayist use in these short lengths of prose to sting us wide awake and fix us in a trance which is not sleep but rather an intensification of life[?] … His

> learning may be [profound], but in an essay it must be so fused by the magic of writing that not a fact juts out, not a dogma tears the surface of the texture.[207]

So, realness—bizarrely—is an intensification of life, where facts, as they happen, merge with the world in which they sit. And, what's more, they keep merging. This is what prose can emulate, and a few chosen facts must do the job. The effect is akin to something hyperreal, a zoomed-in version of a thing seen, drawn from less than is necessary to make a fraction of all there is.

Narrative and tableau, Barthes' description of Michelet's prose, represent a model which aims at seamless intensification. I think the objects in Alfred's glasses case present a version of a tableau, one which manages to acknowledge some of the vicissitudes and complexities of memory. I hope the case is the kind of object which encourages bewilderment, as well as a little solidity—even if I am not convinced it has ever been entirely solid. It certainly manages both for me: the slippage between confusion and firmness is a feature of reality and of the past, and perhaps the ephemeral nature of all the things I've leant on—even, perhaps, Holbeck Hall—is part of why.

Michelet wrote that, 'Prose is of all forms of writing the least figurative and the least concrete, the most abstract, the most transparent, the purest; … the most *human*.'[208] This last, intangible, quality is important, and perhaps possible to pin a little more precisely: according to Barthes, the goal of Michelet's writing was anxiety: no chapter of his work was ever meant to be conclusive.[209] Is it, then, a *human* trait to be anxious about the past? To try and try to firm foundations, but always to know the shakiness and indurability of what results? Dillon again:

> I want essays to have some integrity (formally, not morally, speaking), their strands of thought and style and feeling so tightly woven they present a smooth and gleaming surface. And I want all this to unravel in the same moment, in the same work; I want the raggedness, the patchwork, a labyrinth's-worth of stray threads. You might say I'm *torn*.[210]

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[207] V. Woolf. (1925 and 1932/1948). 'The Modern Essay'. *The Common Reader: First and Second Series Combined in One Volume*. New York: Harcourt Brace. 294.
[208] Qtd. in Barthes. 39.
[209] Barthes. 23.
[210] Dillon. 32.

Torn is apposite: the prose writer—any prose writer, I'd argue, not just an essayist—is always caught in this crosshair. As Hayden White says in *Metahistory*, in his chapter on Michelet, 'Human consciousness is … depicted as inadequate to both the comprehension of reality and the exercise of any effective control over it.'[211] White then quotes Thomas Carlyle's 'On History', in order to describe the vastness of that reality which we cannot comprehend. It is a depiction of the collusion of moments, of the rickety nature of the fact itself:

> Actual events are nowise so simply related to each other as parent and offspring are; every single event is the offspring not of one, but of all other events, prior or contemporaneous, and it will in its turn combine with others to give birth to new: it is an ever-living, ever-working Chaos of Being, wherein shape after shape bodies itself forth from innumerable elements.[212]

Prose was Woolf's medium, and, I'd argue, hers is some of the most human—whatever that word actually means—that I have encountered: it is both anxious and firming, solid and glutinous. This is the quality she spies in the best work of the best essayists: for her, the past emerges, and her memories cohere, when the present *feels* seamless. She says, 'The past only comes back when the present runs so smoothly that it is like the sliding surface of a deep river. Then one sees through the surface to the depths.'[213] Prose—the way it moves ever forward, the way it hacks at the movment around its edges, feels like a kind of river. With the right combination of narrative and tableau it is possible to evoke a smoothness which is reminiscent of experience and the memory of experience; which describes a Chaos of Being. This kind of narrative—this one here, on the page—is always an attempt at firmness which fails. But all its words, which are things themselves, build into a kind of whole, a redundancy, a whorl of matter. And that, I think, can still help settle sense-of-self in the present, even while embracing and producing anxiety and inconclusivity. At least, it can for me. Prose like this is one way to celebrate the solidity of the illusion of the world, and to pretend for a moment that things do adhere.

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[211] H. White. (1973/1983). *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press. 145.
[212] Qtd. in H. White. 147.
[213] Woolf. *Moments of Being*. 98.

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Going to Scarborough, and failing to find that picture- postcard spot, was the catalyst for a mad kind of rush into the past. The impetus for the next stage of that journey was a small sheaf of papers tied by red elastic. On the bed in my room at Mansfield College I untied the band from the folded papers. Together, the sheets make a story or a journal—something written in prose. There are thirteen almost-translucent pieces, thin and grey and a little like skin, each dated August 6, 1934. The writing on them leans to the right, and is cramped and black.

Grandma said that it was Francis—her brother-in-law—who wrote it. She was sure because he was a bit … and her voice trailed off. But she touched the side of her head, not finishing her sentence until I opened my mouth to fill in the words she was looking for. She beat me to it: 'Clever. He and Bernard did not get on.' Bernard was another of Neil's brothers, along with Kevin and Francis. And the way she said 'clever' implied almost the opposite: I didn't know if she meant crazy or smart, but it could have been both or neither. Francis looks a little of both in the photographs I have seen of him.

I asked why it couldn't have been Bernard, and she said he wasn't the writing type. Perhaps there is an inference there, unintended, but still: 'Clever', she said, with a digit pushed to her temple and twisted slightly forward, a blue and purple vein curling up the side of its marble flank.

To follow the story I had to learn to read the words Francis may have written: the writing was difficult to decipher and at first the pages were out of order. They began like this:

Neil the sandwiches which they had saved for him, trade was quiet owing to the bad weather + they had not long to wait + then after satisfying themselves + grateful for a few minutes rest they all betook themselves to the Village again, down the steep streets with Neil with them now to describe various items of interest to them they reached the Harbour, groups of men of the seafaring type + women with bonnets which looked very quaint.[214]

It seems as if my grandfather had, once, in the year 1934, walked down the steep streets of a seaside village. When I asked Grandma if she could remember that year

[214] As with Eleanor's obituary, mistakes in the text have been faithfully reproduced. That is, unless they are my own. It became difficult to distinguish one from the other.

she said she could, but then proceeded to talk in inexact terms. Then, she would have been eleven years old. She told me about her family, the same stories which echo through years of conversations: her father was Charlie Lord, her mother, Louisa Reynolds. Charlie's father ended up in America with 'another lady' and Louisa's mother, 'Well, she went funny. They had to put her in a home.' Why, I asked: 'I suppose the hard life she'd had because her husband was what we call today, erm. God. Erm. Not communism … Irish.' Irish? 'There were a name for 'em … Orange!' She told me a story about how her grandmother had had to sneak her children to their christenings, dressing them in the toilet at the end of the yard before taking them down to St. Mary's Church. I asked Grandma what happened to her grandfather and she wasn't sure, but he must have died, perhaps in the war. 'I don't know that bit, but he must have gone because y'never heard of him after a certain time.'

Grandma's mother, Louisa, had three sisters—Kate, Cissie, and Annie—just like Grandma had herself. What I did not know until we spoke about 1934, sat in her flat at the bottom of the valley, was that Grandma also had a brother. He died when he was very young and she could not remember his name.

Louisa Reynolds lived on Barkerend Road, in Bradford. When she married Charlie her two younger sisters moved in with them, and Grandma remembered that her Aunt Cissie used to take her out: 'She thought I were wonderful.' But the next jolt of conversation is this: Cissie died at nineteen, and then 'Another one died. An' she was only twenty-one.' Then Louisa's mother 'went funny. She used to—me mother's said many a time—she used to put forks and knives out fer the two that died. An' then she just got worse.' Grandma told me that Louisa was stopped from visiting the home where her mother lived, because it—whatever it was—was starting to affect her too. I asked Grandma how old she was when this was happening, and she told me that she used to go, sitting in a pram, with Louisa when she visited her mother.

Charlie had a small limp—'he kinda went over on one of his legs'—and he worked as a wool warehouseman 'down th'bottom o' Leeds Road', in Bradford.' He liked to walk around Undercliffe Cemetery in his time off, and he and Louisa got on well, 'to a certain extent, yes'; but she was 'a queer sort', who 'kinda spoilt it for him all the time.' Grandma told me a story of how Queenie, the family dog, had 'done a biz' in the house. Louisa marched down to the warehouse where Charlie worked and demanded he come back home to wipe it up.

Grandma loved to talk about the allotments her father kept, where he bred rabbits, guinea pigs, and hens up near Peel Park. She always named the places as though I knew them too, and I would have to remind her that I did not know Bradford well, and that most of the streets she spoke about were not there anymore, or were very different. I asked her what the guinea pigs and rabbits were for, and Grandma said 'Well, it's not very nice, in't this, but erm, he used to sell them, because they were beauties. They were white. And he used to sell them fer experimentation.' 'And', she said, 'I don't think me mother ever bought an egg.'

Louisa used to bake, savoury stuff mostly, like Yorkshire puddings and bread. She had a white shelf, 'white, like a … not a shelf. It used to fit in front of the fire and they used to, she used to, an' it was white. An' when I say white I mean white. W' scrubbin' it.' On this not-quite-shelf Louisa would put bread in front of the fire, 'Around about four loaf tins they'd be, two flatcakes, an', if she were makin' any, currant teacakes. Oh, an' they were beautiful.' Louisa, said Grandma, was a good baker, but not a fancy one: 'She used to, erm, whar is it now she used to do in a pan? Puddin's. Like a boiled puddin'. A sweet puddin'. She used to wrap it in a cloth, knot it, an' then put it in the water, an' cook.'

I liked to watch her remember. We talked a little more—about Louisa, and the allotments—and then I started to read her the story she'd done her part in keeping for more than eighty years.

On *August 6th 1934—John Armitage turned over + glanced at the clock perched precariously on a chair by his Bedside and noted the time 5.50, momentarily stretched himself + ~~over from~~ got out of Bed realising this was Bank Holiday, + the day he had promised Neil, his 14 yr old son who was camping out with his brother scouts, that they, that is his Mother, younger brother, oldest Brother and John himself would visit him at Waithes Nr Bluecar on the East Coast.*

If this is a true story, it is not entirely true. John, as far as I can tell, is Alfred, who was sometimes called 'Fred. Waithes does not exist, but Staithes does, as does Redcar, not Bluecar. Redcar is pronounced 'Redka'. Of course, Neil would have been able to tell me if the story was true. Instead, all I can say for certain is that it *feels* true: nothing happens, not really, and the weather is bad, and that is perhaps the truest story I can imagine. But I cannot help wonder why only some of the names were changed: Neil is still Neil, and there is a Frank (but no Francis).

When I copied out the words written about that day in August I did my best to record them verbatim, though it was a little difficult to make the same mistakes again. When I read the story out loud to Grandma I had to make corrections as I went: it's difficult to articulate a crossed out word or sentence. Perhaps this is one way the written word might hold a little tighter to the past—or perhaps it's just another example of redundancy.

When Alfred—who I think is John in the story—woke up early on August 6, 1934, he would have woken up on Exeter Street in Bradford/Bradforth. This street does not exist anymore: there is not even a space on the map where it used to be. Though, on older maps, you can see where it was, along with the allotments, and the cemetery where Charlie Lord would walk. Everything is close to St. Mary's, which their Catholic houses clung to like limpets.

[John-Alfred's] *spirits fell somewhat when he realised the sound he heard when he woke up was rain but hoping for the best he lighted the fire and prepared to make a cup of tea for his youngest, Kevin who had to serve 7 o'clock Mass a post which he filled on alternate weeks the year round.* They go to mass and then make sandwiches; *John had now had time to think things over ~~by now~~ + had almost decided what he would do if the rain continued*: he would send Neil a telegram and tell him that they would not come. But that does not happen, even though the rain continues to fall. John decided to go because Neil would need his pocket money and, I think, more than anything else, Alfred and Catherine (John and Mrs Armitage in the story, but 'Fred and Kitty to their friends) wanted to go somewhere else, to see something else. And this was the time to do it, this day in 1934: *they were ready for their trip a trip which they had all looked forward to. being the only chance they would have of seeing the sea, in fact a ½ day per year had been John's + Mrs A's solitary outing for 20 yrs as with 4 sons who could* [and here we turn a page and the paper crinkles] *all do their share in the eating line + whom they had decided years ago that they should have the best Education possible under the circumstances so they had both made sacrifices the success of which was still in the air*. I know that they were dressed as well as they could be, but that what they could afford was not much: *they had managed to keep out of serious debt + pay their way by dint of stragetic clothes buying + relying on Clubs especially for Boots, a new suit for Father or new Dress for Mother was + had been for year entirely out of the question.* This specific detail—the reluctance to fall into

serious debt—was the first point in the story at which I began to consider if it could perhaps have been Alfred, not Francis, who wrote it all down. He would have been wary of that, more than any of them, carrying as he was those secrets in his head. But Grandma didn't know that, and here I am getting ahead of myself again. A detail can do that sometimes, if it has space to burst. (Although perhaps this detail stands out precisely because I do know something of his secrets?) Dillon writes about this explosive quality of the detail, on what it can suggest about the world which surrounds it:

> I want the detail, and I want the halo of affinities and correspondences that surrounds it. I want this point in space that is irreducible, but I cannot help admiring the way it sets off all these other points—'sets off' in the sense of illuminating by comparison or contrast, and 'sets off' too in the sense of: explodes, detonates, unleashes. The detail is only a detail because of what it implies about the rest—or what it sucks into itself from the surrounding whole.[215]

This is how a single detail works within a piece of seamless prose. It somehow triggers the halo of affinities which wrap around it, then the work on the page shimmers and patterns unleash. It is a strange contradiction, a firming and a dissolution. And each time a work is encountered, a different detail detonates in a different way, even if each time it does there is something like a sense of the surrounding whole. Producing a sense of the whole from 'space that is irreducible' is difficult: it involves selection, narration, curation. This is, to say the least, a more natural and seamless process in memory than it is in writing. Not all skerricks relinquish the past, and it is rare that they do without a level of narrative forcibly attached (think of the beads inside an old and handed-on glasses case). What's more, each reader reacts in a different way. But the past can quiver into a chaos of being, within the confines of our skulls, if the right pieces of it are isolated and described:

> For it is hard to discover
> the winged vertebrates of prehistory
> embedded in tablets of slate.

[215] Dillon. 80.

But if I see before me
the nervature of past life
in one image, I always think
that this has something to do
with truth. Our brains, after all,
are always at work on some quivers
of self-organization, however faint,
and it is from this that an order
arises, in places beautiful
and comforting, though more cruel, too,
than the previous state of ignorance.[216]

This is Sebald, in a poem called 'Dark Night Sallies Forth'. His longer poems are like bridges between those haiku-like bursts and the full throttle prose of his essays and book-length work. They are another evocation of the method his rings of smoke are built from and take advantage of. In the next line of the poem he says exactly what he means by 'the winged vertebrates of prehistory': a beginning, before his birth—a point in time which is isolated:

How far, in any case, must one go back
to find the beginning? Perhaps
to that morning of January 9, 1905,
on which Grandfather and Grandmother
in ringing cold drove in an open
landau from Kloster Lechfeld
to Oberneitingen, to be married.[217]

Somewhere close to Exeter Street, on the morning of August 6, 1934, my grandmother was sleeping. She would meet Neil on her sixteenth birthday—June 14, 1939—on Otley Road, where she was standing with her friend Kathleen Geraghty. 'He was supposedly going about with a friend of mine, Susan Burns,' said Grandma. 'And then, I don't know, er when, er, Kathleen Geraghty, she was my best friend, and we

[216] W.G. Sebald. (2002). 'Dark Night Sallies Forth'. *After Nature*. Michael Hamburger (Trans.). London: Hamish Hamilton. (Original work published in 1988). 81.
[217] Ibid.

were walking down Otley Road this day on my sixteenth birthday and who should be coming up but er Neil Juckes. So er we started talkin an en. Well, he started talking, and after that, I just, er, kept talking.' But in 1934 she was 11. And that was years away.

In the story John, Mrs A., and the boys are at the train station holding pasteboard tickets. And then they are on the train, sharing a carriage with a woman and her daughter—some Mrs. Smith, or Brown. And here, next to the text in thick, large letters running up the side of the page someone (whoever wrote all this down) has crossed out the words ~~so be it~~. I tried to show them to Grandma, but had, in the end, simply to make an attempt to describe what I saw.

It is raining thickly now (then); *it's a ill wind says John to himself so owing to the inclement weather the usual Bank Holiday crowd is conspicuous by its absence* as the train shifts out from the station, steaming and slow. Then the thin grey paper must be turned again and, on the back of the page, are typed two incongruous lines. The first is this: 'The boy stood on the burning deck.'[218] The second is: 'Did your mother come from Ireland.'[219]

When the train finally shifts off from the station in wet and dreary Bradforth *Mother + Father can lean back ~~at last~~ without looking for, + finding, a job every 2 or 3 minutes as happens at Home always.* At this point in the story I paused, and Grandma and I talked a little about being busy. She grew wistful. It wasn't possible to be busy at the age and stage of life she was at, and I think she missed distraction: she missed being able to take her mind off her mind. After we talked I went into Hebden to try to find her a prawn sandwich. Then, when I got back to Mytholm, we drank tea and talked about family—who was well and who wasn't—and what we would do for the rest of the day. It took a long time to decide. Grandma suggested we go for a walk around the building, or half of the building, and so she readied herself, put on her red sleeveless jacket and red shoes, and pushed her walking frame along the flagstones. She complained about the stones being uneven; that I was too protective as I held her sleeve when walking. But I did not let go. And after half a lap we sat on a bench and listened to birds and traffic, and the sun was actually hot—though there was a small breeze

[218] The first line of the poem 'Casabianca', by Felicia Dorothea Hemans.
[219] From the song 'Did Your Mother Come From Ireland'. The earliest version I have been able to track down was recorded by 'Boy' Joe Petersen, and written by Jimmy Kennedy and Michael Carr.

all do their share in the eating line & whom they had decided years ago that they should have the best Education possible under the circumstances as they had both made sacrifices the success of which was still in the air. It had been a tight squeeze on occassions & some of the periods which they had been through they prepared to forget, such as the War time & the economy stunts of 1931 & since, still they had managed to keep out of serious debt & pay their way by dint of strategic clothes buying & relying on Clubs especially for Boots, a new suit for Father or new Dress for Mother was & had been for years entirely out of the question.

So now they were about to start for what we might almost call their annual Holiday or visit to the Sea made more exciting this time as they were going to see Neil who had been away some 10 days. Father takes the £ note, so carefully put away by Mother, & is told to put it somewhere safe till they reach the station where it will be exchanged for the tickets which will release them for a few hours from the too familiar scenes of Bradforth.

On reaching the Station through the recurring steady downpour through which in spite of Raincoats & Macs they all begin to feel somewhat damp, bodily but not Spiritually, Father joins the que outside the Booking office & eventually ~~turns up with the rest~~ rejoins the rest of the Family with the precious bits of pasteboard entitling them to the journey to the coast.

Now to the platform & they await the train which will take them safely, they hope, the first stage of their journey as when they reach Blaecar they will have to take a Bus to the camp at Walkers the distance of which John reckons from looking at Railway guides & Books as being about 10 miles so that the change from the £ note will be wont adding to before they venture on the 2nd stage of their journey.

At last the Train steams into the station & they clamber into a carriage which has already as occupants a Lady & girl of about 13 & 14. its a bit wind says John to himself so owing to the inclement weather the usual Bank Holiday crowd is conspicuous by its absence & overcrowding it at a discount. According to the excursion Bills they should arrive at Blaecar

which rolled through the valley and rattled the leaves of trees. A blackbird swooped, a dainty little thing with a bright-yellow, pen-nib beak; then a crow's odd call ripped through the trees. After that, we walked back to Grandma's flat for another cup of tea.

'How did I get like this, Dan?' she asked.

'Being around longer than most of us,' perhaps.

'I was going to say, "Old age and poverty".' Then she slept in her chair by the window and I listened to birds and church bells through the glass. She held her slipping head in her hand as she slept, and the skin at her temples and on her cheeks was folded and wrinkled like a pond broken by a pebble.

Her Charles Bonnet Syndrome was bad that night. Grandma didn't want to go to bed, she wanted to move house: 'I'll have to go somewhere else. Why do people have to do this?' I remember when I hugged her in her bedroom that her head fit comfortably beneath my chin. Her skin was cold and her eyes were wet. I remember leaving her knowing that she was scared and lonely, and not quite knowing what to do about it. I could not imagine the dreams she must have had, or the way her heart and head must have revolted against it all—how it must feel to be told all you see is merely spun from somewhere dark, coiled, and corroding. I tried to tell her that that is how we all work: that we make our own damn worlds. But I couldn't make the words work.

*

In the morning we talked again about Charlie Lord, and about Charles Bonnet. I remember Grandma sat there, in her chair by the window, thinking. She pushed the folds of her skin upwards with her index finger, her face a mixture of skin and gravity, and she looked like what she was, what Lively says we are: 'The accretion of all we have been'.[220] That morning her back was sore and her ears were shot. Or, her hearing aids were: her ears were long gone. I put gel on her back and changed the batteries in her plugs; we ate Special Flakes from Lidl, and she dozed, accreted like Louis says he is, too, in *The Waves*: 'a vast inheritance of experience … packed in'.[221] And, as I read to her again, I remember thinking that it would be strange not to see the places in the story while I was there and could—that to not go would be something I might regret

[220] Lively. 57.
[221] Woolf. *The Waves*. 142.

from the other side of the world. And so I went. I woke her to tell her, packed a bag and coat, and left her to the clocks, the birds, and her shadows.

I drove to Bradford first. It felt like I found Undercliffe Cemetery almost by instinct, though perhaps that was instinct tempered by time spent pouring over maps. It was silent and sunlit in the cemetery, and I understood why her father liked to walk there: inside the walls all the noise of the city dulled, became other-wordly, broken only by the odd siren, or sometimes voices from the other side of the bricks. Dandelions and bumblebees got on with things at cemetery time.

Then I found Tennyson Place, where Grandma was born and first lived, but I didn't stop—couldn't. The excuse I gave myself was that the street was cramped by cars: that I would not have been able to park. But what if the ruins we are left with don't appear as we feel they should? The eyes of the houses on Tennyson Place opened right onto the street, into the car I was in (driving in slow circles past graffitied bins, scratched BMWs, and the strange mixtures of new and old terraces). I tried to work out where Exeter Street was, but the best I could figure was a patch of tarmac and grass, covered in shattered glass and pieces of pavement.

I headed back through Bradford to St. Mary's, the church which, once, had kept all those streets running. Its doors were locked and barred, and its windows were split with star-shaped holes. The statue of Mary outside was crawling with ivy. But I had been inside once, for Grandad's funeral. That was the first time I remember being in Bradford. There were black cars milling around, and a coffin sat in the middle of the church by the altar. That day was the first on which I remember seeing my parents cry. I can remember the gilt-edged frames of paintings in the church, the gold-coloured candelabras, the statues and altar, the stained-glass windows lit up from outside, and the names and names written on every wall.

I wished its doors would open. Traffic wrapped the church; the roads close to it were being torn up and remade. People passed without looking. The building felt not quite empty, certainly no shell: it was solid and brutish. But what was in there? Why did it not feel what it was? I walked around it, took photos of a sign that said 'To Let', and walked around again. The door had on it a washed-out sign on which the times mass was held were still visible. I thought of all the life in me pushed off from that pile of tacked-together bricks.

And then, underneath the white, tiled archway of a building tacked onto the church, where I could see kitchen implements pushed up against a dusty window, I saw—suddenly—the place where a sign had run years before, advertising a showing of *The Sleeping Beauty*. I felt what the writer Wayne Price calls the 'luminous immediacy' of the past;[222] and I realised I was stood on the spot where my grandfather had stood in the pile of photographs I had kept (and made) of that mystic parade through Bradford. I was stood on the unsteady crust of the present, and it was uncomfortable to be so obvious and in colour there, when the version of this world I knew so well had always been black and white. I did not want to go near the archway or the flaking blue roller-door underneath it (which I could not see in that first picture, covered as it was with crowds of people who were not there now). Time began to misbehave—or perhaps it was the place which was acting up?

Sebald sees place as partaking in, and producing, the co-mingling of living and dead; as an arbiter of the nonconcurrency of time he articulates in *Austerlitz*. The cultural geographer, John Wylie, argues that Sebald conceives of the past and place as interlinked; that memories literally take place, and shape it. This, when we experience it, is spectral and uncanny. Wylie says that,

> The spectrometric places Sebald's narrator voyages through are thus not points of access to past lives and events, nor a surface crust which memories and histories sometimes pierce. Measured by ghosts, and activated within an irreducible and originary wandering, these places are *the past itself*, the ceaseless becoming-past of the present in all its inescapable revenance.[223]

So perhaps I was not stood on the crust of the present, but within the very past itself (which raged and puttered around me.

An example from *Austerlitz* which demonstrates the conjoining of past and place occurs in a ladies' waiting room at Liverpool Street Station. After following a porter through a doorway in a builders' fence, Austerlitz ends up in a disused waiting room.

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[222] W. Price. (2017). 'Time as Material in Creative Practice'. Looking Forward/Looking Back: A China Australia Writing Centre Symposium. 25 October. The Esplanade Hotel, Fremantle.
[223] J. Wylie. (2007). 'The Spectral Geographies of W.G. Sebald'. *Cultural Geographies*. 13. 171-88. Retrieved from http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1474474007075353. 176. Italics in original.

There the perceived natural order of things breaks down: the space between memory and the present fractures and the light which shines through high-up windows performs strange eddies, 'curious trajectories which violated the laws of physics'. That is, physics before Einstein.

Austerlitz sees strange things in that waiting room: rows of pillars, vaults, great stone structures crossing and criss-crossing, all peopled by tiny figures. He feels the room he's in expand and then turn back on itself; he can't quite work out if it is a ruin, or in the process of being built.[224] Then he glimpses a sequence of interlocked, interconnected memories, 'Memories behind and within which many things much further back in the past seemed to lie, all interlocking like the labyrinthine vaults … in the dusty gray light, and which seemed to go on and on for ever.'[225] The Ladies' Waiting Room at Liverpool Street Station disrupts binary notions of space and time, and—when the two are fused—Austerlitz gains access to his past:

> In fact I felt, said Austerlitz, that the waiting room where I stood as if dazzled contained all the hours of my past life, all the suppressed and extinguished fears and wishes I had ever entertained, as if the black and white diamond pattern of the stone slabs beneath my feet were the board on which the endgame would be played, and it covered the entire plane of time.[226]

It felt a little like that.

Rosie Braidotti considers the best work of the Humanities to be done in gaps between binaries.[227] This in-between space might be what Lynne Wolff refers to when she describes how the Sebaldian imagination works: she says that, 'The presence of … alogical connections can … be located in *the space between* sensate perception and cognition, a space that can be bridged by imagination.'[228]

When past and present dissolve, perhaps when binaries do, Sebald provokes the reader into the kinds of questions about memory and the past he considers productive. He is able to make a reader reflect on the oddness of their place in time and space. Ironically, he does this by evoking something close to Einstein's theories about the

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[224] Sebald. *Austerlitz*. 135.
[225] Ibid. 136.
[226] Ibid. 136-137.
[227] R. Braidotti. 'Posthuman Humanities: Life Beyond Theory'. *The Posthuman*.
[228] Wolff. 160. Italics are my own.

physical reality of the universe: the theory of relativity also closes off seeming-binaries; an understanding of it changes how we might consider ourselves in space and time.

Alexander Ross, the physicist who tried to describe the motions of the universe as predicted by Einstein, gives a metaphor for understanding this more complex, more integrated way of knowing the universe. In the pamphlet in which he considers it difficult—near impossible—to describe a thunderstorm to a deaf man, he attempts to depict the four-dimensional world of spacetime, where space and time literally intertwine as a fourth dimension. To describe that union, he gives a metaphor:

> A cinematograph film of a street procession shows … how the advance of the procession took place in space and time. Suppose the film were cut up into separate pictures and these piled in order one on top of the other. We have then a celluloid block an inch long, three-quarters of an inch wide, and of a height depending on the length of time the procession took to pass. A pin passed vertically down through the block might transfix all the representations of a street lamp or other stationary objects. To transfix the various representations of the head of a man in the procession the pin must be pushed in obliquely. The history of fixed and of uniformly moving objects is therefore indicated by direct and oblique straight lines respectively. So in the four dimensional world in which we may picture events, certain lines called 'world-lines' show the life history of all material things. In ordinary three-dimensional space a so-called 'stationary' particle is represented by an uninteresting point: in the four-dimensional world we have a continuous line which shows the progress of the stationary particle in respect to time.[229]

A continuous line like, perhaps, one of Sebald's sentences—like the dark river words make through the body of a book.

There on the street next to the church in Bradford I thought of the pictures of parades I'd made into piles back home. And I thought about how, in effect, time stands still and we fall through it on world lines, affected only by forces which always bullock us; how we are like objects immersed in time. That the ceaseless, moving river it sometimes feels like to live in the present is—more than anything else—a sensation of falling disguised.

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[229] Ross. *A Popular Introduction to Einstein's Theory* …. 18-19.

I felt an odd kind of sensation then: I felt all the past inside me, inside that bordered and shuttered building; I *realised* that this closed-down church was the site of some of the most important events of my life. And I was able, for a moment or two, to push my world lines further backwards, to times before I was born. This felt heady: my grandparents had been christened there, married, and had put on plays for the church's amateur dramatic society behind that white-tiled archway, all before Grandad was eulogised. This is what Gaston Bachelard meant when he said, in *The Poetics of Space*, that his oldest memories were older than he had ever been. He knew, for example, that his 'grandfather got lost in a certain wood', one hundred years before Bachelard himself was born.[230]

Back at Mytholm that night, I fumbled through the trove of things salvaged from Grandma's house, looking for some more postcards—this time for those which show the inside of the church around 1910. I know what it looked like then, even if I do not know exactly what it looks like now.

[230] Bachelard. 188.


ST. MARY'S
BRADFORD. 488.


ST MARY'S
BRADFORD. 453


St Mary's Bradford


ST. MARY'S.

Those black-and-white impressions were in colour once, a moment before the camera clicked and set them into place. Then they were developed and printed, and then they fell along their world lines to Kitty. They were sent to her by her sisters while she was living with ’Fred, in Shrewsbury—he must have wanted to go back, and she went with him. Then they continued on, strumming webs, forming nets of influence. In space and time there is not a pin oblique enough to trap the people moving within a particular section of the universe, let alone the things those people set down.

When I got back to Mytholm after being in Bradford it was late. I realised it would take longer than a day or two to see all the places I wanted to see, but I knew then that I had to try: it’s a long way to Bradford from the bottom of the world.

6

And still the miles fled by

> The past is hidden somewhere outside the realm, beyond the reach of the intellect, in some material object (in the sensation which that material object will give us) which we do not suspect. And as for that object, it depends on chance whether we come upon it or not before we ourselves must die.
>
> Marcel Proust. *Swann's Way*. Part. I. 57-58.

The next day I woke up early and got to Bradford quickly. I remember cresting a hill on the road from Halifax and seeing the town spread out, white smoke tailing from a single, metal chimney. It was cold when I parked my car, in a side street I guessed was close to the centre of town. I followed the pencil-drawn line on my map underneath a roundabout and through subway tunnels covered in local-government sanctioned graffiti. The buildings fit the streets, or perhaps the streets shaped the buildings. I walked on, towards Forster Square Station.

The concourse leading to the platform was deserted; as it ran downhill there was a succession of archways, each higher, deeper than the last. Then I saw a man walking and reading a newspaper, and two sculptures rearing up from the pavement. The sculptures were train lines thrusting out of the ground, double-helixed, showing their electric insides. As I was looking at a sign which read 'To the trains', a stream of people came around the corner of a building, and I thought of *Austerlitz*.

The station was small; I felt conspicuous taking photographs, so I sat and watched the place work for a while, though I am sure it looked nothing like it would have done, even if it was the same platform they left from on August 6, 1934.

Gently at first the train moves forward + gradually increasing speed as it leaves the network of metals at the approach to the station it reaches it first calling place Ripley to pick up a few hardy excursionists who like John + Family have decided to 'risk it'. The rain keeps falling in the story. Fields, and the stations of other towns, flash by. As John reads the paper *the boys with a 'Blood' and 'Ideas' divides their time with an occasional glance at passing objects kindly point out by their Mother*.

I was driving the journey: it was cheaper, and meant I could set my own schedule. Plus, trains didn't even run to some of the towns anymore.

Ripley on the page was Shipley in the world. I parked in an Aldi carpark just across from the train station and stayed a while to look for those *few hardy excursionists*. There was nothing but charity shops and a grim clock tower, which looked like a fire escape ripped from the 1960s. I followed the train tracks out of town to see what sort of things my family may have glimpsed from their carriage, and, eventually, I reached Saltaire, where there were rows of heritage listed terraced houses, built by Titus Salt for the people who worked in his mill. In 1934 this place would have been spectacular: the mill would have been working, the chimney belching.

It was early afternoon by the time I got to Otley/Notley, the next stop. I had to cross through the place twice before I figured out where to park. Thankfully it was easy to find where the station was: there was a long, straight Station Road. Eventually its tarmac turned to cobbles and shops were replaced by houses. And there, at the end of Station Road, was an empty strip of land, half-cobbled, half concrete, stretching to the left and right. There were no tracks or trains, and ahead was a footbridge reaching over a motorway.

I walked up onto the footbridge and watched the road underneath—it was the Leeds Road, and the reason why the station had gone. The bridge shook when cars went underneath. I could see the way the tracks would have led, and I followed them as best I could until my way was blocked. But it bothered me that they were not there anymore.

I went back into town and found the library, and a librarian showed me a large cardboard box held together by thick string. In it were old maps of Otley. I untied the string and tried to match years and scales together, but it didn't work: the way the road went and the way the town looked had changed enough to make it difficult. At that point, in the library, I must have looked a little ridiculous—buried, as I was, underneath string and paper, because I had started to attract an audience: a young lad, about 14 or

15, was watching over my shoulder. Soon he was joined by his friends, who were also loitering in the library. I thought he was being ‘clever’, but he was looking at the maps closely.

‘What are you doing?’ he said.

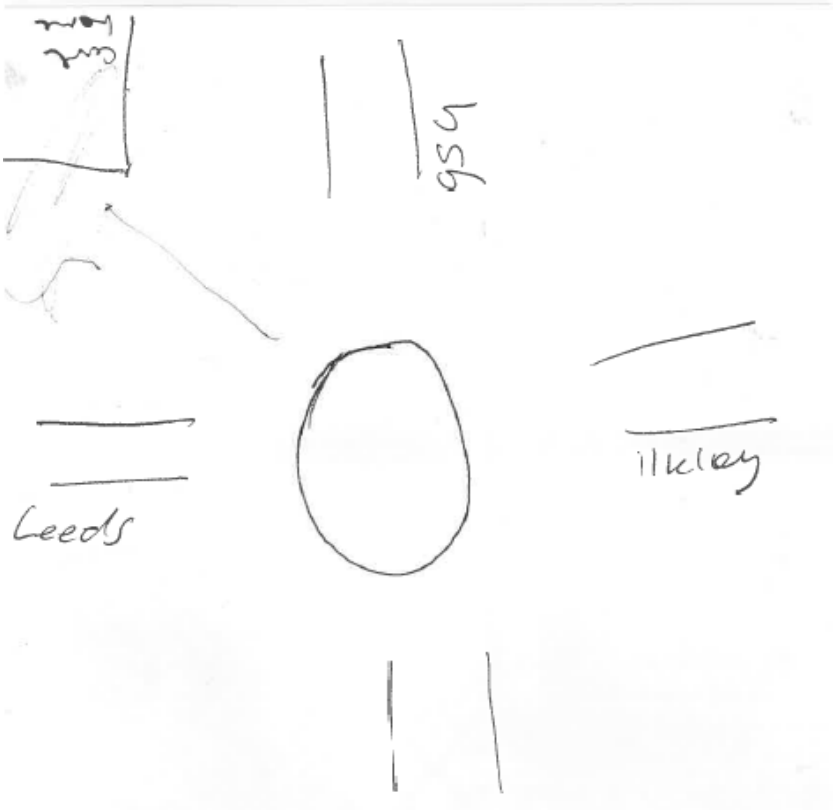
‘Trying to find where the old train track went.’

‘Why?’ That’s not an easy question to answer, I thought.

‘I’m trying to retrace a railway journey from the 1930s.’ He didn’t seem to mind that explanation.

‘I know where there’s some railway track,’ he said. ‘Do you have any paper?’

He drew a map for me then, on a scrap of paper in the library, and when he was drawing his friends gathered round my desk and watched, pointing to where he’d gone wrong, and telling him what to write or add. According to the boys there was a care home, on a roundabout, and the track lead off from some bushes next to it. I used his map as a key for the others, and eventually hovered it over the satellite images on my phone: I could see a line shadowed through fields leading out from Otley, straight towards the next town in the story: Harrogate/Ploughgate. When my phone ran out of battery, I headed for the roundabout.



I saw the care home (marked on the map, in my handwriting, in the top left corner). It wasn't that: it was a funeral home. The roads leading off the roundabout sped to Leeds, Ilkley, and Guiseley. In between the Leeds and Guiseley Roads, over a metal barrier bent out of shape, a well-trodden path dropped down into a wooded area, and then through a fence. There were clothes lying around, and empty beer cans, and it was colder and quieter off the road. Eventually the path became something more comfortable—more walkable and less enclosed—and ahead it led off like a holloway, straight as an arrow. There were nettles bushed up on either side, and the noise of the road was gone. *the next stop is reached on time + the weather appears to be brightening + their hopes are now raised as to the chances of having a fine trip after all*. Reading a story like this—no, following a story like this—feels fruitless: there is too much to tally. The day described opens out into all it was, instead of all it is on the page. Like in *Swann's Way*, when Swann begins to consider the truths Odette's lies conceal: 'dissembled there, by virtue of that temporal superfluity which, after the most detailed account of how a day has been spent, always leaves something over, that may serve as a hiding place for certain unconfessed actions'.[231] It is only in the reading that a story is flawless, unquestionable; not in the following.

I had to turn back, of course: it was already getting late and I'd told Grandma I'd be back in Hebden by 9 o'clock. So I drove back to the valley and arrived in the nearing dark to see her in her room watching all those things outside her window. I could hear the sounds of the valley now the traffic had lessened; I could hear water flowing.

The next day I went back to Otley, then onto Harrogate and Ripon. There I saw the small cathedral, and spoke to a woman walking her dog around the edges of a racetrack, before I headed to where the station was. Attached to a red-brick wall at the bottom of another Station Road was a blue plaque. It read, 'FORMER SITE OF RIPON RAILWAY STATION. OPENED 1848 ON THE LEEDS-THIRSK LINE. CLOSED SEPT 1969.' In the story *John had found out at the last station that they still had 45 miles to go + the time then was 10 minutes past 2, so if ~~they even if~~ there were no more stops the train could not expect to reach Bluecar on Time so John's heart begun to sink a little at the thought of there being so little time to be with Neil when they did at last arrive. Rain still fell as they could see through the windows of the carriage but nothing except an accident could prevent them reaching their goal + still*

[231] Proust. *Swann's Way*. Part II. 214.

the miles fled by as the Engine seemed to ~~have~~ be endowed with a new lease of life. And so they kept on, the coast edging closer. *Eglecliffe* [Eaglescliffe] *rushed by, a very pretty little town judged by the fleeting view which the travellers got as they rushed past away again into the open country + nearer + nearer they got to the coast + Neil*. It's then, in the story, that I see a little more evidence that it could have been Alfred, my great-grandfather, who wrote those words. *John looking through the window setting with his face to the engine* [noticed] *that the weather seemed to be getting worse, a thick Haze of mist had appeared ahead + still wondering what it was going to be like when they arrived he noticed that they were gradually drawing near a big Town + in a few minutes they entered Stormaby* [Thornaby] *Station all around reminded him of the Black Country with which he was more familiar than the moors of Yorkshire, everyone was now staring through the windows + guessing how long they would be before they were away from the smoke + grime of the Town*. How would Francis have known what his father was feeling or thinking? They could have spoken about it, that's true, but would they? And why would that detail be something worth recounting for Francis?

I did not stay long in Eaglescliffe, nor in Thornaby. Over the page *they went again but no improvement in conditions was noted. Slag heaps, Derricks furnaces + ruined buildings crept into view + crept was the correct word as the train was* [now] *only crawling along, jolting over points, whistle scarcely closed + outside the rain seemed to be worse than ever, at last with a roar they entered a large station + discovered they had reached 'Centreborough'* [Middlesbrough] *with its huge shipbuilding yards* […] *Funnells of ships were now visible ~~for t~~ form the carriage windows* […] *+ John realising that only a few miles now separated them form the coast wondered if it would be possible to reach clear air before they got there.*

I quickly caught the train from Thornaby to Middlesborough, and then went back again to Thornaby on the next, back to where I parked my car. Then I drove to Redcar, the last stop by train that day in 1934.

Now things began to move says Francis or Alfred, *+ coats had to be taken down from the rack where they had been stored during the journey*. At Redcar/Bluecar the train stopped and they got off *but they were not as alone as they had begun to think as quite 150 passengers alighted at the same time it being quite a long train the which*

they had not realised before and had almost begun to think they were the only occupants that day. It is an easy thing to convince yourself of.

Father find the tickets! Kevin have you got the Bag! + other ~~some~~ similar remarks fall from Mother + away down the platform to the exit where the ticket's, (after John had obeyed the command of the Ticket collector to tear them in two) were found to be correct + the Armitage's sallyed forth into the streets of Bluecar for the first time, into heavy, steady rain. When I visited Redcar the station building was To Let and there was a metal fence around its entrance, but at least the platform was still working. The day was fresh and windy, and I could hear the sound of seagulls. I headed towards the sea, into the wind, and I can still remember the clang of the railway crossing boom gates as they closed behind me.

In the story my great-uncles and great-grandparents went in search of the bus that would take them onto Staithes/Waithes, where Neil was camping. In the middle of Redcar/Bluecar was a clock tower which told them they had missed the more direct bus, meaning another wait in the rain (they would have been damp and sopping and miserable by then, they must have been). That next bus would take them backwards, through a place called Wilton/Welton on another circuitous route. Then, over the page again, it was *20 minutes to 4*. Ever uncertain, and in a new place for the first time, John asked each passing driver or conductor to *verify the instructions previously ~~ac~~ acquired from perhaps ½ a doz people by John, Mother + the Boys respectively.* They waited, and *the minutes slip by + the hand on the Big Clock creeps nearer to the hour*. And in my room at Mansfield College I held the thin paper up to the window so that the sun lit up the page from behind, spat itself around the paper's edges, and drew black lines on my cheek. I remembered that, when I told Grandma I had been in Redcar, she didn't, at first, believe me. Then she told me she had been there once, with a friend whom she no longer saw.

I passed the clock tower in the middle of town; it was decadent and sea-bitten. When I got to the ocean I saw a spinney of wind turbines far out on the water. I ate a chip butty and some mushy peas and thought about the next thing that happened on that day in 1934, something that, in mounting some sort of claim to Alfred's/John's authorship of those words, I have come to view as telling. At the bus stop close to the clock tower in the centre of Bluecar a crowd began to form. A woman arrived in the cold and wet *who proved to very loquacious* and seems to be the kind of person who inhabits bus

stops everywhere. She had her daughter with her, and the woman *persisted in telling everyone round that there was always a scramble for this particular Bus + that she once had to wait 4 hours before she could get on one.* Here, tenses always shifting, the writer says, *Anyway she looks a bit pugnacious + John + his Wife decided to keep an eye on her*. They were right to be suspicious, it seems, although we must remember that this is a story being told; we do not hear how this woman or her daughter interpret the events of that day.

at last 4 oclock arrives but no Bus as yet, yes here it is just rounding the corner at the other end of the Square, round the Clock Tower it comes + slowly draws up before the waiting crowd of drenched ~~passengers~~ waiters + a sudden rush forward headed by the aforesaid pugnacious woman was brought to a sudden standstill at the steps of the Bus by the fact that arriving passengers wanted to dismount. A crowd of black and white people scrum around the bus—nobody would have wanted to run the risk of waiting longer that day. *then the fun commenced*, and *the P.W.* [Pugnacious Woman] *was determined to get on first + as she had, as I said, a little girl with her who by now had got cut off from her, except for the hand clasp between 2 other passengers she was unable to get in as soon as she expected then from either side of the Door came more pushing + thoroughly wet would be riders John thought that it was time something was done*. The woman's hand slipped from her daughter's, and John forced a space for his family to climb onto the bus and the rain came down and the bus left. He does not say if the mother and her daughter were ever reunited, but (and over the page) *she was minus the little girl + as she was trying to get out again for her, anyway she did not succeed as the conductor was by then beginning to lose what bit of patience he had refused to let her + so Mother + Kevin boarded followed by Francis + his Father who had pulled him by the arm through the crowd.* Those parted fingers and the bottle-necked crowd of damp people—the waiting crowd of drenched waiters—is, for me, as vivid as this brief world becomes.

The writer then tries to justify the actions which John took to get his family on board: *John could not afford to be relegated to the next bus after being ~~so~~ in the rain waiting all that time + so had to adopt measures which were very much against the grain with him.* This perspective—John's—is part of the evidence on which I'm basing my claim to Alfred's authorship. Whoever wrote it, whoever's prose it is, on the surface it is not quite seamless. But there is a breathless quality to it which somehow

forces the reader on, along its continuous line. Perhaps that is the nature of a journey being described? That, as Woolf says, 'Something always has to be done next. Tuesday follows Monday: Wednesday, Tuesday. Each spreads the same ripple. The being grows rings, like a tree. Like a tree, leaves fall.'[232] I think perhaps this force has something to do with the nature of a sentence itself, and with the nature of how time is sensed.

Then comes some more evidence that Alfred, perhaps, wrote this. Say the next line or so in his West Country burr and the syntax, which seems a little off, becomes, in fact, not so. Accents can be great revealers: *Now at last they has a sight of what they had come so far + gone through so much to see, on their left was the open sea rolling in with ~~regular~~ monotonous regularity on to Golden sands as far as on could see ~~for~~ between sand dunes which undulated along the side of the road.* They change buses at Wilton/Welton and still have *9 miles to their Goal*. Then they pass the *Palatial Depot of the 'United Bus Co' built as John was quick to notice at considerable advantage to the Coy in the open country where he imagined rates + land values were considerably less than would appertain in a town*.

What if Kitty wrote this story? If she did, imagine a raised eyebrow when John—Alfred—again starts on about rates and land values. Imagine one raised anyway, whoever wrote it: Alfred's father, Samuel, had been a rate collector in Shrewsbury, so Alfred would have known a thing or two about them, even if he was only young when he had had to leave the first time. If he was anything like I am—and I cannot help but think he must have been—he would have been unafraid of going on and on about what he knew, like the way my father used to commandeer dinner-time conversations with thoughts on how long, exactly, it might take a car or a bird or a man to get to the moon. Or like the way I have kept this line up, and how it keeps on for a long while yet.

Then, finally, *as with everything else the end eventually comes*. The bus draws up on top of the cliffs at Staithes/Waithes. They walk through the town and, in a field behind a church dedicated to *'Our Lady Star of the Sea'*, they see the tents where Neil's Scouts are camped. A boy rides past in a cycling cape—surely it flaps in the wind—and he points them to Neil's tent. My family's feet are wet as they walk through rows of tents, *heads were peering from canvas all around them*. But as John, Mrs Armitage, Frank, and Kevin reach the tent where Neil is staying they find he is not there: he has

[232] Woolf. *The Waves*. 243.

gone looking for them at the station, say his friends, who are tanned and happy and do not want to go back to Bradford—Neil *was out looking for them, in fact had been out all afternoon on the same errand*. And this, always this: if Neil was in his tent on August 6, 1934 then everything would be different. Not, perhaps, for you, but for me. Everything would have flung forward differently, and all that is now inexorable would (at the wink of a moment) have tipped into oblivion. Neil, too—*if* he had been in his tent that day—would have become a different person. That is, if the story is true.

Kevin was sent, with one of Neil's friends, to find him. *Mother, John ~~+ the~~ Frank settle themselves down on kitbags in the tent + ply with questions the Boys who are there, did they want to go Home? Did they get enough to eat?* […] *They were all Tanned + wore little else than shorts + scout jerseys, every one looking the picture of health*. I imagine sometimes that the first part of this story has been embellished: the morning darker than it was, the rain harder; the train louder and longer, and the Pugnacious Woman only more pugnacious. The boys in the tent might have done something similar when they spoke to my family, but it does seem that even in the rain they were somewhat happy.

after a while Kevin + his guide returned saying that they could not find Neil. Over the page again and Kevin swaps places with his parents and brother: the others head into town. Then begins another search, up and down the steep cobbled roads of seaside Staithes, *their nostrils were assailed with the pungent smell of the sea, salt, seaweed + fish; down steeply down the went passing quaint old houses + shops which were a delight to their eyes + the sight of which was in no way spoilt by the steady rain which still kept falling*. In Staithes the land tips them towards the ocean, and high trembling cliffs mark the edge of the island they are on.

John espy's the sign of the 'Cod and Lobster' saying at the same time surely we can't be far now from the Harbour with a Pub with a name like that + sure enough into their view came a picture which they had both [my great-grandfather and my great-grandmother] *dreamed about many a time but had never had the pleasure of seeing*. I do not think that the writer means the coast, but I do think it is inferred that this trip to the coast, to see Waithes, or Staithes, was long-planned and that Neil being there—and the excuse of his pocket money—meant that the family could take a day to see something different. I think that is why it was all written down, whenever it *was* written down, and whoever did the writing. Because this long memory was important

to preserve, to hold. And it was held, in this misshapen way, even if, too, it proves the fact of forgetting: that when a moment clicks into the past, it is only ever gone. For my grandfather that was certainly the case, and for my grandmother too, eventually. In *The Waves*, Bernard feels this way as well: forgetfulness causes the world he is in to shimmer; it makes a mockery of solidity and forces boundaries to dissolve:

> I begin now to forget; I begin to doubt the fixity of tables, the reality of here and now, to tap my knuckles smartly upon the edges of apparently solid objects and say, 'Are you hard?' I have seen so many different things, have made so many different sentences … Am I one and distinct? I do not know.[233]

This is a little of how I feel when I contemplate the solidity of the story—the solidity of the illusion of the story—I so often hold in my hands. It is how I felt that first day at Mansfield College. The papers, put together, take me back to a past which only shimmers and whispers, that quivers and eludes, like Neil in the story itself:

> Looked at again and again half consciously by a mind thinking of something else, any object mixes itself so profoundly with the stuff of thought that it loses its actual form and recomposes itself a little differently in an ideal shape which haunts the brain when we least expect it.[234]

The harbour opens out, and Alfred/John sees the sea and Francis could not have known what that felt like. Alfred fights against not being able to describe in a way I am envious of: *It would be well nigh impossible for me to put on paper the picture as it appeared to them, although low tide there were the 2 breakwaters forming a claw with its 2 points out to sea but approach nearly meeting forming a perfect harbour for any craft entering standing on the sea wall looking down on all sorts of odds and ends which one always meets with on the sea shore*. When I was in Staithes I thought of the boats which crammed the Scarborough harbour. When it was windy both places rang with the sounds of rattling masts and flapping ropes, as though rows of empty flag posts were singing a song of strange attraction. The boats were every colour and their

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[233] Woolf. *The Waves*. 248.
[234] V. Woolf. (1944/1973). 'Solid Objects'. *A Haunted House and Other Short Stories*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books. 88.

nets stunk of the sea. In Staithes there were *boats lying on their sides where they had been left by the receeding water. posts driven into the sand* [to] *which the boats are fastened to when the tide is in + ropes scattered about everywhere, on either hand a headland forming a snug little Bay which in itself was shelter from the rough seas encountered on this coast if one could but reach it*

The words slide faster here and I can feel the effort of memory forcing some hand to move at speed, gobbling up images sent from brain to finger. It's desperate, this sequence of moments on grey paper, to be recorded and remembered: + *on the extreme left of the visitors a little creek running in between the cliff + the town where at high tide the boats could be brought beneath the little wooden bridge well* [over the page] *out of sight of passing shipping + where it was possible to fish if one wanted, on the side of the creek nearest the headland was the lifeboat House + shipway to the sea.*

I live close to the ocean now. My house is a short walk to the beach and sometimes I take the dog to a park on a hill where we can look down to see the waves glitter. They can be too bright to look at directly. Sometimes we walk along the coast, and the ocean is blocked from view by high dunes, but the sound it makes is nothing like that which a shell makes: it's deeper and metronomic, and not like wind either: it is water rolling sand and wind rolling water, forming the world with each barrel. It is, as well, a different ocean to the one recorded by Alfred or Francis (or perhaps Kitty), and even to the one I have in memories of England. ~~*Houses of all shapes*~~ *one could not imagin a more suitable spot for Pirates that this most natural of Bays + it took little imagination to picture some of the scenes which would without doubt have taken place there. Houses of all shapes seemed to be hanging on to the cliff sides + right down to the water + one shop John noticed boldly proclaimed by means of a notice over its door that Cptn Cook once lived within. Of course all this had to be taken in very hurriedly + as John said to his wife, if the others did not come down here + see it they would not have seen Waithes as they decided to return through the village again up the hill + back to the camp* ~~*hoping*~~ *to tell the others + return later hoping all the time that Neil had now been found*.

When I got to Staithes I remembered it: the Captain Cook museum and the shop selling shells and fossils. I remembered the cliffs too, and the cobbled streets curled downwards. I had been there before. The cliffs were grey and brown and brute. Birds hovered and perched and swam, stark white against the rock. The inlet was caked in

moss and smelled foul and damp. It was hard to walk down to the bottom of the town, and I knew it would be harder to walk back to its top: Staithes is all steep streets, gazing windows, and cobblestones.

I found the 'Cod and Lobster' by the harbour. It's small and seems formed just for the jut of rock it sits on. You can watch the boats and the sea from behind the windows, which are small and square and white-framed. In the pub's front bar I checked the list in my notebook of things I wanted to find:

- Our Lady Star of the Sea (and the field behind it);
- The Beck;
- The wooden bridge straddling the Beck;
- The railway viaduct;
- The Cod and Lobster;
- The breakwaters;
- Boats;
- The lifeboat house and the shipway to the sea;
- Captain Cook's former house;
- The train station.

I put a line through the Cod and Lobster.

There were paths leading everywhere, up the cliffs, sometimes off them, through and round the houses crammed onto the slopes which made up Staithes. Some of the houses had made an effort to appear as they might once have done, as fishermen's cottages, but the lobster pots and nets outside front doors did not look used at all.

Of course, by now (in the story) everyone is craving a cup of tea. *retracing their steps they started back very loth to leave such a picture behind, however John said he would hasten forward + perhaps save a little time by so doing.* On the walk back up the hill and through the town towards the station John *saw a train just leaving + travelling over the long bridge which stretched across the valley + almost at the same moment espied a figure just leaving the station approach + turning up the road toward the camp, a figure which he at once recognised as the lost Neil*. John started to run then, and shout—or Alfred did—and Neil eventually heard his calls and turned around to meet his father. I wonder when that memory crept away from my grandfather. I wonder if it ever did, or if he kept it somewhere inside his Alzheimered skull? Well, I suppose he did find one way to keep it: to wrap it in elastic bands and let it find its way

to Grandma. In Staithes there is no longer a railway bridge *stretched across the valley*—the Beck: it was demolished in 1960. But it is still visibly the town which was caught in constellation that day in 1934.

Neil ran back down the hill to his mother and John *pushed forward back to the camp* in search of Kevin. Somehow Frank/cis has disappeared from the story. *Time was now very precious* as, for all they had spent coming to Staithes, they had just an hour in which to see the village and my grandfather. They would soon have *to catch the Bus for their return journey + they decided very sensibly to enter a Cafe which was quite near-by + obtain some tea + give*

From there, from the café in the town by the ocean, the last page turns, and on the reverse are written the first words I knew of this day in August, 1934: *Neil the sandwiches which they had saved for him*. After rest and tea they walk up and down the steep streets *with Neil with them now to describe various items of interest to them they reached the Harbour, groups of men and women of the seafaring type + women with bonnets which looked very quaint.* Neil showed them the shop from which he bought his fishing line and told them of the week he had had, and how he had fished with the line *on the end of the breakwater* (*to his Mothers horror*) and caught a Dogfish on one day of that week. He *told of the great day when several of the Boys, himself included, were given a ride in the lifeboat*.

I went into the pub at the top of the hill that was Staithes, to get a drink and to try to get phone reception—there was nothing at the bottom of the town. The Captain Cook, once the Station Hotel, was sparse inside, and painted half green, half white; the green was the same shade as the algae in the Beck. There were people talking in thick accents, and I realised, after sitting down, that everyone in the bar was involved in the same conversation. Seven men and one woman.

I found a book by the bar and brought it back to my table. *Staithes: Between Two Nabs*, by Rod Jewell. I ransacked it for pictures of the 1930s, and sat and listened to the talk and took photographs of the photographs in the book, which showed the great viaduct stretched across the Beck. You can still see the stanchions which would have held it, sticking out from the sides of the deep valley above the town.

The trains would pull up close to the Captain Cook, when it was the Station Hotel. There were fields where a housing estate is now—probably where Neil's campsite

was—and in the 1930s fisher wives wore bonnets and sold their wares on the streets. The high street looked much the same, it was the top of the town which had changed.

I left the pub and walked towards the church. In 1934 my family had been inside, for just a few minutes, on their way home. *And now Father insists that they should return as the time was getting very short so once more up the Hill leaving behind the fishermen + women + the scenes that will live long to be remembered, on past the station + viaduct past the lane leading to the camp which now they had no time to revisit*. Then *they had to say good-bye to Neil + once more settle themselves for a spin through the country on the first stage of their journey home; it was still raining + had done so the whole of the time*. Neil is left behind with his pocket money and they, my family, head back on the bus to Redcar/Bluecar, to catch the train back to Bradforth.

It was 7:35 p.m. when the bus left Waithes in the story. They had to get to Bluecar for the 9:00 p.m. train. *it was 10 minutes to the hour when they arrived* […] *+ so had to hasten to the station for the train + then as if for spite their train was due to start from a platform which had no roof + so once more they faced the elements but at all events with the knowledge that in a short time they would be dry for at least 2½ hrs*.

It's bizarre that all that day was travelling, or most of all that day. As I have said, I don't know if they went for Neil as much as for something—anything—but in their long journey there is, I think, a great deal of love. There is also a great deal of longing—for the sea and for the world.

at last the train drew in […] *+ so the last stage was begun. everyone was now feeling tired the effects of a gruelling afternoon but no one was sorry they had taken the plunge, there was no regrets, except that they had to return at all + it was whispered between John + his Wide that if God spared them till next summer they would try + manage a week at Waithes. And so in that frame of mind + with memories that will always be pleasant they reached Bradforth once more to find the pavements dry + at last were able to walk along with out their coat collars turned up. The Town Hall clock struck the hour of midnight as they reached home + hot drinks waited them + so to bed to dream of their wet but ever to-be-remembered ½ day at Bluecar + Waites Aug 6th 1934.*

I got back to Hebden Bridge in darkness; it took almost three hours from Staithes. I found Grandma struggling again with Charles Bonnet. She told me that a Chinese lady on the television had been talking to her about adoption, and that the children she

always saw needed her to help them. She had been trying to explain to the lady on the television that she couldn't adopt those children, that she wouldn't be able to look after them. I tried to explain to Grandma that what she was seeing wasn't there, but she didn't believe me. I could not explain the way she interacted with her visions.

Outside her bedroom door, waiting to be collected, was the washing basket we used to have at our home in Todmorden, before we left for Perth. I hadn't seen it for half my life. Before I went to bed, Grandma and I planned our next day: the last proper one. We would catch a steam train ourselves, because I wanted to know what it was like to ride in one. She seemed happier then.

In my room at Mansfield College I folded the story back into its shape and wrapped it in the red band I had found it with. I packed up my suitcase again, as carefully as I could, but—of course—each thing was beginning to bend, to shape itself in a new way, and I could not control the way things shifted when the lid was closed.

Filling in

> History and autobiography work in the same way *as narrative*: they use the same linguistic structure, and they are both fictions, in that they present variations and manipulations of current time to the reader.
>
> Carolyn Steedman. *Past Tenses*. 48.

Here is something left over from that attempt at tracking back through Alfred's story: I did not go straight from Otley to Harrogate and Ripon when I was following those spidery words. In between those places I went to York, to see if I could plot the journey they took to Waithes. In York I sat in a glass cube above the National Railway Museum, listening to the swimming-pool sounds of the place, looking through old time tables and railway guides. But I couldn't find a single train which ran through Ripon on that bank holiday.

While I was in York I looked through binders of used tickets to try to find ones from the lines and stations which are now closed. One ticket, bought for a journey to Otley from Ilkley, looked moth-eaten, or burnt through with holes. But when I looked more closely I saw that the holes had been deliberately stamped: there was a half moon, a heart, a diamond, and then a spade punched into the pasteboard. I could not read the ticket collector's handwriting.

Before I went on to Harrogate I went back to the path behind the roundabout at the edge of Otley. I followed the map drawn for me by the boy in the library, though once I was on the shadows of the track it was never particularly difficult to know where to go: forwards. Sometimes, though, I did have to climb fences or force my way through

more tangled bits of space. I walked through fields and on public rights of way, got too close to cows and startled entire flocks of sheep. Most of the time the path was level and enclosed, with trees tight around, their canopies meeting overhead. Sometimes the countryside spread and the path became a narrow, low plateau. Once, the nettles began to grow thicker and closer together, so that I had to keep my fingers inside the sleeves of my jumper (I had forgotten what dock leaves look like). Then I had to stamp the nettles down to flatten my own path, each time edging forward into the gap I had made. There were trees hanging low above my head, and in them birds scattered. I saw a squirrel for a moment, but it was not close enough for me to hear its heartbeat. Birds would chirp and tweet and I thought how they sounded like the late, violet bluebells I had seen; how they could be poppies, or buttercups, and how the birds back home sounded like bottlebrush and banksia.

I could see above the nettles but I could not see past them, so I was glad, when the chance came, to turn around: the ground I was walking on stopped. Instead of mud and dirt and trodden stems there was black stone for a foot or so, and then a drop—a gap—filled with brambles and nettles which did not quite reach the level of the plants I had tramped through. This was because a bridge had been there once, until it was blasted away: until the track was broken down. Through gaps in the green I could see Victorian bricks covered in moss, choked by stalks and stems and small, serrated leaves. The trees shifted slightly from side to side. I turned around to walk again the path I had made, and behind me nettles raised themselves slowly up and back into place.

I went sideways down the thin plateau, then jumped off so I could walk around the nettles. As I landed I slipped down the side of the ridge, and the stones rolled under my feet like marbles; they made a gentle sound, like bells: I had tumbled into a pile of clinker (which is a kind of illusion: light and rough, where it should be heavy). The rocks felt fragile, as though they would break in my hands, and looked like metal and stone together. They were sintered when the ridge was made or when a train came past, wreckage from the tracks which led along the ridge where nettles were in the countryside between Otley and Harrogate. And there, at my feet, buried up to its neck, was a thick and rusted nut-and-bolt. I scratched it out; it was dandled in moss, muddy, and heavier than it looked. It would once have held a sleeper in place, or perhaps tied the track to the ground. I put it in my backpack and walked on until I could go no

further: there was a half-tunnel where a new suburb started, and a great wall blocked my way.

By that time my trousers were ripped because of barbed wire fences, and I was covered in shit and mud. Back in Otley I bought some new trousers and then I drove on to Harrogate/Ploughgate. From the windows of the train my family could see hotels and *hydro's*.

At Ripon I found myself body-sore and wandering. In the story my family talk to men going to the races at 'Stripon', and they finish the sandwiches (which John [Alfred] made that morning after pushing the last of Sunday's roast through a mincer). The train stopped for a while in *open country*. Then, over the crinkled page, there is more waiting and eating. And if all this feels like a long journey that is because it is: they took a long and circumbendibus route from Bradforth to Waithes, from Bradford to Staithes, right to the coast, and I did the same.

The old station building in Ripon was now somebody's house, and an estate had been built around it. But the goods yard was still there, at the back of where the station was, just on the other side of a heavy wooden fence. The fence was too high to see over, but I could spy through its cracks. I took some photos through the gaps in the wood of an old red-brick building which must once have been used for storage, and when I got back to my car and looked at the pictures I saw, in the middle of one shot, caught in an arched doorway through the crack in the fence, down the lens of the camera and passing my eyes too, a half-captured bumblebee. A strange sort of syzygy; a precise evocation of a skerrick of a thing which happened in the past.

> But it is a mistake, this extreme precision, this orderly and military progress; a convenience, a lie. There is always deep below it, even when we arrive punctually at the appointed time with our white waistcoats and polite formalities, a rushing stream of broken dreams, nursery rhymes, street cries, half-finished sentences and sights—elm trees, willow trees, gardeners sweeping, women writing—that rise and sink even as we hand a lady down to dinner. While one straightens the fork so precisely on the table-cloth, a thousand faces mop and mow. There is nothing one can fish up in a spoon; nothing one can call an event. Yet it is alive too and deep, this stream. Immersed in it I would stop between one mouthful and the next, and look intently at

> a vase, perhaps with one red flower, while a reason struck me, a sudden revelation.[235]

I'd argue that *this* progress—this kind of progress—is a mistake which sometimes works, one it is sometimes necessary to make.

I drove home that day across the moors. At Oxenhope there was a threatening, trembling purple cut through the brown and green, and the heights were sun-hit. They seemed to last forever, rolling miles towards the Pike on the horizon.

[235] Woolf. *The Waves*. 219-220.

7

The effect of the real

> Memory, after the book is shut, brings out, as sometimes in real life, the details and subtleties which some more salient characteristic has prevented us from noticing at the time.
>
> Virginia Woolf. 'George Eliot'. *The Common Reader*. 236.

In Oxford it was past lunch time and the day was bright and hot. In a park across the road from Mansfield I found a game of cricket to watch, and I felt a little better. I think I felt more used to Oxford, and certainly less affronted by how different it was from the valley, which is decaying, and Scarborough, which is rotten, and the coast, which is always falling into the sea. But it is hard to wrest yourself from the mood of the past, or whatever you have convinced yourself that mood is.

I walked into the centre of town and went to Blackwell's, where I wandered through the aisles of books. In the part of the shop where they keep the second hand stock—upstairs, enclosed—I found a copy of Elizabeth Gaskell's *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*. The book was small and green and battered, and had a black and white portrait of Charlotte on the cover. I opened it, and flicked through its pages. And I remembered, as I was reading—as if in a clatter of flagstones—something else of Scarborough: a car parked next to a churchyard, and the sound of the sea. In my memory we walked from the car, and grass lapped at my ankles, and there was a small grave on a cliff edge. It belonged to Charlotte's sister, Anne. I sat down with the book then, and worked back to its contents pages. Chapter XVII was described briefly, in those sprawling Victorian chapter summaries at the start of Gaskell's book, as if in confirmation of that memory:

> The *Quarterly Review* on *Jane Eyre*—Severe illness of Anne Brontë—Her last verses—She is removed to Scarborough—Her last hours, and death and burial there—Charlotte's return to Haworth, and her loneliness[236]

Anne Brontë died in Scarborough. She was the last of Charlotte's grown-up siblings, who did all pass away within months of each other. Charlotte was writing *Shirley* at the time, and 'She had nearly finished the second volume of her tale when Branwell died,—after him Emily,—after her Anne;—the pen, laid down when there were three sisters living and loving, was taken up when one alone remained.'[237] It was strange to see the story Peter from Mytholm told so often there in black and white, on a page, in that bookshop. It is a tale which echoes through the valley.

The chapter Charlotte would write when she began her novel again was 'The Valley of the Shadow of Death'.[238] This shadow circles the Brontës' story. It defines how their lives have been thought through and written down; even how they have all lasted into the present. In '*Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*' Woolf says as much:

> Of the hundred years that have passed since Charlotte Brontë was born, she, the centre now of so much legend, devotion, and literature, lived but thirty-nine. It is strange to reflect how different those legends might have been had her life reached the ordinary human span.[239]

Theirs is a bounded tale, shaped by death. The presence of it looms like a shadow over the stories of their lives, and even buries itself deep into Charlotte's prose: Gaskell says that, 'Down in the very midst of her writing came … bolts of death.'[240] Perhaps this is what Woolf is referring to when she writes that, along with Thomas Hardy's, Charlotte's prose is,

> awkward and unyielding. But both with labour and the most obstinate integrity by thinking every thought until it has subdued words to itself, have forged for

[236] E. Gaskell. (1857/1960). *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*. London: J.M. Dent & Sons. xx.
[237] Ibid. 277.
[238] Ibid.
[239] V. Woolf. '*Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*'. *The Common Reader*. 219.
[240] Gaskell. 277.

> themselves a prose which takes the mould of their minds entire; which has, into the bargain, a beauty, a power, a swiftness of its own.[241]

Gaskell describes Charlotte's loneliness, her sadness, her state of mind when her brother and sisters had passed away, and she shows how all of that fell into *Shirley*—how death must have surrounded Charlotte. In doing so, Gaskell added to the literature and legend Woolf described.[242] The image of the sisters working together in that valley-top village away from the world is bred, in part, by Gaskell's biography. Life after them—which, for Charlotte, meant dealing with death—is caught in a scene Gaskell depicts, in the parlour of the parsonage at Haworth:

> [For Charlotte] it was dreary to write without any one to listen to the progress of her tale,—to find fault or to sympathise,—while pacing the length of the parlour in the evenings, as in the days that were no more. Three sisters had done this,—then two, the other sister dropping off from the walk,—and now one was left desolate, to listen for echoing steps that never came,—and to hear the wind sobbing at the windows, with an almost inarticulate sound.[243]

Woolf's assessment is that Charlotte's writing was powered by the inarticulated, and that same unsaid-sensation seeps into Gaskell's biography (and into Peter's repeated invocation of the way the sisters and their brother died). Grief utters and murmurs, and powers the way their story works. For Woolf, this lurking inarticulation is a feature not just of Charlotte's writing, but of poetry in general—it is what impassioned prose leans towards. Specifically, it is a feature which is not there in a certain kind of prose: the 'learnt … smoothness of the professional writer.'[244] This intangible quality does, however, go beyond what even poetry can muster, and—according to Woolf—is there in *Jane Eyre*. In that novel it is Charlotte's 'overpowering personality [and] some untamed ferocity' which draws the reader on.[245] Despite the fact she was mostly a

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[241] Woolf. '*Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*'. *The Common Reader*. 223.
[242] Daphne du Maurier, in *The Infernal World of Branwell Brontë*, claims that Gaskell played a vital role in this shaping of the Brontë's story. 'When Mrs Gaskell published her life of Charlotte Brontë in 1857, she painted so vivid a picture … that every Brontë biography written since has been based upon it' (9).
[243] Gaskell. 278.
[244] Woolf. '*Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*'. *The Common Reader*. 223.
[245] Ibid.

novelist, this is what makes Charlotte a poet—or, at least, 'If [she chooses] to write in prose, intolerant of its restrictions.'[246] This is how boundaries dissolve between ways of writing. And it is where the line between life and books breaks down too. When a writer's own story, that of their readers, and that of the place they come from intersect and grow and shift, perhaps the most impassioned prose occurs when what's written facilitates what's thought and felt, and acts with and on those feelings; when a life becomes intermingled with the story being constructed. Nabokov may have called Proust's work a fantasy, but he also called it an 'evocation of the past', and said that Proust was the prism through which *Remembrance of Things Past* was refracted.[247] This is the kind of thing I mean: life and the story being written can twist around each other and produce a deeper kind of affect. Edmund White calls Proust a 'literary cyclops': 'a creature with a single great "I" at the centre of his consciousness'[248]—an overpowering personality, perhaps. He says that every page of Proust—while only occasionally being a literal page of Marcel Proust's mind thinking—is, nevertheless, 'a transcript of a mind thinking … the fully orchestrated, ceaseless, and disciplined ruminations of one mind, one voice'.[249] He could be talking about Sebald, too. *Jane Eyre* is obviously a different kind of book, but the 'I' of the narrator offers a similar kind of ceaselessness. I think the way that life and work intersects, in the prose of all these writers—Woolf, Sebald, the Brontës, and Proust—is analogous.

David Malouf, on Proust, describes the 'narrator's voice as the entire focus and justification of his book', which is 'about the power of language itself as an instrument of perceiving and knowing.'[250] The stretched out 'I' of this kind of work is a method of personality and a kind of ferocity—at times it is unforgiving and unrelenting. And, like the Brontës' stories which are shaped by a knowledge of the tragic lives Charlotte and her family lived, the world outside Proust's pages always interferes and affects the reader. This changes how his 'novel' is read. Malouf suggests that this 'reading outside the text' is an impertinence on the part of the reader, but also that it is something which it is impossible to avoid. That:

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[246] Ibid. 224.
[247] Nabokov. 208.
[248] E. White. (1999). *Proust*. London: Phoenix. 138.
[249] Ibid. 138.
[250] D. Malouf. (2014/2015). 'Marcel Proust – The Book'. *The Writing Life*. North Sydney: Vintage Books.154.

> Proust's life, and its various transformations in the events of the novel, the equivocal placing of his narrator … halfway between historical fact and fiction, are as familiar now as the book itself, and too close to us for an awareness of them not to colour what we read. Proust anticipated this and took it into account. What we know of the life is part of the book, as a second reading is part of the first.[251]

This suggestion of a second reading is a worrying one: it took me long enough to get through those books the first time around. But the case remains that the reader pulls the world into the book they have in their hands, just as the world pulls the book into it. Malouf also suggests that Proust's style of novelising—of 'digressions, elaborations, belle-lettrist set pieces, essaylike disquisitions and analyses'—is akin to that of a memoir writer. 'Complex as it is … both sides are at all times aware that what is being told contains within it an element of falsity.'[252]

I think that element is a useful trait: it makes a game of which-is-what and where-is-he, providing the reader with a deeper immersion into the consciousness of the narrator. The result is a ferocious intimacy, that shaping of perspective and personality vital to impassioned prose.

The lives I want to keep—my grandmother's, and, well, my own—are without the heft of the Brontës', both in terms of tragedy and in terms of literary output. But I have tried to use the ways in which their story has persisted to fuddle my own forgetfulness. I hope that, in this way, I can capture something of life—of the past—on the page. This was Charlotte's goal, too, for *Shirley*. Gaskell says that she tried to make that book 'like a piece of actual life.'[253] Her mourning makes it easy to see why that might be the case, even if it is more difficult to understand how that kind of writing might occur. But Woolf suggests that Charlotte, and her sister Emily, had the tools at their disposal to make a kind of resurrection happen. And that is the kind of thing I've tried to tap; it's what Michelet believed writing could do, in an almost literal sense. The sisters could conjure this life-like quality by 'invoking the help of nature. They both [felt] the need of some more powerful symbol of the vast and slumbering passions in human nature than words or actions [could] convey.'[254] One trick, according to Woolf,

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[251] Ibid. 160.
[252] Ibid. 153-154.
[253] Gaskell. 277.
[254] Woolf. '*Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*'. *The Common Reader*. 224.

are powerful symbols which work through and beyond what they seem to offer on the page (that is, as black words on white paper). I think this kind of laden prose can translate into life writing, especially when the boundaries between fiction and memoir are tenuous, like in the work of Sebald, Proust, and even Ferrante. Woolf's work, which represents a scape of ferocious personality, is almost too vast to consider in that respect: books like *The Waves* are the apogee of competing selves, of intersecting view points and objects, and are something different to the way memoir works—even to the single-I fractured, which represents the truth of how the self is constructed. They are different again to the way in which the double-I of memoir (narrator and actor) are always entwined.

Shirley, says Gaskell, was the 'product of personal experience',[255] and that '[p]eople recognised themselves … though they were placed in new positions'.[256] Emily herself was one of the models for Shirley. The kind of fiction I've interpreted as life writing in this thesis benefits from the same method.

I've tried to draw out this 'charge of nature' in other ways too, in waves and eclipses, in chaos, entropy, and ephemera, and I have tried to weigh down my writing with symbol and metaphor wrapped around each other in concatenation. But making an image which might become a powerful symbol—the 'nervature of past life in one image', according to Sebald[257]—has proven difficult. For one, it's been impossible to view the work from above, to see it as a whole. And making an entire book which seems one image, perhaps more like a painting, is harder still. But this is exactly what Proust achieved. Anne Carson says that,

> No one would deny that Proust's novel streams with time, and with arrows shooting in all directions. But you could also think of the whole novel in your mind as one big stopped instant, since it takes Marcel the entire three thousand pages of the story to get around to the point of beginning to write it.[258]

Woolf stills an eclipse in the sky with absurd ease—she is a theorist of moments, and stilled images, even if she knows that that stillness is a lie. Sebald—seemingly long-

[255] Gaskell. 277.
[256] Ibid. 276.
[257] Sebald. 'Dark Night Sallies Forth'. *After Nature*. 81.
[258] A. Carson. (2014). *The Albertine Workout*. New Directions Poetry Pamphlet #13. New York: New Directions Books. 27.

winded, ambling—was inspired by the *trompe-l'oeil* method of painting, which became, if not a model for his writing, analogous to it:

> *Trompe-l'oeil* painting is a manner capable of conjuring forth out of virtually nothing, with comparatively humble means, whether by certain shifts of perspective or by a cunning distribution of light and shades, what is called the '*effet du réel*' … This means that the production of a perfected illusion depends not only on a staggering artistic skill but ultimately on the intuitive steering of a breathless state in which the painter himself no longer knows whether his eye still sees and his hand still moves.[259]

I'm not trying to claim that this kind of single image—one great gulp of consciousness—is something I've achieved. Just that, to me, it seems the most likely method by which something of the past—of how it's perceived to be—might flicker again, in the same way that it seems to flicker briefly in one single piece of ephemera. I see the past everywhere, and feel it too, but translating that is what is hard—it is difficult to strike a balance between a stretch of prose and the latency of the inarticulate. But the rewards are clear, according to Woolf, writing on what Charlotte and Emily achieved:

> [The sisters] seized those aspects of the earth which were most akin to what they themselves felt or imputed to their characters, and so their storms, their moors, their lovely spaces of summer weather are not ornaments applied to decorate a dull page or display the writer's power of observation—they carry on the emotion and light up the meaning of the book.[260]

Everything addles together, each part a seamless aspect of the whole. And this is where the past resides—out past the intellect, and even past the motifs which make it. That 'meaning of a book' is the deeper meaning of a life Birkerts writes about, and is where the past curdles. It happens off the page, in the grey matter of skulls which keep and hoard memories, and in the way the world happens to us and because of us in a seamless but interrupted always-curated rush which feels like falling.

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[259] W.G. Sebald. (2004/2005). *Unrecounted*. London: Penguin Books. (Original work published 2003). 83-85. (Images by Jan Peter Tripp).
[260] Woolf. '*Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*'. *The Common Reader*. 224.

In her *Life of Charlotte Brontë*, Gaskell does something similar to what Woolf observes in '*Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*'. While she cannot maintain the kind of intensity those novels manage, there are moments when Gaskell draws the reader on, plotting into the future, around the edges of her words. That future is, of course, the past, just as it is in this work. And the ending is just as inevitable.

In Blackwell's, folded into a corner nook of the shop, I read how Charlotte went to Scarborough with Anne, to nurse her at the last. It was then that Gaskell's writing became, for me, an exemplar of the way evidence might be plundered, as well as of how something inevitable, inarticulate, might be manipulated. One of her techniques is to describe things matter-of-factly, and leave much of the detail to Charlotte's own letters. It's a false distancing, of course: she was Charlotte's friend.

She tells how Anne and Charlotte travelled to the coast: an unnamed friend of the sisters waited for them on the platform at Leeds Station on May 23 (when they had meant to travel, but Anne had been too sick). It's then that Gaskell seeds what's to come, plots the skein of the next few days in the mind of her reader before they get there: as there was no way to let that friend know Anne and Charlotte were not travelling, she was left to wait and watch the platform. From two separate trains, Gaskell writes, 'coffins were carried forth, and placed in hearses which were in waiting for their dead.'[261] The sisters travelled instead on May 24. This is the kind of pattern forming, in embryo, that Woolf sees working in the prose of the Brontë sisters. A metaphor is set in place, and the story folds around it, even ahead of it, in a kind of premonition. It feels a little like a prediction made via redundancy, and is as Charlotte says in the first sentence of the first post-Anne chapter of *Shirley*:

> The future sometimes seems to sob a low warning of the events it is bringing us, like some gathering though yet remote storm, which, in tones of the wind, in flushing of the firmament, in clouds strangely torn, announces a blast strong to strew the sea with wrecks.[262]

It is in the complexity of these folded metaphors that the best works have their power: silk, in *The Rings of Saturn*, waves in Woolf's novel, and perhaps even the missing

[261] Gaskell. 270.
[262] C. Brontë. (1849/1972). *Shirley: A Tale*. London: Collins. 334.

doll at the beginning of the *Neapolitan Novels*, which reoccurs as a lost daughter, and a lost friend, only to appear as a doll again on Elena's doorstep at the end of the sequence. Nabokov describes how this method was part of Proust's too:

> [His style] contains three especially distinctive elements:
> 1. A wealth of metaphorical imagery, layer upon layer of comparisons …
> 2. A tendency to fill in and stretch out a sentence to its utmost breadth and length …
> 3. … Proust's conversations and his descriptions merge into one another, creating a new unity where flower and leaf and insect belong to one and the same blossoming tree.[263]

Roger Shattuck also describes the way in which Proust achieves this 'new unity', in a method of constant interchange. When talking of the way time and space fuse and spin in Proust's novel, Shattuck notes that,

> The interchange never stops. [*Remembrance of Things Past*] creates a predominantly temporal perspective, scored through deeply at crucial moments by arresting spatial insights. The only synthesis resides in the full dimensions of the work itself … Time and space do not try to elbow each other aside … They perform an elaborate and moving saraband that leaves both of them onstage and in full possession of their powers.[264]

This is what the mind works on when a book is closed, or in the silent, still times between chapters or sentences; when grey matter considers—cognisant or not—all that is inarticulate, because of the way sentences work. Then, the end anticipated invariably comes. This is how books can become tight, trembling webs of thought and symbol, constellated plottings which describe something vaster, and how they give an effect of memory and the affect of the past. In this way, prose can work as one kind of image: a haiku writ-large in one continuous line, a giant miniature, a work of *trompe l'oeil* writing.

We may only grasp a modicum of the swirling world. But that is enough to suggest a picture. *The Rings of Saturn* is so immersive because it is a collection of finely-strung

[263] Nabokov. 213-214.
[264] Shattuck. 210-212.

details, picked at and tweaked so that its incoherence feels like a pattern, a true depiction of consciousness, which is at heart a pattern-forming mechanism. It is a *trompe-l'oeil* book, made of selected light and shadow, constructed in winding metaphors and symbols. Sebald acknowledges that 'Even the realist working with the most meticulous precision can accommodate only a certain number of signs on a given surface':[265] a coffin, perhaps? A glasses case? Spires lining up? The challenge is to find which things are essential, to decide which of them should be placed back into the present. And then, I think, a little of life might be considered out of context.

This facet of reading, and of constructing a miniature world as a result of the one on the page, occurs at different levels through a text, as is evidenced in the way Gaskell works her biography, and the way an altogether different masterpiece like *The Waves*, or *The Rings of Saturn*, or *Remembrance of Things Past* might function. How *The Waves* works is beyond my scope here: Woolf's competing narrators do not have the same cyclopean power as Sebald's or Proust's. But perhaps her own force of personality offers something like an answer: she gives extra levels to the interlinkédness of selves and things. In any case, this feature of the way 'the help of nature' (of which I am taking a loose interpretation) pulses prose into life, makes a work feel like what Charlotte Brontë intended *Shirley* to feel like: a piece of actual life. Even if, in the end, the result is just the kind of miniature world Woolf writes about in 'The Sun and the Fish': a tank with sand hills for mountains.

When Woolf herself went to Haworth, in 1904, she felt an echo of the past in the ephemera within the parsonage, which, collectively and in isolation, conjured up what is impossible to articulate—the sad grandeur which is the assemblage of all things:

> The museum is certainly rather a pallid and inanimate collection of objects. An effort ought to be made to keep things out of these mausoleums, but the choice often lies between them and destruction, so that we must be grateful for the care which has preserved much that is, under any circumstances, of deep interest. Here are many autograph letters, pencil drawings, and other documents. But the most touching case, so touching that one hardly feels reverent in one's gaze, is that which contains the little personal relics of the dead woman. The natural fate of such things is to die before the body that wore them, and because these, trifling and transient though they are, have

[265] Sebald. *Unrecounted*. 85.

> survived, Charlotte Brontë the woman comes to life, and one forgets the chiefly memorable fact that she was a great writer. Her shoes and her thin muslin dress have outlived her. One other object gives a thrill; the little oak stool which Emily carried with her on her solitary moorland tramps, and on which she sat, if not to write, as they say, to think what was probably better than her writing.[266]

The past will never come back. But I hope I've been able to show something of how it *feels* to contemplate what's been, and that that, in turn, might be close enough; that writing how the past feels is a task of essence and evocation.

*

In Blackwell's, I paid my money and took *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* with me to the Gardener's Arms. I read about Anne's last few days, spent with Charlotte in Scarborough. On May 26, 1849, she was taken down to the sands, sitting in a cart pulled by a donkey. The next day she wanted to go to church, but was dissuaded: instead, she sat and watched the beach a while:

> The evening closed in with the most glorious sunset ever witnessed. The castle on the cliff stood in proud glory gilded by the rays of the declining sun. The distant ships glittered like burnished gold; the little boats near the beach heaved on the ebbing tide, inviting occupants.[267]

The next day Anne seemed well, at first. But that changed: a doctor came and told her she would die. And she did, at around 2 o'clock in the afternoon, a death presaged by coffins, missed trains, caught trains, and the black knuckle of a shadow on a cliff side. 'So little was the house disturbed by the presence of the dying, and the sorrow of those so nearly bereaved, that dinner was announced as ready, through the half-opened door, as the living sister was closing the eyes of the dead one.'[268] At the Gardener's Arms I remember closing my book for a little while and watching the people around me. The sun shone through to the corners of the room, and the clink of glasses and the hum of voices mattered.

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[266] Woolf. 'Haworth, November 1904'. *Books and Portraits*. 196.
[267] Gaskell. 272.
[268] Ibid. 273.

I flicked through pages then; I skimmed back to the contents, and saw that Charlotte had returned to Scarborough three years after Anne's death. According to Gaskell, Charlotte could not resist going back:

> [S]he had wondered whether all decent services had been rendered to the memory of the dead, until at last she came to a silent resolution to go and see for herself whether the stone and inscription were in a satisfactory state of preservation.[269]

On that trip she wrote to her friend Ellen Nussey, from the small seaside town of Filey, just to the south of Scarborough. The date was June 6, 1852, almost exactly 141 years to the day before Holbeck Hall collapsed into the water. In the letter, Charlotte tells Ellen not to be angry that she has returned to the coast alone. She refers to this return as a duty, one which weighed heavily on her through the years following Anne's death. And she is glad she went back to the cliff-side churchyard I can remember, because there were five errors on Anne's gravestone.

Then, in the Gardener's Arms, watching people come and go, I worked out that the Friday she went would have been June 4, 1852, 141 years exactly before the last guests were evacuated from Holbeck Hall, at breakfast time, on the day when the cliff finally broke apart and took the building with it.

There are nearly always patterns, no matter from which angle the past is glanced at. That is the strangeness of it, or, of our experience of it. There are kind-of patterns in the building and the reading of it too, and they console in a way I find difficult to articulate. This shaping of chaos into something understandable should be part of the method of writing a life, of evoking the past, and is certainly built into the kind of novels Charlotte and Emily wrote.

In her letter to Ellen, Charlotte describes where she stayed in Filey—where she and Ellen had once stayed together—and she describes the people there, and the sea, which '[had] all its old grandeur.'[270] Then she talks of a walk she took to the Brigg, the great length of crumbling land which points seawards from the beach at Filey. And what I could not look past then, in the front bar of the Gardener's Arms, was that after I went

[269] Ibid. 359.
[270] Ibid. 360.

to Scarborough that day, ostensibly to follow a postcard and a wave, I drove on to Filey to chase memories there. I had ended my day at the end of the Brigg.

We went to Filey every summer, and stayed in the same many-storied house in the centre of town. It was ritual. I went to Filey that day to try to be precise about the past, especially after failing to be so in Scarborough. I was aiming, if I could, to trace a space *I* had been; where I knew I had been because of an old photograph taken on a family holiday.

The promenade at Filey, when I reached it, was deserted. There was a paddling pool where I had, in fact, paddled, but no one was in it; there was not even any water in it. The sea was flat, and in the distance the Brigg fingered out into the ocean. Out past it I could see tufts of water, but that was all. There was an excavator on the beach, and a ute parked between two flags, but no one was swimming and even the sand was grey and flat and damp. I walked down to the promenade and then along it. The amusements were still there and so were the shops, and Coble Landing too, where boats wait for the water. I thought the picture I had was taken somewhere along the Landing, but I couldn't quite remember where. In the picture I am mid-lick of my ice cream, next to Mum, and Grandma is smiling away from the camera, wearing a blue skirt.

The boats were tied up and the life boat station was still there. Its door was open, and the big, orange lifeboat still inside. I could smell fish and chips, and I could hear the sound of arcades further down towards the beach. And I realised that, because I

was there, seeing it all again, that the memories I had of it would be polluted, and that felt strange and a little sad. But it was also true that I could not help but be there, that something had brought me back. Even if that something was as banal and impossible to resist as a curiosity over the state of preservation of the place.

Small windmills for sandcastles spun next to plastic buckets and spades in crammed-in shopfronts. People ate ice-creams and sat on plastic chairs. There were fewer cobbles than I remembered.

I played on the two-pence machines for a while and then went upstairs to a restaurant, ate a chip butty, and drank a cup of tea. I remember sucking the vinegar from the chips and watching the water from the window; I remember warming my hands on my mug. I spilt salt and milk on the table, and left behind a pile of empty sauce packets. Later, each street in Filey would force me onto the next; each place a clue for somewhere just around the corner. And I did know my way around, but only bit-by-bit: each step triggered the next.

I found where we posed for the photograph. It was on a long bench at the start of Coble Landing; the place had changed enough around the bench to force a little uncanniness, and perhaps the bench had changed too. I'd just come out of the arcade after wasting another pound or two on the machines—where erasers shaped like cars and assorted keyrings, dangling above their precipice, had threatened but failed to drop—and I had aimed back towards the town, memory itching. And there was the bench, just after the life boat station, hemmed in by new places to park cars.

Everything in Filey is small and tight and crinkled, except for the seagulls, which are monstrous, and not at all afraid. I found one parked outside a pub, waiting for leavings. It was the size of a dog and looked at me with a kind of smile. I could hear voices from houses but no one was in the streets. The Vinery, a café I remembered, had rebranded. The gift shop attached to it in the 1990s was now a restaurant, Charlotte's of Filey, and the Vinery itself was the Brontë Vinery. And in the pub in Oxford, flicking through *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, I realised why that might have been the case. The vine was still there in the café named after it, curling and twisting on the roof, a couple of hundred years old.

Then the last thing. I had to park my car as close as I could to the Brigg path—the day was long, but not as long as I needed it to be. A large red sign said 'Beware Dangerous Cliffs'. The town looked small from where I was and the beach looked

huge, the sky and the sea still the same grey. I walked out onto the Brigg, on the grass and paths on top of it. It narrowed as it reached out into the ocean, like a great finger pointing. I remembered going rock-pooling at its base, catching crabs with tiny nets bought with coins won on Coble Landing.

All the sides that the Brigg had were steep and sheer, and each edge threatened to tip. There was a feeling of vertigo attached to being that high, buffeted by the wind, standing on crumbling sand and rock. Even the flat bed of rocks which make the end of it, the tip of the finger leading out into the ocean, was dangerous: waves crashed into the northern side, the Scarborough side. Though, to the south (where the beach and Filey are) the water was mostly calm.

Wind and waves made the sound of the place. There were routes I could not take because the ends of paths had tumbled into the lapping water. When I leaned out to look at the stretch of cliffs leading back to Scarborough I could see the layers of what I was stood on, the crunched up time of it all, falling off and away into waves.

I got to the end of the grass and then had to work my way down to the bottom of the Brigg. I was wearing the wrong shoes, and clumps of dirt and sand fell away from a path that was itself falling as I jumped and hopped my way to the bottom, carried down its steepness by gravity. Small yellow and white flowers speckled the grass right to its edges, hanging on grimly to the cliff side. The paths trembled and were hard to manage.

At the bottom, at sea level, there was a concrete path through rock pools. But it, too, was cracked and stopped suddenly. I had to hop across bits of water to figure a root to the end of the fingernail of the Brigg. The rocks at sea level were worn, and worked by the ocean into curves and waves; they made small pools where moss and seaweed gathered, and where anemones waved; the pools were like small, strange bowls in the ground. The seaweed was the type which threatens to pop when you squeeze it.

The cliffs came down quickly to the water. You could see the layers of them better from below, all their crunched and flattened eras quite distinct. Under a thick layer of white and brown rock I found something which would once have been alive: a fossil, curved and hollow like an eye. I put it in my pocket and stepped out from the shadow of the cliff.

When I reached the end of the Brigg I turned around to see the whole thing tipped to one side, the paths and cliffs and rocks all lent, bent upwards towards Scarborough;

the world was lopsided and falling away. There were lines running all through the Brigg at the same angles, parallel, as though the whole thing were tipping slowly into the grey and moving sea. I watched the waves hit from the north and saw a small boat bobbing to the south in the bay. It looked like the waves were slowly turning the Brigg, rolling it over. The rocks which took the brunt of them were battered and crazed, but still, somehow, speckled with seaweed. The place was slippery, loose, and battered; ruined. You could break bits of it off in your hand, you could crack the rocks of it and find things squashed inside: there was so much living or once-living that the massive singular edifice also seemed to live, to be always moving and changing and dying.

I could not climb back to the top the way I had come to the bottom: the steps were steep and incomplete. I walked back towards the beach, under cliffs which flickered, undulated like skin. They looked like a range of mountains glimpsed through the back end of a telescope: deep ravines, sheer valleys, cliffs, peaks, passes, all in miniature. In the sand, when the rocks and pools finished, were the swirls and spirals of burying worms. The sand itself was fine, with a white-tinged top made from what looked like battered shells, as if it had a thin dandruff coating.

To escape the beach and the bottom of the cliffs I walked up a steep path called the Ravine. There were dead-ends of paths even there, ways I could only walk a little of until they fell away and I had to turn back. The Ravine was midge-choked, a steep cave of green aiming upwards and covered over. When I got to the top, to the fresh air at the top of the cliff, it was a relief to burst free from the swallowing greenness of that path, from the rotten and rotting smell of it, and from the water rushing down the hill towards the sea.

The fossil I found underneath the cliff is a shadow. It's evidence of something, sometime in the past. It's proof, like the cliff side, of the nature of the place we inhabit. Sat in my car at the top of the Brigg I remembered where I pulled it from: that lip which had been slowly forming and falling for an impossible expanse of time, the rock in my hand a part of that process. The fossil was merely the hint of a shell, a curved shape like an eyeball, but with the pupil missing—either chipped off, or lost before the thing became rock. In any case, it looked like something was trapped inside. I put the fossil back in my pocket and called Grandma, told her where I was ('Oh, you're never?'), and that I would be back late. I was.

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In Oxford the march of the day was beginning to speed. I made my way back to Mansfield College, and the town was quiet and still. I do not remember much of the rest of my time there, but I did feel a little out of place at the conference. I had to make my presentation with no shoes on, because of the noise my heels made on the floor of the room we were in. On the walls of the room were dark, shining paintings of red-cheeked men.

I was glad when it was all done: I had been away for a while, and delivering my paper was the last thing I had to do in England before heading back to Perth. As I was flying from Manchester, though, I would have one more night in the valley. But I had decided, with Uncle Kevin, that I would not see Grandma: I had already said goodbye once, and a second time might just prolong the leaving. So I headed north, to sleep in the spare room at the house of some of my parents' friends.

8

This is not the letter of a madman

> What this needs is some conflict, so that there can be an end. Death I think must come in as the antagonist.
>
> Virginia Woolf. *The Waves: The Two Holograph Drafts*. Notebook 14, page 761.

In Perth, things were normal. When I got back it was easy to settle into a routine I was used to: work, writing. But after a week or two of jetlag, and perhaps a month or so of prevarication, it was time to meet my father to show him what I had found. I went round to my parents' place in the evening, carrying a bunch of print-outs and scans, and a suitcase full of relics.

He knew much of what I'd brought back: had seen it all, whether before it went into that room at Grandma's, or when he'd been there himself—when it was my aunt's wedding, and he liberated Vera Lynn and Charlie Kunz from their bin-bag homes. I showed him the photographs I'd brought back, the diary, the glasses cases, and a few of the things I'd rescued which were certainly his: old hole-punched programming cards; my parents' wedding notices; and the degree he thought he'd lost moving house before I was born. (I found it in a bin bag trapped underneath a pile of rotting World War I encyclopaedias.) One thing which puzzled us was a brown and plastic View Master, with clouded-grey eyes and an ivory-coloured handle. The picture-wheels, which slip inside a slot in the top, are made of thin card. When one is slid into the machine, the viewer builds a kind of three-dimensional image from two pictures placed side by side—the pictures are somehow layered on top of each other. The machine's inventor, Wilhelm B. Gruber, called this kind of vision stereoscopic: your eyes

converge the images to layer them, one on top of the other, and that makes pictures seen through the View Master thicker: leaves on trees stand out and sit in tight, unerring focus.

There are seven photos on each disc, built of fourteen images. I found a few different wheels at Grandma's: Christmas scenes, shots of Ireland, London Airport, Native Americans, Rome, Paris, the launch of a rocket from Cape Canaveral, and one disc of Scarborough. I put it into the View Master and pressed the ivory handle so that the pictures lined up with the lenses, then I passed it over to Dad.

In the patent application for the View Master—which I had to google—the lenses sit at the end of octagonal tubes. But in the brown one we had at Grandma's the tubes were smooth and quadrilateral, tapering just slightly. First its flanges, lugs, and screws are described in the application, and then Gruber goes on to say exactly what the View Master does: 'It can be seen from the foregoing that there is provided a viewing device which can be operated by a child without inconvenience or danger to the views or without unnecessary wear thereon.'[271] Of course, that cannot be seen at all: the language of the application is impenetrable and seems abstract to the point of poetry. But it *can* be seen when you hold the thing in your hands, point its grey eyes towards the light, and look at the turning views of Scarborough flick around the screen through those tapered tubes which end in clouded plastic—it's easy to use, and hold. The town appears frozen but in a kind of perspective, layered in the way that the View Master patents, stacking the levels of the photograph. In the first image of Scarborough, a panorama from Oliver's Mount, the trees in the foreground are bursting and green, tinged with yellow from a sun that is not visible but whose effects are. If you move the View Master from light to dark the leaves on the trees shimmer; the town behind is spread out, ending in its harbour and castle. Then the ocean and a cloud-dusted sky. It's only possible to get the effect if you look with two eyes, but with my phone angled down the lens you might get half an idea:

[271] W.B. Gruber. (1947). 'Stereoscopic Viewer'. Patent Application No. US2511334A. Published June 13, 1950. 4-5. Filed 28 April, 1947. Retrieved from https://docs.google.com/viewer?url=patentimages.storage.googleapis.com/pdfs/US2511334.pdf.

The second image is of one of the most famous buildings in Scarborough, a small stone thing you walk past along the front, on which a blue plaque (which was not there when the view-finder photograph was taken) now says: ‘King Richard III 1483-1485 is reputed to have stayed here.’ Dad remembered it, and had been inside.

The next flashing scene, which comes around with a flick of the lever on the side of the View Master, is the beach, looking back towards the Castle, from somewhere near the Grand Hotel. Whenever someone alludes to the Grand in front of my father, he mentions the e coli outbreak there, and I think, perhaps, that might have had something to do with the mood I was in when I walked past it. On the picture, down the lens, the sand on the beach is as flat and smooth as the day I walked along it. But there are people this time spotting the sand, on deckchairs and under umbrellas, watching the water and sitting like puppets in a stop-motion film.

With a flick of your finger you can also see, just as a glimpse, briefly windowed, the boating lake at Peasholm Park; then a close-up of the ruins of the castle where Thomas Hinderwell found the capital of a carved cross, followed by an open air theatre, and finally the herring fleet waiting in the harbour. It looked much the same

then, whenever that was, as it does now. The photograph of the fleet appears as if it was taken on board a ship—there is rigging and rope and the wooden sides of a boat in the foreground. And behind that are seagulls, the layered town, and a menacing castle of clouds. The wheel never stops turning—part of Gruber's design—so that the same scenes flash again and again, affected by whatever light shines through the grey apertures and then into your eyes, which are squashed to the tubes in order to see the shapes which shine through them. We used the lamps in the lounge to stare into the corners of each layered picture as best we could.

In the bag which carried the View Master were a couple of rolls of film and a camera, still with pictures left to take when I found it. In Perth, I clicked the last few images away, and took the film and camera to a developer's. I got half a refund back: the film in the camera was fried, and the people captured on it had vanished. Though, as I thought I could see shadows on some of the negatives, and because I wanted to see the pictures I'd tried to take, I kept it anyway.

The only usable thing, according to the developer, was an old film I had found rattling around that room upstairs at Grandma's house. The photos from it were now on a disc and so, when I got to Mum and Dad's, I put the disc into their computer. On the screen we saw a wedding that must—from the clothes and the cars—have taken place in the 1960s. The pictures were in colour and crystal clear, eerily clear, all dead-still snapshots. I knew no-one in the photographs; neither did Dad (although if the date we guessed was right then he would have been very young, so that's perhaps understandable).

The wedding was held up on the Tops, and the church was made of that black-stained rock which makes everything around it darker. It must have been somewhere near Old Town, which is a village above the Hebden Valley, and it must have been from the time my grandparents (and my father) lived on top of Hebden Bridge—when Grandad and Uncle Kevin worked at teeth in the centre of the town, in that shop above where a bank is now.

If I could read the writing on the gravestones at the church it might be possible to say exactly where the wedding was. But all I can say from this side of the world is that it looks like Old Town: the shape of the hills, the colour of the rocks, and the deep greens of the grass and of the trees point to that place.

Two of my favourite photographs are of members of the wedding party: in the first, an old man smiles madly at the camera, hands in pockets, hemmed in by the gravestones above him and to his right and left. Without a woman in white, in the foreground, the picture would be foreboding. I also love one of the street-scenes: the guests have left the church and must be waiting for the bride and groom to drive off on their honeymoon or to the reception. In the picture there are clumps of people talking to each other. The ladies are mostly hatted and gloved, and the men squint and wear suits. Only one person stares at the camera, a woman with her hands bare and an odd smile on her face. A cloud of smoke blown from somewhere behind her hovers above her head, and her cream coat does not match her red bag.

One of the last pictures was a view across the Hebden Valley, to Heptonstall and beyond. Hebden Bridge is nestled in below somewhere, and Stoodley Pike (for once blurry, less lightning-rod, more possible-smudge-on-the-horizon) and the church at Heptonstall line up almost as they should. Clouds never seen again are caught like dust trapped behind the glass of a picture frame, and the house in which I lived is hidden by the hills.

A couple of days before I went round to my parents', Melissa and I had been watching television in the dark. It was loud and I wasn't really thinking of anything, but we were talking, occasionally, about her grandfather, John. He had kept all the

albums of photographs he had taken during World War II, and Melissa's mother had scanned them into her computer so that they would not be lost. Sue had gone through the pictures using a kind of light box, with which she was able to record the negatives, and she had it in the back room at her house.

We fetched the scanner from Mel's parents' and put the roll of film through it; I was pleased to see that something had lasted. Even though the pictures were spotted and difficult to make out, and even though they were stained and not the sort of pictures you might put on a wall, it was possible to see Grandma with Aunty Bernice and Uncle Mac, as well as my cousins Jason and Darren, walking, ridings donkeys on the beach, playing crazy golf at Filey, and fishing off the Brigg. Though, as we turned through the film from the camera—a Kodak Instamatic 155—the pictures dimmed. The last old photo worth looking at was taken from the window of Grandma and Grandad's house on Parkinson Lane, in Halifax. 'That's where we used to live,' said Dad, when I showed him. And Mum, who had woken up to get a drink, walked into the room and asked, 'Is that a sink hole?' In the street an area of tarmac was cordoned off, and box-shaped cars half-blurred past. That view from the window at Parkinson Lane gave way to shadows, though once it was possible to see the shape of a lampshade on a windowsill. 'That's inside the flat,' said Dad. Then the negatives went blank and bubbled, and there was nothing but space; the pictures I had tried to take had failed entirely, except for one at Matilda Bay, where there must have been enough light soaring and seeping through the aperture to leave a kind of impression. In the picture the boats are still, and the city is distant.

After the pictures, I showed my father the bolt I'd brought back from somewhere in the ground between Otley and Harrogate—kept inside a Ziploc bag to stop flecks of rusted iron falling everywhere, and in order to keep the moss and muck tied to it as best I could. We talked about the story, too, and how hard it had been to follow. He was not so sure about my suspicions regarding Alfred's authorship: his best guesses were his uncle, Kevin, who once told him he was going to write a German textbook (which started in English and ended in German, but which he did not ever start), or his dad, who caused the trip to happen in the first place. Then he asked how Grandma had been, and what the valley was like. I tried to explain how time was bent and strange in England, how it seemed to stretch and squeeze, and that the days inside Mytholm Meadows were longer than they should have been. What confused, what did not compute, was the way in which those long and stretched-out days could seem to rattle by, to be done and gone in a moment. But that bits of days (hours, minutes, seconds) were long and interminable—each small increment of time, measured on its own, would have broken clocks—even when weeks were fast and months were faster still. I presumed that everyone living at Mytholm would wonder to themselves where the time had gone, and how they had come to be where they were: no one, especially not the old and well-lived, is nimble enough to catch it—time—as it lists off and off. But perhaps we need the flux and flow of it, if only to appreciate the seconds of our lives it is possible to recall.

And then I told him about Samuel, Alfred's father. It was why I had come, and what I had promised. I wasn't, of course, telling him something he did not know. But I was filling in details, consolidating facts which he had only been able to guess at, helping him to make his own links between then and now. The story of it all was held on microfilm in the archives at Shrewsbury, nowhere else. I told him that I had waited as long as I could to make the decision to take the trip. That it was, in the end, a little rash of me to go. But also that it had to be that way: I had almost talked myself out of it when I stood up and said to Grandma that, again, I would be back late: that I had to go to Shrewsbury. 'Shrewsbury? Why are ya going there?!'

The roads were long and traffic-crammed, and I felt less confident than I wanted to: I was not convinced I was going the right way until I drove past the bottom of Mardol, the street on which Samuel had worked. I parked my car between two big buildings, a hospital and the Charles Darwin Shopping Centre. And I wished I could remember the

people I passed on the way through the town, but I could only see shadows of them: an enormous man playing a tiny guitar, and a teenager, rake thin, with him. Then two women pushing prams. I walked past them and up the stairs to the archives.

I was given the microfilm I asked for and pointed on, and the staff were friendly but (and this may just be my normal sort of insecurity) sceptical. I remember being in the archives but I do not really remember how I started to work. I must have fiddled with the microfilm machine for a while, because I would have been out of practice, and, anyway, the ones in Shrewsbury were different to the ones in Perth.

I rolled the film through as quick as I could, overshot, wound forwards again, and then started to read the *Shrewsbury Chronicle* for May, 1899. The paper had a thick masthead, but the words of the rest of it were crammed into narrow columns. I found it hard to focus the text in the light of the machine, and that meant the words were blurred and small and difficult to decipher. I did not know which part of the paper to look for, so I turned through it all, slowly, backwards and forwards. I did not even know, honestly, if there would be anything there, although I suspected that there would be. I found a 'Miscellaneous' section which seemed promising, as it turned out to be a catalogue of different small-scale catastrophes: a paragraph, bound between adverts for Cadbury's cocoa ('It's absolutely pure!') and 'Floriline! For teeth and breath!', told of a man killed by lightning. Then, in each tiny piece of text crammed onto the film rolling through the band of light, was the tale of one more death or accident: I wrote down bullet-point notes on John Batolle's suicide by three methods (first he walked into his parents' burial vault and shot himself five times, then he cut his wrists, and finally he jumped into a fast-moving stream). Miss Josephine Renan, a French dressmaker living in Westminster, shot herself at her lover's feet; George Hamden, the captain of the barge 'Isle of Grain', was the victim of 'fatal light refreshments', and died after consuming ginger beer and two buns. I watched for Samuel, but kept finding myself distracted. In my notes, which I showed my father, I recorded that John and Mary Tracy, of Liverpool, were 'victims of a paraffin lamp outrage', murdered by a Mrs Levens, who threw a lamp into the Tracey's bed following an argument about the noise the drunk couple were making; then there was the sudden death of a revising barrister, Mr John Hill Gough; and a man, Richard Wilson, was run over by a train, 'killed in his wife's presence'. Then, 'To Mothers': 'Mrs Winslow's Cooking Syrup has been tried over fifty years by millions of mothers for their children while teething

with perfect success.' There was a plague of foxes on the Fens of Lincolnshire: 'the vulpine marauders have made considerable havoc among the young lambs, and many losses have been reported.' And, that week in 1899, a fire consumed the library and archives at the Paris Chamber of Commerce and National Office of Foreign Trade, destroying 200,000 volumes.[272]

I tried to describe to my father how the archives were. It was difficult to articulate the normal sounds of the place, and the solid patterns of it. Somewhere purpose-built for the pursuit of shadows and the collecting of dust, a building hiding so many secrets and stories, should not be bland and neat and near-empty. Though this is often the way of it: we are only bound in glistening skin for a moment, built briefly of bones and gristle. But we can last in records that we keep and leave—continue to linger in stilled repositories, even if the most faithful reflections in those air-locked places lack a kind of force of life; it's as Woolf says: 'In the looking-glass things [cease] to breathe and [lie] still in the trance of immortality.'[273] I stopped trying to describe the way the archives worked then, and tried again, caught in the light of two small lamps sat in the opposite corners of my parents' lounge room, to breathe what I could into the death of Samuel, to rescue him from his state of suspended animation.

I wound the microfilm back and forth and leaned as best I could over the screen, but my shadow kept getting in the way. Until, 117 years after it happened, on a transparent film threaded through a dial, I was able to triangulate something of the past.

On May 4, 1899, about half a mile from the village of Habberley, 'a hat was seen lying on the road by the side of a gate.' Past the hat and the gate Samuel was lying underneath the thick hedgerow which lines the Habberley Road. That morning, hours before, he had left his home at 10 minutes to seven. Before walking out the door, he went into the bedroom where his sons slept, said 'good morning', and that he was

[272] Unfortunately I did not keep, in my notes, the number of the page this long list was printed on. Instead of copying it I wrote it all down; my handwriting is scruffy, smudged, and rushed. As the newspaper itself is only, to my knowledge, accessible at the archives in Shrewsbury, here across the world I am left simply trusting in the self I was when I wrote everything down that first time. In my notebook I did record the date: May 19, 1899, and, of course, the publication: the *Shrewsbury Chronicle*. But even when I took copies of the *Chronicle* that day at the archives, I neglected to take down page numbers—in haste, perhaps. The smoothest way to reference the *Chronicle* will, I think, be to say now that each quote comes from the editions of May 5, May 12, May 19, and May 26, 1899.
[273] V. Woolf. 'The Lady in the Looking Glass'. *A Haunted House* …. 94.

going to see Thomas Higley (a wheelwright in Habberley). It was not unusual for him to take walks in the morning.

Nearly three hours after 10 minutes to seven, William Roberts, a baker, saw Samuel on the Habberley Road. When they met, my great-great-grandfather gave Roberts a note and asked him to take it on to Higley. In the archives the threaded film read: 'The man did not give his name; but he gave witness [Roberts] twopence, telling him to get a drink. He seemed perfectly sober, and knew what he was doing.' I showed Dad a print out of the film, white text on black background, flung from a copy machine in Shrewsbury. It looked like a still from an old movie, streaked through and captioned.

At around 10 o'clock Roberts passed the letter on to Albert Warters, a joiner employed by Higley. Warters took the note to Higley's wife—unnamed—who opened it. She asked Warters to go straightaway to the Habberley Road, and he did, hopping on a cart passing through the village. The cart was driven by Thomas Juckes, who worked at the Mytton Inn, in Habberley. Each of these back-lit strangers flickered briefly. Then I told Dad about the dog I saw at the inn where Thomas had worked—that beagle with bulging eyes—but I did not mention the way I had left and not returned. I'm sure Samuel and Thomas must have known each other, but I cannot figure out how.

Trapping up the Habberley Road, hemmed in by hedges and birdsong, Warters and Juckes turned one of its blind corners and saw 'a jacket, collar, and tie on the ditch bank.' They found Samuel within six yards of where Roberts, the baker, took the note from him. He was dying; he was 48 years old.

The phone rang then. It was my uncle, calling on behalf of Grandma. She had been moved to a ward a couple of days previously: her visions were bad, and she was anxious because of them. When I spoke to her I could hear the hospital moving on the other end of the line, a whirr of machines and voices. It was loud where she was, and she couldn't really hear me. She was embarrassed about being on the phone too—worried what they would say about that on the ward—and concerned that someone else would need to use it to talk. She was not alone but I guessed she felt lonely. And she had been in the hospital longer than we thought she would be, because the drugs they gave her, to sort out the way she felt because of the things she saw, had not worked as well as they should.

I should admit, now, that I don't really remember our old conversations. And even if I did manage to record snatches of some, they represent just sporadic flashes of years and hours of talk, and feel only a little like memories—more like things washed up from the past. When I listen back to those stolen snatches—even though I spoke the words or heard the words—they sound new; what's more, all the ticks of speech or quirks of personality which I don't really like about myself are obvious—the way I interrupt, for example, or the way I shift the subject of a conversation away from the direction it's heading. I irritate myself, when I listen back, at the way I didn't let her finish. It frustrates me to think of all the things she might have said if I didn't choose to speak when I did.

The actual work of transcribing even those snipped conversations was laborious. It was demoralising, too, to spend an afternoon typing down thirteen minutes of talk; it tested my eyes, my ears, and my fingers. When you transcribe there is not really much else you can do: you can't read other things, or listen to anything else. You just transcribe, or get distracted.

Moving the electronic-conversation back and forth meant I could analyse (too much, perhaps) the differences between um and urm and er and uhm and erm: Grandma and I must have used most of them. And for reasons I am not quite sure of, when I transcribed I was determined to catch them all, to be as truthful as I could to the recording of the conversations we had.

There was plenty I couldn't infer from the sounds left of those conversations: what exactly was happening when we were silent, for instance; why there were so many pauses and stutters; even, sometimes, where the conversations took place. The recordings stop and start too, because my phone was turned on and off by messages or calls or a dead battery. But there were patterns as well: for instance, when she said a name I would always repeat it and then repeat it again. And off we would go, dancing a rhythm of attempted memory and affirmation. Grandma was nearly always concerned with what the time was, and she liked to remember those guinea pigs her father kept.

On the phone that night, which Dad held close to his ear but with the loudspeaker on, Grandma said something like this:

'Oh it's, mind ya it's ni nice, I've been in. Erm, it's one at, erm, … oh dear, what they call it? … They 'ave settees o' er, in the alcoves as yer walkin' down.' She was

talking about the entrance to the hospital in which she was. To make it work on the page I would have to transform dialogue like that into something which makes reading easier and meaning clearer. That sentence or two might become something like this: 'Mind you, it's nice. I've been in. They 'ave settees in the alcoves as you walk down.' Of course, what that means is that I've enacted a process which actively takes words from my grandmother: I have changed her into someone I think she might be, and I have—for example—made you consider her as someone impressed by the settees in the alcoves of a hospital, simply by including this snippet in the narrative. What I need for it to work is for you to imagine how she might sound, hidden among the words I infer from the words she spoke: she chopped her haitches. Or 'aitches. And repeated, repeated the first words of her sentences. And she, like me, prefered erm to um.

Another way that conversations on the page fail to work the same as those in the world is the way they cannot overlap and interject, cut off and pause. In the recorded scraps I have there are, as well, noises which are indecipherable. The recordings can be confusing because of what is going on in the background, whether shuffling on seats or—out in the garden—wind chimes ringing. There are a thousand nuances—thoughts, inferences, digressions—which flap between words and flutter across conversations; all cannot be dealt with by dialogue alone. The pauses in the words Grandma squeezed out were painful and she often struggled to articulate her thoughts; the same is true for the person I am in those recordings, and for the person I was that evening. I had to shout into the phone to her, and I had to try to sound like I used to. Sometimes I managed it, but even when I did I could hear the sounds come out of my mouth in ways that were not normal. It was always easier to speak face to face.

We did not talk much, because she only really had the hospital to talk about, and I did not want to talk to her about that. Normally we would chat about the football, or the place she lived, and, of course, the weather. But she had not been outside in days, and so we were left to discuss the rain on the other side of her window.

I could see her on the ward, even though I did not know what the hospital looked like. I could see her eyes, pale and veined like her skin, and I could see her holding the phone in two hands, a tissue wrapped around her fingers. When she was in hospital Dad would call every day, sometimes more than once. And when she was back in her flat he would keep calling—some days she would be good, and some she would not.

And when she was not good it was hard, because there is not a lot you can do for someone from a few thousand miles away, even if you can speak to them every day.

It was late when we hung up the phone, but Dad and I kept on. I worked through the file of papers I had in my hand. To make those copies I had to thread the film through a dial on a different machine. I turned the long roll through, and then, when a button was pressed, the text fell backwards until the light of the screen winked out, like a television turning off. Then a piece of the required page was pushed out of the machine, warm and inexact and negatived, so that the writing was bright-white on black, and the words were sometimes swollen or cut in half, like a tongue. I do not know who wrote the words which tell the story of how my great-great-grandfather died, and I do not know who copied the newspaper onto the role of film I read in the archives. But I am grateful to them.

When I walked down the Habberley Road I took the copies with me. In doing so I held the last words Samuel wrote clenched tight in my fist. They were printed in the *Shrewsbury Chronicle* too, and that still feels vaguely like a miracle.

A week later, after the cart, and the clothes littering the Habberley Road, and the note passed from Samuel to William Roberts, there was another article in the *Shrewsbury Chronicle*. It came below a piece about the purchase of a set of communion plates 'for use in the Greenfields Mission Room':

> Mr S.H. Juckes … lies in the Salop Infirmary in about the same state as when admitted. He is constantly watched by a county police constable, and there is a chance that he will eventually recover.

Of course, he did not. This, from Friday, May 19:

> Mr S.H. Juckes … died in the Salop Infirmary on Wednesday evening … The deceased, who leaves a widow and three children, was formerly a prominent tradesman in Shrewsbury, and for many years carried on the business of an ironmonger. He had held the position of rate collector for two years. An inquest will be held today.

The inquest was held at the Clarendon Hotel, now demolished. The coroner's job was to decide how my great-great-grandfather died, and why. That is, if he had committed

suicide or not. I was a little nervous as I handed over the report on the enquiry to my father.

The first witness called was Harry Hesleton Juckes (an ironmonger's assistant, and Samuel's son—my great-great-uncle). He was 20 that May, and had had to identify the body of his father. The coroner questioned Harry on Samuel's mental state, and a journalist inside the Clarendon Hotel wrote down what was said:

'Have you noticed at any time that your father was depressed—that he had troubles upon him?'

'He has been troubled, I know, for a long while.'

I should say that the report seems, more or less, verbatim—though I hope I have articulated some of what 'verbatim' implies. It must, at least, give some of the words spoken that day. I did try to find the original coroner's report before I went to Shrewsbury, but the records for 1899 are lost, and the newspaper version is all that is left—that is part of the reason I had to go.

'What were his troubles?' asked the coroner.

'He always said he was short of money, but never told me anything definite.'

The coroner asked Harry a few more questions then. He told the inquest that Samuel used to stay up late with his books, jotting down figures—among other things, of course. Then the coroner handed Harry a letter, and asked if he could identify the writing. The letter was one of those found in a box left by Samuel in the family dining room that May morning, one of the letters I copied, and which I have kept. Harry knew the writing. Then, another question:

'Have you ever heard your father threaten to do anything to himself—to destroy his life?'

'Never.'

Harry reported that, on the night before he died, Samuel had a glass or two to drink and did not bring home the books he was accustomed to work at. And, I remember, as I read from the backlit microfilm in the archives, the tension I felt built into this report on the inquest: the end is inevitable, but the writing builds slowly and deliberately towards it anyway. The prose is clipped and precise.

Albert Warters, the man sent along the Habberley Road to look for Samuel, then took the stand. He told the inquest that, when Mrs Higley first read the note addressed to her husband, she had not suspected that Samuel would follow through with what he

had threatened in writing. Then Warters described what he saw after trapping up the Habberley Road in a cart with Thomas Juckes, and the reporter for the *Shrewsbury Chronicle* wrote down what he said:

> [He] saw a man in field. He was lying underneath the hedge adjoining the road, in his shirt sleeves. Under the bottom bar of the gate they found a hat, and on going into the field they saw a jacket, collar, and tie on the ditch bank, about two yards from the body. The man was lying on his left arm. Blood was flowing from a cut in his throat, and the razor produced was just within reach of his right hand. The man did not speak.

While my father read the printouts I had brought him I imagined the blade being passed around the Clarendon Hotel. The room it was in was full, and its metal caught the light of a lamp or the lick of a candle flame.

Warters and Thomas Juckes took my great-great-grandfather to Pontesbury, where he was treated by a doctor and his assistant, lying still and silent in the back of the cart.

The coroner interjects then, to clarify something to the men assembled: 'The man had only gone two or three yards from the gate in the field, but would be out of sight of anyone walking.' We go so quickly out of sight. But every last action is a product of the one before, and becomes itself a reason for the next. These knife-edge moments then become part of a story we cannot know more than a fraction of.

The coroner called the next witness; this motion was recorded, printed, copied onto film, and then copied onto paper, and carted to the bottom of the world in my suitcase. Police-Constable Wilson, of Pontesbury, 'deposed that he conveyed deceased in the cart to the Salop Infirmary.' You can still visit the infirmary. It's a huge building, somehow squeezed into Salopian streets. It's become a small shopping complex, with nowhere to park and the signs of its past purpose scratched all over it. On the way to the hospital, my great-great-grandfather 'put out his tongue three or four times with blood on it, and the witness wiped it off with wadding.' It is strange to think that on this intimate act I hinge.

Wilson found £1 13s. 6d., and two receipt books, in Samuel's pockets. He gave the books to Samuel's brother.

‘By whose authority was that done?’ asked the coroner, and the room at the Clarendon Hotel must have fallen silent. ‘People appeared to do just as they liked in the borough of Shrewsbury’.

A personal gas bill, for £2 15s. 5d., was overdue. There was a letter from the town clerk too. It said that, ‘the Finance Committee had decided to issue summonses against all persons whose rates were unpaid.’ The journalist noted that: ‘On this document the sum of £117 7s. 6d. was mentioned.’ Then P.C. Wilson told the inquest the first words Samuel spoke after slitting his own throat with a razor. While Wilson was watching over him at the Infirmary, Samuel said, ‘I left home and wished them good-bye; I do not know what could be wrong with me; I must have been mad.’

The next man to be interviewed (we do not hear from any women at the inquest, not even Samuel’s wife, Jane, my great-great-grandmother) was Cecil Salt, a surgeon. He admitted Samuel to the hospital semi-conscious, and described Samuel’s injury in detail to the coroner. I watched as my father read how the surgeon

> found a wound in the upper part of the front of the neck, very nearly central, about five inches long and two inches deep in the deepest part. The cut was at the top of the larynx, and the upper part of the windpipe was severed, but none of the large vessels had been injured. There was not much hemorrhage (sic) at that time, but there had been, and deceased was in a state of collapse.

Salt was the last witness that day. Then the reporter wrote up what seems to be the coroner’s closing address, but the words are ambiguous: it’s hard to tell what was said by the coroner and what the journalist filled in:

> Most of the jury, if not all of them, knew the deceased, who for some years, like his father before him, was an ironmonger of good standing in the borough of Shrewsbury. Some years ago he was appointed rate collector for the Corporation, and it appeared from certain letters which had been put in, and which he would presently read to them, that his accounts were involved. It had come to his (the Coroner’s) knowledge that the auditor of the borough rates (Mr Price) had sent in a report to the Finance Committee that the deceased was in arrears with his collections to a large extent. He did not mean to say that Mr Price reported to the committee that deceased was short of money because he had taken it for his own use, but that during

> his collection he had excused a good many people who were in a position to pay; and the suggestion was that rather than take the trouble to call upon people a number of times or summon them he would cross off their names.

We talked a little, then, about what this might mean for who we might be. There was no doubt some consolation in the knowledge that Samuel might not have been an embezzler, that he might simply have been unsuited to rate collecting. I thought of Alfred musing on the cost of rates for the bus depot out in the countryside on the way to Staithes, and of the reams of betting slips and unpaid bills kept in bin bags at Grandma's house. Dad laughed in the same way Grandma and Kevin did when I mentioned the thousand kept, pink slips.

We both felt oddly relieved at the thought that Samuel might simply have been a little uncomfortable collecting money from his friends, perhaps keen to avoid chasing them up because of the awkwardness which may have resulted. Although, of course, there is a kind of melancholy in that. There must have been a swelling of guilt in the room at the Clarendon Hotel as the razor blade was held aloft and shown to the assembled men.

The coroner suggests that Samuel had too much power to pick and choose who would pay, but, I think, perhaps he was just too nervous to ask. As he was behind on his own debt, he would have known how that felt, and that might be what drove him to his decision, to that razor edge which sent everything else rolling forwards. Although this guess is a lottery:

> Each of our actions, our words, our attitudes is cut off from the 'world', from the people who have not directly perceived it, by a medium the permeability of which is of infinite variation and remains unknown to ourselves.[274]

The coroner pointed out that those who had not paid were able to, which does, of course, complicate Samuel's decision and his death. But sometimes the things we choose to do build and build into something else entirely, and we cannot ever know where each cumulated moment might lead—except, perhaps, by plotting the past (or

[274] M. Proust. (1925/1978). *The Guermantes Way*. Part. I. C.K. Scott Moncrieff (Trans.). London: Chatto & Windus. (Original work published in 1920). 373-374.

some of it) forwards from one wrested moment. But that substance which is plotted is something fragile at best, illusory at worst: Proust suggests, on the one hand, that 'The past not merely is not fugitive, it remains present'[275], even though it is also impossible to reach or breach: 'One has between oneself and the rest of the world the barrier of a strange language.'[276] He adds layers and folds to this separation too, which both Nabokov and Shattuck point out:

> One of the elements of the book is the various ways in which a person is seen by various eyes … Proust contends that a character, a personality, is never known as an absolute but always as a comparative one. He does not chop it up but shows it as it exists through the notions about it of other characters. And he hopes, after having given a series of these prisms and shadows, to combine them into an artistic reality.[277]

> Just as we witness two different versions of Rachel, as seen by her lover Saint-Loup and by the indifferent Marcel, we are finally offered two different versions of Albertine, as seen by the same two men with their roles reversed. Saint-Loup cannot believe that the photograph Marcel shows him is of the girl he has been talking about. The whole passage turns on the faculty of sight. After an inevitable astronomical reference to the illusory location of the sun, we read, 'So difference in optic extends not only to people's physical appearance but to their character, and to their individual importance'.[278]

Like Woolf in 'On Being Ill', Proust sees this separation from reality clearly emphasised during illness, which is one arbiter in how a person might sense the world:

> It is in moments of illness that we are compelled to recognise that we live not alone but chained to a creature of a different kingdom, whole worlds apart, who has no knowledge of us and by whom it is impossible to make ourselves understood: our body.[279]

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[275] M. Proust. (1925/1957). *The Guermantes Way*. Part II. C.K. Scott Moncrieff (Trans.). London: Chatto & Windus. (Original work published in 1921). 151.
[276] Ibid. 283-284.
[277] Nabokov. 216-217.
[278] Shattuck. 104.
[279] Proust. *The Guermantes Way*. Part. I 408.

I cannot quite work out if old age is the same kind of separator: I must hope that time will tell. What's clear is that my grandmother certainly had this knowledge, and it was either her age or her eyes which produced it. That fulcrum of our failing optics was, for Proust, key to the way art can, in turn, be as true as life. Malouf suggests that *Remembrance of Things Past* is an 'anti-realistic novel. Its end is always a new beginning. Its process is cyclic and its ultimate reality, as it exists for both writer and reader, is in the act of reading, of writing'.[280] But that anti-realistic quality is something else too: the way the narrator embraces a once-removed reality gives the opposite effect:

> It is not in the end his acceptance of 'reality' that saves the narrator and justifies the long telling, but the power of those dreams themselves, the magic of naming, the super-reality of language itself, which can, in another form, restore and remake reality and in doing so proclaim the primacy of the act of memory and of mind.[281]

A super-reality, something hyperreal, is the goal of the Proustian novel. This is not, I think, a comfortable thing to deal with—when the confines of the body become not enough for the mind there is that sensation of dissolving boundaries again, that fear of the gripless, slippery looseness of the present. In *The Guermantes Way*, the narrator's grandmother experiences something like this—impelled by her age, her failing eyes, and her frailing body, she attempts a conclusion similar to Samuel's:

> There came a time when her uraemic trouble affected my grandmother's eyes. For some days she could not see at all. Her eyes were not at all like those of a blind person, but remained just the same as before. And I gathered that she could see nothing only from the strangeness of a certain smile of welcome which she assumed the moment one opened the door, until one had come up to her and taken her hand, a smile which began too soon and remained stereotyped on her lips … it was left isolated, without the accompanying smile in her eyes which would have distracted a little …
>
> Then came a state of perpetual agitation. She was incessantly trying to get up. But we restrained her so far as we could from doing so, for fear of her discovering how

[280] Malouf. 170.
[281] Ibid.

> paralysed she was. One day when she had been left alone for a moment I found her standing on the floor in her nightgown trying to open the window.[282]

My grandmother had the same kind of smile: an unhappy grimace, some kind of acknowledgement of how wrong the world had become.

*

The Coroner crossed off the first point—how Samuel died—easily enough: the wounds that killed him 'were produced by his own hand.' Then, 'Now came the most serious part of the inquiry, namely, what was the state of his mind at the time?' Suicide was still illegal in 1899, but there were ways to avoid the charge, such as a claim of temporary insanity. The jury, Samuel's friends and associates, would have to decide what was going through his mind when he walked up the Habberley Road, would have to impute what they could of his world. To help them make their decision, the Coroner finally pulled out the letters written by Samuel before he cut his own throat. This, for me, is the miracle of miracles. I think the pure chance of survival is never more noticeable than in pieces of ephemera, but it is perhaps even more extraordinary when the ephemeral thing is gone. And that's perhaps, the crux of all this: that miracle of lasting, always coupled with something even more fundamental: that the events of May 19, 1899, or even August 6, 1934, had to happen in precisely the way they did, otherwise everything would be different and the atoms I am would make different shapes.

There were three letters, one for the Borough Financial Clerk, one for Harry, and one for Thomas Higley. Samuel wrote to the clerk and his son on the 3rd of May, and to Higley on the day he walked down the Habberley Road, the 4th.

> To the Borough Financial Clerk
>
> Improvement and Water Rate
> Collector's Office,
> Talbot Chambers, Shrewsbury.
> May 3rd, 1899.

[282] Proust. *The Guermantes Way*. Pt. II. 29-30.

Dear Sir,—By the time you get this I shall be no more. I regret to say I have grossly deceived you and the Finance Committee by using monies entrusted to me, and which I am unable to repay. I have only to thank you for your kindness to me, and regret that I should have so deceived you. I should like to say that Arthur Dove [deceased's clerk, adds the reporter] is in no way cognisant of my wickedness, and must not be blamed. I have deceived him like all the others. The only satisfactory matter is that the guarantee society will refund any deficiency. Don't let my sins fall on the heads of my dear wife and family, who are perfectly innocent of this or of what I am going to do, for which God forgive me. For the last time,

S.H. Juckes

This contradicts the earlier message from the Coroner, and I am still not sure what to do with it. There is no commentary around this letter to the clerk; the Coroner must have read it out loud to the jury and those watching the inquest—my father and I did not speak about it either. The Coroner moved straight on to the next letter, addressed to Harry.

To Harry Hesleton Juckes, Poplar Cottage,
Shrewsbury

Improvement and Water Rate
Collector's Office,
Talbot Chambers, Shrewsbury.
May 3rd, 1899.

My Dear Son,—In case I should meet with my death unexpectedly, I hereby express my wish and desire that you shall as early as convenient have a sale of all I am possessed of, to be carried out by my friend John Lloyd, and with the proceeds pay debts I owe to the enclosed list of creditors.

This is a little disingenuous on Samuel's part, I think. He tells the town clerk that he will soon be dead, but is reluctant to admit as much to his son. But perhaps that is too harsh: this would have been a difficult letter to write, and maybe the distance Samuel imposes with his tone and legerdemain was necessary, simply to get the words down. He wrote the letter at work, I presume after the meeting of the Finance Committee, and carried it home with him on that last night. When Harry was interviewed at the inquest, he said that his father was home before him on the 3rd of May. The letter in

Samuel's pocket must have burned hot through his jacket, on top of his still beating heart.

Through the rest of the letter the reporter includes the Coroner's interjections in brackets. Presumably they came as he read the letter out loud to the jury:

> I have written to Mr Lloyd to ask the firm to advance, say, £35 on security of the sale. See that you pay Mr Hughes rent and the Gas Company. [The Coroner: That shows a very clear mind, and that he knew what he was writing about.] The balance of the sale monies I give to you in trust to help your poor mother and Charles by first finding lodgings for them and yourself, and then supporting her to the best of your ability. [The Coroner: This is not the letter of a madman.] I hope that my sisters at Colwyn Bay may be able to care for him (Charley) for a time; it would be a great help to you if they will be kind enough. The furniture and the goodwill of the garden ought, if properly disposed of, to fetch a good sum. I have no doubt Mr Hughes will help you all he can after the time and money I have spent on the place.

The place was Poplar Cottage, on Crescent Lane, in Shrewsbury. When I was there I could not find the house; I could barely squeeze my car down the street it was on: there is a school backing onto Crescent Lane, and I ended up there as students swarmed around waiting to be picked up at the end of their day. Parents and brothers and sisters clogged the road and I could not spare the time to wait for them to leave—I had to reach the Habberley Road that day or not at all.

> There are some shop fittings at Wright's and some horns and lock at Crumpton's. Mr Frank Blower owes me a slight balance on the E.P. kettle he sold for me. God forgive me for leaving my dear ones to the mercy of the world, but I can do nothing else in the dreadful position I have placed myself in, without the slightest knowledge of any of you. Of course you all know that I am short of money, but it is worse than that. Honour is gone, and I hope people will not visit on the children the sins of their father. I give my blessing to you all, begging you to help each other in every way you can. I know it will be a great upset, but I can't help it. Good-bye, good-bye to your dear mother, to Fred, to Charley, and may God have mercy on me, your loving father,
>
> Samuel Henry Juckes.

I imagine this is almost, finally, the goodbye he would have liked to make—aside, perhaps, having to detail the balance owed towards a kettle.

On the list of creditors that Samuel included with this letter he left his wife the chain that belonged to her, gave Harry a ring, and 'Fred a pin which I have looked for. Samuel's sisters, in Colwyn Bay, were given portraits of their parents.

The last letter which the Coroner had to read was the one delivered to Mr Higley, the one Samuel handed on to William Roberts on the Habberley Road.

> To Mr Thomas Higley, Habberley
>
> May 4th, 1899.
>
> Dear Mr Higley,—I have walked from Salop to your lovely valley to ask a last favour for old acquaintance sake. I am in great trouble, and have got my books into a mess. I have been in great trouble for months, and have had influenza till I am completely worn out. When this comes to your hand I want you to give my poor body a resting-place for a day or two, to make me a plain coffin, and if there is a corner for such as I in your little churchyard put me there as quietly as possible. I have a grave in our own cemetery, but I am not worthy to be with my father and mother. There will be very little expense if Mr Aston will allow it, and my son and Mr John Lloyd, auctioneer, of Shrewsbury, will pay all expenses. Anyhow, don't let me go back to Salop. I have walked all the way here to be buried here, and you must grant me this favour, the last in the world I shall ask anyone. I am too ill to say more, and apologise for the trouble I am giving you, but I have no one else to fall back on. Good-bye, God bless my poor wife and children, and God forgive me what I am about to do. I am mad.
>
> Yours sincerely,
>
> S.H. Juckes
>
> PS: Keep my pipe and pouch and matchbox in remembrance of me.

I wish I had those letters so that I could see the way he wrote. I wish I could see the way the ink blotted and the way the paper was folded. I wish I had the envelopes, and the creditor's list, so that I might be able to divine who got what and when, and I wish, simply, that I know more than I do—I do not know where Samuel was buried. But to have something of them is better than having nothing.

I'm not sure how it all made my father feel, but that night we were silent for a long time. Then the phone rang, again: it was Uncle Kevin and there was no news. And when he put the phone down, Dad asked if I had told Grandma any of this: if she knew

this story. I said I had not, and he was glad. He agreed that was for the best. Neither of us wanted to add to the cavalcade she already saw and grinned at without her eyes.

After the reading of the letters came the summing up. (Then, of course, the unbroken chain of everything after—but that is beyond my scope here.)

The coroner told the inquest that fits of temporary insanity were becoming too common in Britain.

> Whether it was due to higher education, or to a more sinful world, he could not say, but things were getting to a very high pitch, and it was so often the case that where a man got into difficulties he took his life and so passed out of the world.

The coroner made very clear to the jury where he thought their verdict should fall—that Samuel was of sound mind, and therefore guilty. But there was a show of solidarity for him. His friends, the men of the jury, couldn't stand to shame him with that verdict, and were unanimous in their decision: they stated the cause of his death (and one cause of my life) to be a case of temporary insanity. It is a safer bet, I think, than the permanent kind—which is a bridge we all cross with each and every glance. It is a safer thing to think on, anyway. The next story in the *Shrewsbury Chronicle* contained minutes for a meeting of the Shrewsbury School Board.

I told my father what it was like on the Habberley Road—how I wasn't sure if the way it felt foreboding was how it was, or how I was. Then I showed him the feather I had found on the road, and told him how birds seemed to hover on the wire which ran across the tarmac. The flowers I'd pressed into my notebook were still a little damp somehow, and behind them all the ink I'd left had vanished, leaving a rough approximation of their shape.

By then it was dark and quiet. The last piece of paper I had to show my father was the picture of Samuel from the wall of the archives in Shrewsbury. I can remember looking at him as he looked at it, and thinking that I could see how similar they might be. It seems, at least, he thought so too, because he got up, crept into the room where my mother was sleeping, and pulled a photograph album from the basket on the floor next to their couch. Inside the album were pictures of old holidays we had taken, weddings we had been to, and parties we had had. He found the picture he wanted, pulled it from the album, and gave it me to look at. It was a photograph of him and

Grandma, stood in a park in Filey, surrounded by a collection of vintage lawnmowers. I remembered that day, I think. And if I did not, I do now. In the picture, next to Grandma, looking at the camera and resting his hands on the handle of a lawnmower, my father stands like Samuel stood in the door of his shop, surrounded by spades and buckets and things on hooks.

9

Sun hunters in the Antipodes

> Everything taken away must be examined slowly and in fastidious detail … For example, notice the space that has been left by the absence of a person or a thing from a scene. Something not there should still be seen as 'a thing'. Indeed, it might be the main thing … What's thought to be gone can be roused from oblivion.
>
> Ross Gibson. *The Criminal Re-Register*. 35.

I remember watching a comet called Hale-Bopp pass by my bedroom window, its long white tail spattering like a puff of steam. It stood still in the sky, but moving. Two years after that came the only eclipse I have ever watched from the ground. It was just partial in the part of the world where I was, but still managed to splay itself in a half-moon shape through the pin-prick we made in a piece of paper. My father, my brother, and I watched it from the driveway of our house underneath the shadow of the Pike. Those two events were what I thought of on the sand at 80 Mile Beach: the starscape there was the first to make me believe the truth we're told about how many there really are—how all the grains of sand we know would not match the stars spread across all the sky we can see and the space we cannot.

It took a long time to get to the beach. We drove in three-car convoy, stopping off when we needed to and wanted to. There were 12 of us, myself and friends, on a trip we had promised ourselves. On the way we saw stromatolites at Hamelin Pool, wandered gorges in the Kimberley, drove through the lickings of a bush fire, and then, after the beach, saw the world spread at Wyndham and hid from bats in Kununurra. I'd never been as far north before, relatively speaking.

At the beach—which used to be called 90 Mile, until somebody decided to measure it—the sand swirled thick through waves which rolled and rolled and turned quickly into foam. When you're in the water, you're dragged along the shoreline, and it is warmer and more exposed than is comfortable. The place was only horizon. In a photograph taken that day my smile is forced and the vast expanse behind me empty. Clouds rise like rocks, like distant mountains, and shells speckle the sand. There is no one else, so the others must be behind the camera, but that is a little how it is on that beach: impossible not to feel alone, even with friends swimming, sitting, watching, listening, talking close by. Something like the tracks of a car lead off into distance in the photograph, tyre impressions only just visible on the damp parts of the beach. The place is never deserted but it certainly feels that way.

We came back to the water at night, with torches, and before we saw the waves we could hear them. We came because I'd seen on the campsite noticeboard that there might be a chance to see turtles. The woman in the office gave me a sheet of paper with their patterns and habits typed up.

From the sand, the moon seemed to turn a smiling face on the ocean (which was all kinds of darkened silver). Our small electrics were made redundant: the place was lit by moonlight. And the waves tipped and tipped, building a felt sound which throbbed and trembled in the nooks and crannies of my ears. At night the horizons might have been closer, but the beach felt just as vast. I thought of *The Waves*, which

> broke and spread their waters swiftly over the shore. One after another they massed themselves and fell; the spray tossed itself back with the energy of their fall. The waves were steeped deep-blue save for a pattern of diamond-pointed light on their backs which rippled as the back of great horses ripple with muscles as they move. The waves fell; withdrew and fell again, like the thud of a great beast stamping.[283]

All my memories of that night are silver-tinged and moon-touched. It still feels not-quite-real.

I wanted to be by myself and wandering, but was scared to be. I felt the beach deserved silence from us and I wanted to hear its noises: birds, waves, wind. But we whispered to each other as loud as we could, clumped ourselves together spraying tiny

[283] Woolf. *The Waves*. 128.

torchlight across the sand, catching things in brief flashes of light. It was still warm, balmy even, and the moon was laid on the water, rippling.

We tracked back and forth, spreading ourselves as wide as we could, then running, turning, shouting, wild with it all. There was nothing so simple as time, that night. It did not matter when we were, just where. Giddy on the darkness, somehow gleeful, we looked for turtles, laughing at the thought of them, jumping at the birds which swooped through silver bands of light. It was like nothing I had known, nothing like the crunched and cramped valley I'd had my head inside for so long, and which I still couldn't shake. If the watchword for that place was 'horizon' then the only word possible for the beach was exactly the same. I knew we were not meant to be there: there are birds which come to the beach from wild Siberia, have done for thousands of years, and we had merely drifted in off the black-tarmacked road to stay a day or two in obscene little chalets. But then, I mostly always feel an imposter when I am outside of the valley—or, when I am outside of the valley I remember.

Clumps of seaweed and pools of water caught the light and set us running, words wind-caught, at shadows. Until one of those shadows was still, did not move like the rest of the beach, like those wisps of sand which were dancing. It was the size of my palm—just the palm, not the fingers with it—and each of its limbs perfectly moulded. Its new shell caught a lick of silver, but its body was pointed the wrong way, back up the beach, towards the dunes instead of at the water. It had lived a brief kind of lottery, which it won—perhaps—by weight of numbers. Maybe it could not read the lights on the horizon, or it did not have the energy to reach the waterline, or it had been unable to crest one of those dips in the undulating beach, where waves had bitten at the sand to make bands and shadows, grooves, divots, ripples. We sat with it a while.

And then, from nowhere, caught in the corner of the eye at the edge of silver light fled this thing along the sand. It half-swam, skimming across the wobbles through small pools, pulling itself with tiny flippers. We ran with it, around it, willed it on, all of us as best we could, wanting to protect it, to keep the birds away, to stop them from stopping it reaching the water. It knew where to go, arrowed at the waves, wanted them. Its flippers were finger-sized. We followed it to the water and watched it work into the ocean. Waves flopped and dropped and it paddled out into the darkened, silver-edged sea, only resting occasionally, just too long for comfort, until the strange crawl of a turtle on land disappeared into mile-long shallows. Then it became a little black

dot, a missile in moving water enacting a cretaceous rite, until it vanished in the swell. We stayed a little longer, wandering, and then—each taking signal from another—aimed back toward our chalets. I cannot say what the others thought or felt that night, but I remember feeling both proximal and distant. That is, included and ignored by the beach.

Where we would have to walk into camp, through a gap in the dunes, was a boatshed. On the south side of the shed there were marks in the sand stretching back to the water. They were dug in a rough straight line and made a kind of pattern, an odd kind of pattern only stark because of the line it made in the sand. It was a path. It was dug into the beach that night, and it went in a line from the sea to the edge of the dunes. It was wider than my shoulders, obvious, and when I turned around to look across the rest of the beach I saw more like it; the sand was netted in them, crosshatched in paths carved by something come from the depths of the ocean. It would have been a long journey for a body not made to feel its own weight.

Again, we heard before we saw. She made strange varieties of groans and shuffs, and worked at the sand underneath her with a kind of wriggle and push, a time-honed, awkward, effortful action. And there she was, parked in the moon-shadow of the boatshed. We were silent then. And we watched her, and the stars and the waves and the darkness in-between. She was enormous, prehistoric, and the marks left by her flippers were bigger than handprints. She was all hard and thick, muscled and deep-shelled and her eyes were shining because she knew we were there, but I and we could not help but stay to see the way she worked and struggled. She snorted, hawked, seemed to grimace, doing the same thing she had always done, and the same thing that has always (yes, not quite always, but a good-sized chunk of it) been done on the beach—no matter where the coastline was, or in which particular eon. This was a kind of ritual and custom, and this archaic thing we got to see and feel (when she pushed off sand and it flicked into the folds of our clothes) was a privilege.

The morning after the night on the beach we went to look at the marks she had left. There was no sign of what we saw in the darkness, but underneath the sand were the eggs she laid. And, one day, out from beside the boatshed, will come a tiny thing set on-course for the water, programmed to run the gauntlet, to reach for the waves. That journey ingrained inside it, coded there by stars, by the feel of sand and salt, by her

bones and blood, by the slow rhythm of the waves and the temperature and tannin of the water and the past.

We drove on then, left the beach like the flicker-hearted things we are. But when I got back to Perth I could not let that place go, could not let that night still. And so I tried to find what I could of the things I'd seen, in an effort at keeping, preserving, pinning. It was nice to work on something not quite so maudlin as Samuel, and it was a distraction from all the things relayed to us by my uncle at home.

The turtle was an Australian Flatback Sea Turtle, *Natator depressus*, and it had lasted as a species since the time before that asteroid dropped and sent dinosaurs back into their skeletons—making their feathers grow and slowly spreading their wings. Those dinosaurs—or some of them—now chirp and craw, but *N. depressus* still crawls its ancient way up the sand, living its slow moments. It is, according to a 'Redescription' I found on a shelf in a bookshop on Bulwer Street in North Perth, 'the most primitive genus among the extant Cheloniianae and is among the most primitive form in the entire family'.[284] I know that to be true: the eyes it has stare back through all those years. Its body, when (and if) it grows into a great thing heaving itself up onto the beach, is thick with time.

N. depressus lives across the tropical top-half of Australia. Well, it nests there. It lives in the ocean and swims most of its life in dark water.

In their redescription of it, which is a gorgeous book, skeletal and mysterious and hieroglyphic, Zangerl, Hendrickson, and Hendrickson detail specimens held in collections. There are only eight known examples of juvenile Flatback Sea Turtles: McCulloch's 1908 specimen from Port Darwin and Fry's from Cape York, both tagged with handwritten labels, are two. 'Northern Territory Museum specimens R2939 and R2940 were found washed ashore on a beach on the outskirts of Darwin town following a storm'.[285] These are the only two specimens of the 8 to be preserved in alcohol. Their shells, called carapaces, are 14 and 22 centimetres in length. Two more specimens from the Northern Territory come from the Groote Eylandt in the Gulf of Carpentaria; they 'consist of dried, partially eaten remains found under the nest of a White-bellied Sea Eagle'. Zangerl, et. al. 'think of the White-bellied Sea Eagle as a

[284] R. Zangerl, J. R. Hendrickson and L. P. Hendrickson. (1988). *A Redescription of the Australian Flatback Sea Turtle, Natator depressus*. Honolulu: Bishop Museum Press. vii.
[285] Ibid. 52.

"collector"',[286] but do not say anything about the people who keep these pickled or picked-at shells inside museums.

The final juvenile specimen detailed 'is a 27-cm-long, dried flatback carapace that we found hanging as an ornament on the wall of the restaurant-bar at the Victoria River Wayside Inn'.[287] It is up to you to decide or imagine how the turtle crawled its way onto the wall of that restaurant-bar, so that Zangerl, Hendrickson, and Hendrickson could step inside and measure it. And, perhaps, for you to do the same for juvenile specimen number 8, which is not listed.

I soon became a little obsessed with Zangerl, Hendrickson, and Hendrickson, who are, without doubt, enigmatic. I imagine Zangerl as puppet master, sending his scientists into the world and then ticking, crossing, and checking their work from his post as Curator Emeritus at the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago. Hendrickson and Hendrickson were married. They lived in Tucson, and worked at the University of Arizona, where Lupe P. belonged to the Cooperative National Park Resources Studies Unit, and John R. was Professor Emeritus of Biology. They are dead now. John R.'s 2002 obituary (written by David Owens and published in the *Marine Turtle Newsletter*) begins: 'JRH was brilliant, he was confident and he was not very tall'[288]—a brutal microcosm of a man, but which just about sums up biography: how we are meant to squash life from the few details we have left. 'He grew up in Tipton, Iowa (pop. 2, 998), in the middle of the American great plains. [And] these brief facts', continues Owen, 'may help us understand why he loved the desert, the ocean, the tropics and Senorita Lupe Perez so passionately.'[289] Perhaps they might. But I get no sense of the love Lupe and John had for each other from those words alone; I get some from the three months they spent looking for turtles together on vast and distant beaches spattered across the top of Australia, tasting the flesh of the thing they thought was different to everything else, the thing they were trying to trap between pages and *redescribe*—an animal which had brought them from the deserts of Arizona to the edges of the Indian Ocean and the Timor Sea.

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[286] Ibid.
[287] Ibid.
[288] D. Owens. (2003). 'Obituary: John Roscoe Hendrickson 1921-2002'. *Marine Turtle Newsletter* 99:1-3. Retrieved from http://www.seaturtle.org/mtn/archives/mtn99/mtn99p1.shtml
[289] Ibid.

In their writing, the scientists seem both enamoured of, and detached from, the animal which is their subject:

> The literature on *N. depressus* reveals a continuing controversy on whether the flatback is primarily carnivorous or primarily herbivorous, with no clear observations of actual feeding in nature and almost no firm data on stomach contents (see Williams et al. 1967: 6; Worrell 1970: 10). Most of the arguments for carnivory are inferred from the reputed unpleasant taste of the flesh (Bustard 1972: 85; Limpus et al. 1983a: 178), but Worrell (1970) says he finds the flesh quite palatable, and we (L.P.H./J.R.H.) can confirm this from a single experience in Western Australia.[290]

It is easy to imagine Worrell snaffling the flesh of a new-caught turtle, a juvenile perhaps, and noting down that, in fact, the taste was pleasant. He is by himself in the middle of nowhere, no et al., sampling the turtle he is dissecting for study. I do not know how H and H managed to taste their turtle, if they cooked it, or why they might have wanted to. Nothing is made of the absence of Zangerl—hence my suspicions of him.

The scientists point out—they are at pains to show—that their monograph does not represent the first time the Australian Flatback Sea Turtle has come up for consideration by anatomists. That is why their work is a redescription of the animal; in it, they are kind enough to plot the route to their conclusions: *N. depressus* was first described by S. Garman in 1880, who used a stuffed specimen (holotype MCZ 4473) from the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard University. He called it *Chelonia depressa.* To make his classifications, Garman used a juvenile specimen (MCZ 1413) which, in 1914, T. Barbour realised was not *depressus* at all, but *mydas*. It was McCulloch, in 1908, who proposed that the *depressus* warranted—no, deserved—its own genus, and so he gifted the Australian Flatback Sea Turtle its *Natator* moniker, using the same specimen that Fry (no doubt to the chagrin of McCulloch) re-re-described later as *Chelonia* again. This process removed and then replaced *N. depressus* among its cheloniid cousins. It was, apparently, the lack of specimens which made it difficult for the turtles to be described; to lock them into separate species.

[290] Zangerl, Hendrickson, and Hendrickson. 54.

Then came Bustard & Limpus's 1969 breakthrough: they showed that the 'lateral peripherals' of the *C. mydas* were not all upturned! In the same year, the great work of Cogger & Lindner, with their publication of a photograph of an adult female 'covering its nest on a beach in the Northern Territory',[291] brought about a re-examination of the genus of the Flatback. And then, in 1984, Pritchard & Trebbau finally suggested the reapplying of McCulloch's '*Natator*'—too late for him.

Both Hendricksons were in the north and north-west of Australia from January to March 1981. That was when they collected their 6 'mature' specimens of (then) *C. depressa* 'from widely separated beaches'.[292] Four of the specimens were females taken after nesting, and two were just of partial remains (also—probably—female). Four turtles taken after nesting are preserved as skeletons at the Bishop Museum in Honolulu; unfortunately I do not think I will ever have the chance to see them, as I have no plans to travel to Hawai'i (but then, of course, neither did what those bones once were). 'Study of these skeletons', say Zangerl, Hendrickson, and Hendrickson,

> leaves no doubt that *depressa* does not belong in any of the presently established genera of extant cheloniids. It is at least as distinct morphologically from each as they are from one another … Beyond question, *depressa* is the type species of a 5th recent genus of cheloniid turtles.[293]

And, well, I cannot know exactly what that means. So I will have to trust them.

Once I'd found what I could of the turtles I went further into the story of the beach. It was, again, a different kind of work to the history in which I was so obviously entangled. And yet the two stories kept finding ways to reflect each other—or, it might be truer to say, that the business of morganatic associations was proving no issue for the mechanisms of my consciousness.

One of the books I found was a kind of built-up diary, a cooperation between a priest, Father Kevin McKelson, and a Nyangumarta man, Tommy Dodd. The Nyangumarta are the traditional owners of much of the beach. Both men are dead now, but when they were not they would talk, and McKelson would write down everything Dodd said, trying to steep himself in his interlocutor's language, Northern

[291] Ibid. 1.
[292] Ibid.
[293] Ibid. 2.

Nyangumarta. They spoke together at what was La Grange Mission, now Bidyadanga Community, at the northern edge of the beach. In Sue Hanson's Editor's Note to the diary, McKelson's close and continued relationship with Tommy Dodd and the people who lived around the Bidyadanga Community is emphasised: it took several decades for the book to be written, for their relationship to form. And as it did, McKelson felt his world expand; the importance of the language he learned cannot be underestimated: 'Knowledge, albeit small, of a language other than our own, can provide us with another kind of lens for seeing and interpreting the world around us.'[294] It is easy to imagine the two men talking on the priest's veranda at the mission, but harder to wonder what they might have spoken about, how they could have sat, what they may have held in their hands.

The evolution of the diary into the book it became was convoluted: typed up, re-read, corrected, and then corrected again by academics and relatives of Tommy Dodd. English words soaked into Nyangumarta were re-spelt as Dodd said them: cigarette became *jikarit*.[295] What resulted, through the diary, was a series of caught and captured moments: '*Ngalypa jurarr jinu yaninyirri*', said Dodd some time in the 1960s. Then he talked it through with Father McKelson, who wrote down something like 'The sea is best when it runs slow'.[296] Another burst of impression shows the method for cooking those turtles which crawl up the sand to lay their eggs on the beach: '*Yapan wirriniyili ngarlungu. Wikanga jiniyi yapanjartiny. Tipiny piniyili ngarlungu*'—'They put hot stones in its stomach (a turtle's stomach). They put it in the fire with stones in its stomach. They put a stick (a rib) through the opening so the stones won't come out.'[297] I still do not know if this was the method Hendrickson and Hendrickson used.

These captured phrases kindle into brief life old conversations, like the words in the journals of William Dawes which Gibson writes about. These sentence-snippets are flickers of the past, just as Dawes' recording of conversations with Patyegarang, at the dawn of colonial Australia, are.[298]

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[294] K. McKelson and T. Dodd. (2007). *Nganarna Nyangumarta Karajarrimili Ngurranga: We Nyangumarta in the Country of Karajarri*. Sue Hanson (Ed.). South Hedland: Wangka Maya Pilbara Aboriginal Language Centre. 12.
[295] Ibid. 14.
[296] Ibid. 30.
[297] Ibid.
[298] One of the most startling aspects of Gibson's book is the way he details the shifts in worldview experienced by Dawes and Patyegarang: the invader and the girl who spoke to him came at each other with vastly different perspectives. I am sure this is true of McKelson and Dodd, but I do not have the expertise to dissect that facet of their conversation—nor, indeed, to figure something of the way those

These Northern-Nyangumarta reflections on turtles and waves were not the only echoes I detected or imagined in McKelson's book. In a section called 'An Exercise in Vision', Dodd says '*Kurnturr wartu wartu yaninyin*', which translates as 'You are walking along enveloped by dust',[299] and '*Warrukartilu yamanarra karrpu*': 'Dark covers the sun'.[300] There are sentences, too, which manage to still for a moment strange attractors—which capture Woolf's bobbing, dipping, flaunting linen hung on a line: '*Wara karra manarra*': 'The sound of clothes flapping in the wind.'[301]

Leaning heavily on Gibson again, these sentences are like haikus: they are objects on their own, bursting with potential. The words themselves affect the world and the people in it, in the same way that the things we use (and have left behind) have made the world. It is the relationship between things and people, the space between them, which actively shapes conceptions of how the world is, even if what I mean by people shifts as much as what I mean by things.

It was around this time—a few months after arriving back from England, and weeks after getting home from the beach—that I got a parcel from a writer and publisher based in Hebden Bridge. I had been emailing him back and forth for a while, and the parcel was the end result of those emails. It was strange to see the postmark.

John Billingsley wrote a book called *Folktales from Calderdale*, in which he describes the Pike, the cragged rocks of the valley, and its witches and ghosts. I hadn't emailed him about any of those things though: in the back of *Folktales* is a list of his other books: *A Stony Gaze: Investigating Celtic and Other Stone Heads*; *Aspects of Calderdale*; *The Mixenden Treasure*; *A Laureate's Landscape: Ted Hughes' Mytholmroyd*; and *The Day the Sun Went Out: Accounts of the 1927 Solar Eclipse as Seen from Yorkshire and the Pennines*. I was chasing a copy of the last on the list, which was written about the eclipse Woolf witnessed—and the one my grandad

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who came before Tommy Dodd might have reasoned the events and the science enacted on the beach in 1922 (events which I will come to momentarily). That understanding would take a lifetime of study, and the fostering of the kind of relationships McKelson built, and even then it might not be possible: seeing the world, truly, from another's perspective is never entirely uncomplicated. But the sense I get, from reading *26 Views of the Starburst World*, is that the more 'aqueous' affect—to purloin a word of Gibson's again—with which Indigenous Australians of the Eora nation live, would have meant an easier embracing of relativity theories than the northern hemisphere senses of the colonisers: Gibson writes, 'Dawes was beginning to understand [that southern time] … is something organic, recursive, non-linear—time best construed in the way Slessor described it, as a 'flood that doesn't flow'(60).

[299] Ibid. 119.

[300] Ibid.

[301] Ibid. 121.

remembered Alfred showing him. For a long time even John himself wasn't able to track down a copy, but I kept asking, because that moment of eclipse was something I kept trying to think through.

When it arrived, the pamphlet was only 16 pages long, not including its covers. It was, as John said in his letter, 'really looking dated now': the pages were printed in black and white, and it had a picture of an occluded sun on the front cover. It was produced before the 1999 eclipse that I remember, perhaps to remind Yorkshire people about the one which came before, when the Path of Totality had passed directly over them, and the sky had darkened completely (unlike in 1999, when it would merely make the air feel slightly different). Included in the parcel were a couple of extra pamphlets, and a small letter written on the back of a black and white photograph. The photograph was faded and whatever it was copied from was scratched; it showed the church at Heptonstall from somewhere on the Tops, but in the distance Stoodley Pike was missing, wiped off the picture by the edges of it.

Inside the cover of *The Day the Sun Went Out* is a description of what a solar eclipse is:

> The sun is eclipsed when the moon passes between the Earth and the sun. The event is improved from a ground perspective by a happy coincidence; although the sun is about 400 times larger than the moon, it is also about 400 times farther away, resulting in them appearing to be the same size in our sky. When the two orbs exactly coincide at the nodes of their paths, a total eclipse occurs; if not, the eclipse is only partial.[302]

This alignment seems, on the surface, to be perfect. It is not:

> As their orbits are … elliptical, the moon and sun are not always the same apparent size; when the moon is at its furthest and the sun at its nearest to us, a circlet of sun appears around the dark moon in what is known as an annular eclipse. Total solar eclipses actually happen at approximately 18-month intervals, visible from different places on the earth.[303]

[302] J. Billingsley. (1999). *The Day the Sun Went Out: Accounts of the 1927 Solar Eclipse as Seen from Yorkshire and the Pennines*. Hebden Bridge: Northern Earth. Inside cover.
[303] Ibid.

So they are rare events, but not unheard of. And, in the scheme of everything, this kind of confluence is quite regular. Though even the mountains and valleys on the moon mess with the picture, spraying around sunlight in a phenomenon known as Bailey's Beads, making the sun seem a diamond ring for a moment in the sky.

One of the first things I noticed in Billingsley's book was a discrepancy: he describes the 1927 totality as lasting 23 seconds, but for Woolf it was 24. Perhaps that can be accounted for by the distance between where totality was observed? I'm not sure. In any case, the facts, for Billingsley, are these:

> On June 29th, 1927, at around 6:23 a.m., North Wales and northern England were plunged into darkness for just 23 seconds! It was a brief period during which nothing was quite the same as it had been, nor as it would be.[304]

My grandmother would have been four years old, and probably wide awake at her home in Tennyson Place. Everyone else would have been.

The Yorkshire eclipse was an event—'the first motoring eclipse'—which captivated a people newly fascinated by science, and newly literate in astronomy. Trains were commandeered, towns were jammed, and because the eclipse would occur early in the morning, dances were organised to go all through the night before it. Afterwards, four people died on the roads driving home from watching it. And, in the end, not many people got to see anything at all, because of the clouds. But, said Woolf, (and even so),

> All noses were pointing north. When for a moment we halted in the depths of the country, there were the pale yellow lights of motorcars also pointing north. There was no sleep, no fixity in England that night. All were travelling North. All were thinking of the dawn.[305]

In the package from John, among the pamphlets and booklets, there was also a photocopy of 'The Rock', by Ted Hughes. The copy he sent was printed on yellow paper, and was something he said I would find interesting. I did.

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[304] Ibid. 1.
[305] Woolf. 'The Sun and the Fish'. 520.

I wish I could remember how I found out about the eclipse on the beach. I suspect it was through the kind of aimless googling which characterises much of the research I do. What I know is that, as soon as I knew the story, a kind of sense fell on the way I had felt at the beach: the way that time stretched and shifted there seemed almost appropriate, as it did for the Valley. And the more I read about that eclipse in 1922, about the Einstein Problem, and about Alexander Ross and the great telescopes set up on the sand, the more I began to settle on a way of considering my own past, and the ways in which I'd tried to trap it. The shapes the eclipse made helped formulate this work, and articulate how the past feels.

Ross, when he was a professor at the University of Western Australia, travelled to Wallal Downs—a station right in the middle of 80 Mile Beach—to observe the 1922 eclipse. His scrapbook and photographs are kept in the underground stacks at the State Library in the centre of Perth; they were donated to the library in 1969, three years after his death, by his wife. Part of those papers were the 'Book of press cuttings compiled by Professor Ross re the "Total Solar Eclipse," 1922, at Wallal', and 'Five albums containing photos of Wallal Solar Eclipse 1922'.

I remember, when I went to see them, that the white gloves they gave me were too big for my fingers, and that I had to wear a mismatched pair because there were only dirty ones left. I took photographs of as much as I could, so that now I can flick through and fall back again to the beach, and to the library. But I must have been rushed, or felt rushed, because lots of the pictures I took are a little blurred or angled wrong. I remember I had to support the albums on a pillow, and that I could only take notes in pencil. And, that between each photograph, was a scrap piece of paper showing the number of the picture (in case they needed to be printed), but that some of those scrap pieces of paper had photographs on them, heads ripped in half so that eyes stared back at the pictures they helped protect.

The first pictures in Ross's albums show a crowd of people waving goodbye to a boat leaving Fremantle Harbour on August 20, 1922. The eclipse was one month away. One of the clippings kept by Ross, stuck into his scrapbook with the paper and publication date typed neatly next door in blue ink, said that the Navy band played 'Auld Lang Syne' as the ship steamed off. The Navy were in charge of getting the scientific party to Wallal, though the only way they could figure out where it was, was to consult Post Office records.

Some of the scientists on the expedition had already come a long way. Clarence Chant, an astronomer from Canada, had sailed to New Zealand and then travelled by train across Australia. He wrote that the party stopped at Geraldton, Carnarvon, Onslow, and Port Sampson before getting to Port Hedland. His letter, published in *The Journal of the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada*, and written from Port Hedland, predicted its own journey: it would be 'carried out by airplane to Geraldton where it will be transferred to the railway and go on to Perth and then to Sydney'.[306] That was August 27, 1922; Grandad would have been two years old, sleeping or crawling or crying on now-demolished Exeter Street.

The scientists changed ship at Port Hedland, from the steam-powered S.S. *Charon* to a two-masted schooner, *Gwendoline*. The first seen of *Gwendoline* in the albums is at 80 Mile Beach: she is leant slightly over on her side as the telescopes, cameras, and instruments are transferred from her belly through the surf to the sand.

The scientists who sat on board the *Charon,* and then the *Gwendoline*, were literally chasing shadows. Or, perhaps, chasing one shadow: the 100-mile-wide strip of darkness called the Path of Totality. They knew that on September 21, 1922, the path would glide precisely over the beach; though, initially, the place was considered too remote—too distant—until Ross persuaded each of them that it was accessible. Of almost all the points along the Path (Ethiopia, Christmas Island, then through Australia to the border of New South Wales and Queensland, and then on again, out into the Pacific), Wallal offered the longest duration of Totality: just over five minutes. It also gave a near guarantee of good weather. This would be vital, because, as well as studying the corona, shadow bands, and other eclipse effects, the scientists needed to be confident they would be able to measure the position of the stars which peeked around the sun when darkness fell. This would help (they hoped) prove Einstein's newly-minted general theory of relativity. The parties of astronomers collected on the sand hoped to show how space and time could be put out of joint; they could do this by measuring bends in the light sent out from those peeping stars, bends caused by the mass of the sun. If they could prove the theory—and attempts had been made in 1919 which confirmed Einstein's predictions, but did not yield enough results to be entirely certain—then space and time could be seen for what they are: joined, knitted together.

[306] C. Chant. (1922). 'The Eclipse Expedition to Australia—From Auckland to Port Headland.' *Journal of the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada*. 16. 125. 283.

And the three dimensions we know would have a fourth to contend with, one we can't really sense, can't comprehend, but which exists all the same. Then the present would become a moment which moves through space and time.

I spent a lot of time scavenging around the internet, trying to help myself grasp these concepts. Sometimes (mostly) to little or no effect. But once or twice, on a video or through a blog, or through simply sitting bored, a glimmer of something sunk in:

> Note that the space-time concept does not necessarily imply that the future is already set, because we must add to this vision a crucial quantum physics principle that states that randomness is at work in the universe. This randomness is at play as events unfold, but no more once they have occurred. Therefore, 'ahead' of our present, space-time is undefined, blurred: the future is not set. But 'behind', since the events have taken place, the past is not blurred and space-time is clearly set.[307]

There were, though, discrepancies among the videos and papers and things I crawled through at next-to-snail's pace. Some were barely believable, and most barely comprehensible:

> Objects consist, not of 3D entities enduring in time, but as 4D world lines existing and extended from the big bang to the big crunch. For example, the earth is not a spheroid circling the sun, but a stationary hyperhelix wound around the world lines of the sun. Thus the buildings of imperial Rome still stand—it is just that we cannot see them any more. The buildings of future cities already exist—but we cannot see them yet. It should be noted, however, that there is no more a distinguished present in Newtonian physics than there is in special relativity, so all times must be treated symmetrically in regard to the distribution of matter.[308]

Whichever way, it seems, the relative universe is looked at, our time-consciousness pervades even the fourth dimension. But, if the measurements on the beach were right,

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[307] 'What is Space-Time?'. (7 August 2014). *YouTube*. Uploaded by DiSTI - Édouard-Montpetit. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sryrZwYguRQ.

[308] J. Smythies. (2003). 'Space, Time and Consciousness'. *Journal of Consciousness Studies*. 10. 3. Retrieved from https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/2aba/9778d09534ac352e152614021f7ad4deea3a.pdf. 52-53.

we would know a little more the falseness of what we perceive, and perhaps sense some of the depth and importance of each of the moments we live through.

Ross's explanations of the expedition and of relativity, detailed in the pamphlet he wrote, are split by his photographs. These graft onto the page a kind of coordinate for his observations, though they are still quite far away from what I can conceive.

'An object', says Ross, 'which is not interfered with, falls.' But, he continues: 'The only requirement is to define precisely what we mean by the term "falls", and that is not a simple matter'.[309] The path of any object is complicated by forces acting on it: our planet's path would be a straight line if the sun were not there to disturb it. Part of Einstein's prediction was an assertion that massive objects, like the sun, distort the four-dimensional world. I'd like to think that small ones do as well, but perhaps on different scales. Ephemera, like an old betting slip, or a note I wrote to my grandmother, have both had clear—if inscrutable—effects. 'It may help the imagination', says Ross, 'if we think of a piece of wood in which the grain is distorted by a knot running through it'.[310] Or it may not.

At Wallal, for astronomers like Ross and Robert Trumpler and William Wallace Campbell—Americans convinced into the journey by Ross—the eclipse was more than just the chance to prove the Einstein Problem. In his report on the expedition, Campbell spells out the lickety-split nature of eclipse work: 'The astronomer who uses the utmost endeavour to observe all the total eclipses in the fifty active years of his life cannot expect to have, altogether, more than one hour in which to secure observations looking toward the solution of eclipse problems'.[311] The work they had to do at Wallal, in just over five minutes of totality, was something like one-tenth of the time they could foreseeably spend under that specific darkness when the sun is crossed by the moon. So those five minutes would be a pressured bunch of seconds, every moment vital, sensed, and measured. To see these brief sliding seconds aimed at, coordinated, is to feel some of the weight of what the moon crossing the sun meant: there was no way to stop the universe from working, they simply had to be there in the middle of nowhere when it showed, briefly, its shape; when all that was coincidental lined up and a path was made which seemed like a pattern.

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[309] Ross. *A Popular Introduction to Einstein's Theory of Relativity* …. 21.
[310] Ibid.
[311] Ibid. 12.

When the *Gwendoline* reached the beach the cameras and equipment were unloaded as carefully as possible through the rolling surf. There were donkeys to pull heavy wagons, and the local Indigenous people helped lift everything to shore. First off the boat were Mr Campbell and Commander Quick, the officer in charge of the naval party. Quick was also an artist; he would draw the solar corona at eclipse time.

The camera moves, Ross behind it, to the setting-up of camp at Wallal, then to the constructing of the great telescopes and cameras designed to trap the stars around the sun. The 40ft. tower was nicknamed the Tower of Babel, and it looked grotesque in the desert. The parties also built an 'Einstein Café' and an 'Einstein House', all canvas, wood, and metal, of which there is nothing left now.

According to Campbell, the camp was built on an old lake bed, and,

> After a few days the operation of walking across it raised dust in profusion … if a breeze of eight or ten miles was blowing, a stream of dust resembling a comet's tail in form proceeded from each footprint, frequently extending across the camp.[312]

Keeping dust away from the instruments—from the nooks and crannies of their measuring glasses—was one of the hardest jobs the scientists had to face. When the telescopes and cameras were set up, Nyangumarta were made to dampen the sand around them, using thicker sand or branches to help combat that swirling dust which never seemed to settle. Another difficulty on the beach was keeping time: that task fell to a member from the New Zealand delegation, Dr Adams, who received wireless signals sent to Wallal from observatories all over Australia. Without that knowledge, of when—precisely—it was, there would be no way to prove the futility of that knowing.

Once everything was set up at the camp there was nothing left to do but wait, each day being one of rehearsing, anticipating, of preparing for the advent of totality. Clarence Chant describes the rehearsal process:

> A certain second would be chosen for the beginning of the total phase, the zero hour, and at precisely six minutes before that epoch Mr. Kean [a member of the Naval party]

[312] W.W. Campbell. (1923). 'The Total Eclipse of the Sun, September 21, 1922.' *Publications of the Astronomical Society of the Pacific*. 35. 203. 29.

> would call out 'Six minutes before!' Everyone would be at his post. Four minutes later he would call, 'Two minutes before!' Then 'Thirty seconds before!' Director Campbell would be looking through the finder of his Einstein camera and when he would (in imagination) see the moon just cover the sun and the corona flash out he would shout 'Go!' Then Mr. Kean would count the seconds, One! Two! Three! ... Fifty-nine! One Minute! One! Two! Etc., until some seconds after the time totality was supposed to end.[313]

It is difficult to imagine such bustle and quickness coming from the people frozen in Ross's pictures, captured in their stiff white collars and long white dresses. But that is what must have happened, and all for five minutes of totality. Or, five minutes and 15-and-a-half seconds, which was the actual, measured duration of the eclipse.

In my photocopied pamphlet, cribbed surreptitiously from the stacks of ephemera at the Battye Library, Ross only gives about a page to discussing the actual results of the Wallal expedition (having spent the previous 30 describing Einstein's theory, and showing pictures of the beach and the equipment and the people who went there). He suggests that,

> Photographs were obtained which … led to a decisive vindication of Einstein's generalised theory of relativity. The star images were displaced in accordance with the law deduced from Einstein's theory, and the amount of the displacement differed by less than one per cent.—or within the limits of observational error—from the theoretical value.[314]

The results were about as accurate as hand measured results could be, 'a displacement of only 1-2000th of an inch on the plates of the 5ft. cameras, or to 3-2000ths of an inch in the case of the 15ft. camera'.[315] One of Ross's photographs shows the way sunlight shone through trees, creating a thousand tiny half-moon shapes from natural pinhole cameras made by gaps in the leaves.

Clarence Chant's wife, Jean, was tasked with observing shadow bands, one of the more ephemeral effects of a solar eclipse. She watched, and wrote,

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[313] C. Chant. (1923). 'The Eclipse Camp at Wallal.' *Journal of the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada*. 17. 1. 7.
[314] Ross. *A Popular Introduction to Einstein's Theory of Relativity* …. 30.
[315] 31.

> There was some doubt in my mind as to whether I should see the shadow bands, but no doubt as to the wonderful view I was to have of the eclipsed sun, as I was away from the little wattle trees and absolutely alone, with nothing to distract my attention.
>
> Some considerable time after first contact, when the moon had moved well over the face of the sun, the astronomers took their places at their instruments and I stood beside one of the sheets [on which the shadows were to be measured]. 'Six minutes before!' called out Mr Kean, who was announcing time for the American and Canadian parties. The darkness was rapidly coming on and the landscape assumed a peculiar greenish hue, as if a storm were approaching. The seconds went by and I felt rather nervous as this was my first experience of this kind.
>
> Suddenly, and before I had expected it, the shimmering, elusive wave-like shadows began to sweep over me and the sheet … They continued to move over me for only a short time, perhaps ten seconds, and then they were gone! They were faint, thrilling, ghost-like, but definite enough for me to be sure that I had seen the shadow-bands.[316]

The event seems to have occurred, despite all that preparation, in the way events tend to: elusively, impossibly—ghostly, and somehow slippery. But when all the measurements were compiled the astronomers had managed to record the positions of 145 stars, making the Wallal trip the most successful verification of the Einstein Problem to that date. In one of the last of Ross's photographs, a picture I made a copy of and pinned to the wall at home, Trumpler holds a negative of a photograph of the sun in his hands, one of the Einstein Plates taken that day and used to measure the stars. The negative is pressed on glass, the sun held at the angle it would have sat at in the sky, and in it the corona is reversed—black instead of bright white, caught stark in the centre of the glass like a wink or a bullet hole. Trumpler's pin-striped shirt floats in the breeze.

This image, half-stillness, half-movement, is a clear expression of the kind of layering required to make a work which evokes the feeling of the past, one which describes the layering of past and present. The eclipse-moment, framed, is where Proust drew his inspiration, and where the past is at its most tantalisingly close. It shows the way time is relative in *Remembrance of Things Past*. As Malouf says,

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[316] J. Chant. (1923). 'The Shadow Bands at the Australian Eclipse.' *Journal of the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada*. 17. 379-381

> [T]he telescoping of time in *A la Recherche* … makes the whole work, in some ways, a single breath (as it certainly would be if Proust could manage it, since containment, the holding of all things in a single moment of awareness, is his final purpose).[317]

Nabokov points out, in *Swann's Way*, that the occluding of the sun shifts and shapes the Proustian narrator's sense of time and space. This frames the past in a new way. When,

> the sun's face was hidden[, n]ature began again to reign over the Bois … The reality that I had known no longer existed … The places that we have known belong now only to the little world of space on which we map them for convenience. None of them was ever more than a thin slice, held between the contiguous impressions that composed our life at that time; remembrance of a particular form is but regret for a particular moment; and houses, roads, avenues are as fugitive, alas, as the years.[318]

An eclipse moment has the potential to shape the maps we make in our consciousness, to turn them into this kind of regret. An eclipse moment framed is a diluted form of this feeling. Sebald, in a poem called 'As the Snow on the Alps', depicts the effect of eclipse light on the work of an artist he describes as 'Most probably Grünewald', the painter behind the 'Basel *Crucifixion* of 1505'. In that poem, Sebald shows an eclipse moment to be an event which pulls a person outside of nature, away from how reality normally feels. In the painting,

> the rushing
> away of time can be sensed.
> Most probably Grünewald painted
> and recalled the catastrophic incursion
> of darkness, the last trace of light
> flickering from beyond, after nature[319]

[317] Malouf. 153.
[318] Nabokov. 245. And Proust. *Swann's Way*. Part. II. 287-288.
[319] Sebald. 'As the Snow on the Alps'. *After Nature*. 29-30.

Sebald calls an eclipse 'the secret sickening away of the world'.[320] At this point, 'after nature', what we know of the world breaks and what we feel of it takes over: this is the space after the intellect Proust thought held the past, and this moment—the eclipse moment—is when the past is released. Dillard felt it: 'Usually it is a bit of a trick to keep your knowledge from blinding you. But during an eclipse it is easy. What you see is much more convincing than any wild-eyed theory you may know.'[321] The effects of the eclipse produce a heightened sensation of the world and the part played in it by each actor, messy-shimmer-of-self included: 'The sun was going and the world was wrong. The grasses were wrong; they were not platinum. Their every detail of stem, head, and blade shone lightless and artificially distinct as an art photographer's platinum print.'[322] In this way—when a moment is isolated—when one small, atomic breath is caught and beaten down, scale moves in and out, and the past breathes through the miniature. It is one of the small miracles of the way the universe is experienced. Perhaps it is part of the effect of the way data is transmitted, through dust and single particles? Then, of course—and after that—comes the plotting together of each beaten moment.

Another thing: I see a correlation between this distorting sensation and the one produced when an object from the past is considered: think of Bachelard's greatness, or Macdonald's 'spooky sense'. Susan Stewart, in *On Longing*, suggests that small things make us think differently about time, because 'The reduction in scale which the miniature presents skews the time and space relations of the everyday lifeworld, and … the miniature finds its "use value" transformed into the infinite time of reverie'.[323] The strange way the actual sizes of the sun and moon mean next to nothing when they pass across each other is a visible example of this: they are both the same miniature in the sky. When pieces of ephemera from the past are caught at the right moment they can help the present line up with what's gone in a similar kind of syzygy, and this is an eclipse moment which can be drawn on the page. The page is both a distancer, and a lens which allows a cultivated version of the world—one through which a reader can glimpse the kind of movements which usually remain well behind the actions of the

[320] Ibid. 30.
[321] A. Dillard. 'Total Eclipse'. *The Abundance*. 8.
[322] Ibid. 9.
[323] S. Stewart. (1984/1993). *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. 65.

intellect. In this way, by making miniatures of the world out of words, it is possible to comprehend, briefly, the vastness of where we are. And when those miniatures are layered successfully on top of each other, in the stratigraphic orderings of a book, it becomes a work like Ross's picture: a framed sequence of eclipse moments, half-still, half-moving. Then the pasts which make up those layered moments are hinted at.

Ephemera is, on its own, another lens through which to look at the past, and one which produces this kind of sensation too. Objects can be extra tools with which the mind can work, and, when built into prose, they bring the world beyond the page into a more prominent kind of relief. Through the layered lensing of object-on-page, a stranger kind of vertigo is enacted, a true telescoping, in and out, between scales.

Perhaps where prose can do more than life in the generation of these kinds of experiences is in the way a work of literature performs patterns which, in life, are random. In literature syzygy is engineered, and, because of that, it is possible to sustain an eclipse moment much longer than the briefness allowed by the haiku-like bursts objects induce—even than the minutes-long lingering horror of an eclipse. The best works of memoir, Birkerts says, plot the complicated weaves between events, and the double helix of fact and feeling in the kind of prose I've tried to describe furthers this. It's pulsed from the essayist's voice, and is the motor of what I think Woolf meant when she described impassioned prose. It is a method by which it's possible to play with what Louis MacNeice calls 'The drunkenness of things being various',[324] and can be enacted through narrative and tableau.

Georges Poulet describes Proust's novel as a work made of distinct episodes—tableaux, perhaps. 'However,' he says,

> these episodes are placed in harmony; they exchange information; they confer upon themselves a sort of reciprocal intelligibility. It is as if, instead of succeeding themselves, to each other, they content themselves by simply adding themselves to the whole, in the manner of a series of pictures with which an amateur constantly would enlarge his collection.[325]

[324] L. MacNeice. (1967). 'Snow'. *Poetry Foundation*. Retrieved from https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/91395/snow-582b58513ffae.
[325] G. Poulet. (1977). *Proustian Space*. Elliott Coleman (Trans.). Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press. (Original work published in 1963). 104.

The word Poulet uses to describe this harmonious placement is 'juxtaposition', but in a kind of simultaneous way: more like a layering on top of each other. The layers, for Proust, express a paradox: 'the simultaneity of the successive, the presence, in the present, of *another* present: the past.'[326] This is what occurs in the space between the distinct episodes that Proust's novel enacts. According to Poulet:

> It is human existence in its gradual development that means something to him, that is, the sort of thing that does not appear *in* pictures, but only *between* them … Juxtaposed! Is not there, realized in an extreme example, the preeminent Proustian method? That which consists in eliminating duration, in suppressing distance, in reducing the world to a number of isolated contiguous images, strictly delimited, which, hitched, so to speak, to the same dado-rail, offer themselves simultaneously to the gaze?[327]

This is a method of drawing links by annihilating them. It is a more-than-zoetrope scheme of imagining: it is an expression of the way space and time and past and place are interleaved, and shows that the modes lay on top of each other in a realm beyond what can be called reality and must be called the hyper reality of spacetime. A work of memoir which might capture the past—or, how it feels to sense the past—must find a way to offer the past and the present as simultaneous, and eclipse moments are a way in which that might be possible.

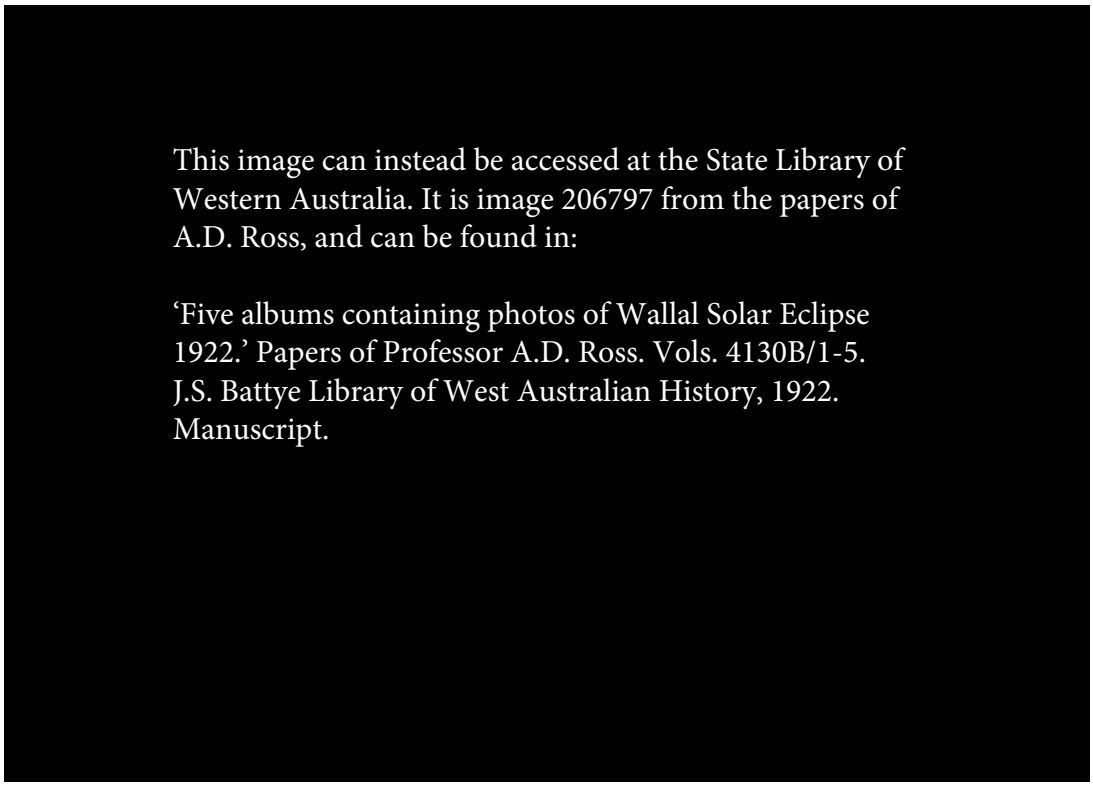
We are small, in the scheme of things, and tend towards insignificance—Woolf sensed that. But she also knew that we are, somehow, the centre of our own universes, able to change everything with a wave of our hands. This was one of the things Ross and those scientists managed to prove on 80 Mile Beach. The awareness of that kind of insignificance can be crippling, but the flipside of it—an awareness of the chance and miracle of ourselves, and of the significance that entails—is something different. In one of her drafts for *The Waves* Woolf writes:

> Now do you think I understood something about life? … What interpretation should I put on it? Am I justified in taking a sheet of paper & writing this down? Have I any of

[326] Ibid. 94.
[327] Ibid. 98-99.

> the certainty that a mathematician has when his calculation … works out, or the planet appears, timed right to the fraction of a second?[328]

I think the answers are yes, your own, and yes, and yes. Horizons expand with new ways of viewing the world; each lens used allows a kind of expansion, making our place in it all both firmer and more daunting. This kind of view can turn stars and sand and things, each and all, into symbols of eternity. Around them behind them within them, in the void of them and in the way they twinkle, literally, or with that uncanny sense of someone, somewhere, somewhen, is both the wonder and the fear of the world we know and can sometimes sense.



In 1927, Woolf was not the only person caught by eclipse mania. At the time, says Stephen Kern, Einstein's 'general theory of relativity demolished the conventional sense of stability of the entire material universe'.[329] Entire publics became aware of a different universe, which was still the same as the one they already knew, but seen differently. Relativity was one of the forces which decentred Woolf, took her out of

[328] V. Woolf. (1976). *The Waves: The Two Holograph Drafts*. J.W. Graham (Ed.). Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press. 363. Qtd. in. H. Henry. (2003/2009). *Virginia Woolf and the Discourse of Science: The Aesthetics of Astronomy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 101.
[329] Qtd. in Henry. 26.

the middle of the story, even if, by contradiction, it always kept her there staring out from the page, with the kind of cyclopean 'I' White says defines Proust's work.[330] Holly Henry expresses this thickening of the world, this firming of essence into wonder, as a realisation that, 'All camera angles would be necessary for a complete recounting of the play':[331] each 'I', each potential 'I', each subject (which may well be an object) in this slippery, massive, complex crust of the present we inhabit, is vital for a complete picture. It is an impossible task, but an invigorating one. Relativity forced this world view, even as it helped enforce a sense that the way we tick our own worlds along, from the shapes made behind our eyes, is the only real truth. Woolf knew, and felt, that minds work like cameras, taking snapshots of the world from a very particular perspective; Einstein's universe isn't governed from a central point, it is a universe of partners in which everyone (and everything) has equal impact. It shows the grandeur of all assembled things: that each crumb of us will dust off eventually into something else as easily as rings of smoke. Of course, this presents one difficulty of finding the past: that endings are never quite final.

The Wallal expedition does not merit a footnote in Holly Henry's book about Woolf and science. But she does talk, briefly, about attempts to solve the Einstein Problem: she mentions expeditions in 1919 and 1926, which were derailed because of bad weather. The 1922 eclipse is written into her book, but she only describes the party who went to Christmas Island. They also failed due to bad weather—the light and air on the west coast of Australia is a rare thing.

Woolf uses eclipses to represent what Emily Dalgarno calls a 'mutation in subjectivity'.[332] It's this new subjectivity, post-event, that I want to emphasise. The world becomes different because of the way we gaze at the skies, and the way those particular sky-syzygies make us feel. This 'mutation in subjectivity' is, I think, the same kind of bafflement we feel when we sense the past, briefly, in a thing; or when our memories trip back involuntarily and the past looms. There is a kind of exhilaration embedded in these moments, something captured by Emily Brontë in a poem fragment which shimmers the moors into sight: she knew, from her experience of that gusting

[330] E. White. 138.
[331] Henry. 103.
[332] E. Dalgarno. (2001/2006). *Virginia Woolf and the Visible World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 28.

place, that ‘the wind may never again / Blow as it now blows for us; / And the stars may never shine again as now they shine.’[333]

*

Not long after the package from John arrived in the mail, Grandma fell, on the other side of the world—close, actually, to where he’d put the parcel in the postbox. Then, a day or so later, she fell again. There was another matter too: that of the blockage in her heart. I remember how we were all sat together, with the dog, on the couch; how we were trying to think through the implications, no doubt all considering something similar. Dad suggested that he should call my uncle to find out what was going on, but, almost exactly then, the phone rang. It was Uncle Kevin, calling—again—from the hospital, this time in its carpark. He did not know much more than we did, but wanted to keep us as informed as possible. He couldn’t spend too long on the line as there were other people to ring. That was what Dad told us, Mum, Milo, and I, and then we were quiet again, until Mum started talking about what should happen in case Grandma needed to be resuscitated—which was a strange thing to hear: then my grandmother became a thing of skin and bone and synapses. Mum pushed it a little, because it needed to be pushed, and Dad was quiet until he admitted that he should, perhaps, look at plane tickets and prices.

I felt a little guilty. A part of me thought (without meaning to think it at all) that it would make a good ending. Nothing had happened then, of course, but I wondered what it would feel like when it did. We tried to work out the best time to call my brother, Ben, in America.

The next day, when I got to Mum and Dad’s, I came into the lounge to find them all on the couch again. I knew what that meant. All quite quick. Nearly sudden. We sat and talked a little, and then tried to figure out what would happen next: it was my nanna’s birthday, and we had to find a way to tell her which would not get in the way of that. We decided to go as a family to see her.

Dad called Ben; he was at work and it was still the day before. Mum made Dad marmalade on toast using the one with the whiskey in it. I sat. Dad cried for the first time in the kitchen, holding a milk bottle, on the way to make a cup of tea. Then he ate

[333] E. Brontë. (1844/1973). ‘D.G.C. to J.A.: “Come, the wind may never again …”’. *Poems*. Rosemary Hartill (Ed.). London: Tom Stacey. 110.

his toast, and I can still hear, if I close my eyes, the crunch of it. I texted Melissa, who was at work.

Because we were going to see Nanna earlier than expected I had to go to the shops to get her birthday card. As I drove I passed Dad in the park with Milo. He waved; stuck his hand straight up in the air, and left it there. It's hard and soft to look at Milo now, to hold him: he reminds me so much of her, how she loved him and missed him and how they both were company for each other when they sat together outside, watching the garden, listening to the clatter of birds and also to the silence.

Uncle Kevin and my cousins, Darren and Tony, were there when she died. She was sleeping, and it was peaceful, they said. But it was hard to feel certain of that from where we were. Aunty Pat drove up with Colin, and Uncle Kevin collected her death certificate. And I felt guilty about writing—furtive. But I did not stop.

We skyped Ben. He was sad but okay, I think. He decided to fly back for the funeral, and the connection dropped in and out. He'd grown a moustache, which looked like thick eye-brows resting on his top lip, neatly separated by his philtrum.

The week was bizarre, a whole muddle of things one after the other after the other. Mum had to fly to Cairns to care for a family friend who had fallen ill; there was a test match; I had to write a paper for a conference in Adelaide (which was why, in the end, I couldn't fly back to England for the funeral). We were all supposed to go and see Stephen Fry speak at the theatre in the Convention Centre, but Mum and Dad were gone and Mel and I forgot: she was out when I saw, on Facebook, people tagging themselves in at the show. So I drove down on my own and got there late, listened to Hoagy Carmichael on the way and sat surrounded by their empty seats. It was my birthday that week, and then there were attacks in Paris, bushfires in Esperance, and a 'Reclaim Australia' flier appeared in the letterbox. The test match ended, finally, without a result, because of bad light.

Mum and I skyped Dad in England. He, Ben, and Aunty Pat were packing up and putting away. Everything was being divided up and moved on: each of the things we'd moved and boxed and unboxed again had to be decided on. Social services came for the furniture, and the jewellery was for the women, they said. Mum wrote me a note while we were talking; she pushed it underneath the eye of the camera on the computer. The note said that Aunty Pat looked just like Grandma, who Dad and Ben were going to see for the last time at 4 o'clock that day. When we spoke I asked them for the box

which once held the Brontë placemats, which has inside of it the case which once held a gold sovereign, which once belonged to Grandma. The wake, they said, was planned for The Fleece, a pub in Ripponden which was (according to Mum, after Skype) the first pub in which she and Dad shared a drink. And on the screen, Dad, Ben, and Pat looked haggard; Dad hadn't showered for days and the flat I had helped fill was almost empty.

On the day of the funeral, Mum, Mel, Milo, and I went down to Matilda Bay, as close as we could get to the time they would be gathering in England. One oddness of it all was this: that my cousin Jason, who was there, sent to me (through my phone) a commentary of photographs. So while we sat and waited by the side of the river I saw her coffin and the flowers and some of the people at the service—sometimes Dad and Ben were half-caught in shot.

At the side of the river, while watching black swans paddle up and down and boats tack and weave, I could hear the clink of metal and rope in the small wind. There were children wandering on the little beach and up, alongside the jetty, there were some paddling chest-deep in the water. The café Grandma liked to go to, to eat potato wedges with sour cream and sweet chilli sauce, was closed, so we drank water from a plastic bottle instead.

Filling in

> Consider the value of a plan-drawing. Ditto free-hand maps and rudimentary model-building. Ask your witnesses and suspects to put a story into whatever spaces you avail to them. Your imagined or modelled world might waft them back to the scene. (Accept but don't confess that this is just a rough kind of magic.) Invite witnesses and suspects to write and sketch all over your little worlds.
>
> Ross Gibson. *The Criminal Re-Register*. 33.

This last is from the day I spent in Todmorden, hiding from Grandma at Mytlhom, after deciding not to say goodbye again.

When I made my way back up to the valley from Oxford I stayed in the centre of Todmorden. On the wall of the bathroom in the house I was in was a picture of the Pike on the hill, and framed in the window was the Pike in the picture, looming. Even though I did not have long, I went.

There were longboats moored up in the canal and there were low clouds scudding. I knew the paths, still. They were trodden in somehow, and the way was never in doubt. The brown canal was stopped on my right-hand side and the geese, still to be avoided, were in my memory where they were that day. They honk and scream at you from the far bank where there is no path, only woodland, and when it has rained tiny waterfalls plash past them into dark water. Once, I used to run along that section of the path. That day I quickened my step.

It was only when the Pike appeared, framed by hills from the road, that I felt like I was back where I was. Everything else has always seemed to shift. Like Solnit says,

> Perhaps it's that you can't go back in time, but you can return to the scenes of a love, of a crime, of happiness, and of a fatal decision; the places are what remain, are what you can possess, are what is immortal. They become the tangible landscape of memory, the places that made you, and in some way you too become them. They are what you can possess and what in the end possesses you.[334]

When I lived in that house below it, we would take the path up to the Pike every so often. It's not a difficult walk, but it can be steep and slippery, and it nearly always rains, at least briefly, when you are on the flank of the hill.

There are paths all over the valley, some more official than others. There are those made of stone which is buckled and almost soft, and seems to sink like a pillow in the middle. These are packhorse trails, and they can carry you over the moors. There are paths trodden through the dirt and grass, showing the way of least resistance, worn into the side of hills and fields. There are roads, and rail, and water paths too, and the sound of trains in the valley is either a yelled horn or a rattling chuff. The roads are notorious, potholed, worked-on, and very often crammed; those which scrape the edges of the valley, and which rise to the tops of it, can be terrifying but also beautiful. They are thin, tarmacked, enclosed by mossy walls and high banks of grass.

The river makes its own paths, and all the streams and rills and dribbling bits of water have more responsibility than anything else for the shape of the place. They cut over roads and anything man-made, through forests, and, every so often, burst into the bottom of the valley to flood houses and parks and towns and shops. The canal is two paths—the tow-path, and its water-way. And still, despite all these paths compelling, I knew the way: the Pike loomed. It was as Glyn Hughes describes it:

> I am told that one's eye automatically enlarges something seen on the skyline; but to see Stoodley Pike only from the valley, as a mark on the crest of the hill, is to have no idea of the remarkable size of this obelisk—not that it isn't typical of such monuments. Like all the others, Stoodley Pike is black and lugubrious and faintly Egyptian. Rather than being celebratory or joyous, it is funereal … Architecturally, the

[334] Solnit. *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*. 117.

> main thing that it achieves is to disappointingly reduce the scale of its surrounding hills.[335]

The toe-path crackled underfoot. The air was damp and cool and small breezes criss-crossed the water. I walked alongside the canal, remembering the overflows and the curves of the road—but that canal is mostly straight like the pike which swim through it, and like the Pike which watches over it. Those long, cold fish were the prize of the men who sat for hours on the banks, and that long, cold obelisk was my prize that day. I walked to the bottom of Shaw Wood Road, a mile or so from Todmorden, where there is a bridge across the canal. That road is one I travelled up nearly every day of the life I led in England: the house I remember is at the top of it.

The road winds and drops off into ravines where we, my brother and I, built dens and wandered. But that day the way was up, through the wood by the stream after crossing the canal, and past the murky houses and boat-building shed, into the green and onto the brown and muddy upwards path which seemed cobbled as if by mad men. Sometimes, crude and ancient steps hindered the upwards march, and it was difficult to tell if the rocks were always there or if they were added, later. Leaves littered the place like corpses, and my feet slipped from underneath me. I remembered trying to find the source of the stream at the top of that wood, and then sledging through the fields I knew I would find when this part of the path was done. And, always, the world dropped away into valleys within valleys, all the land carved out by time and ice, the trees weeping and growing and the grass a startling, shifting, constant green.

Through the wood, at the top of the path, is a stile, and through that I went across the field and saw a standing stone and the path continuing. At the top of the field an old house of locked-in memories sat still and never moving, trodden in like the towpath. It never changes even though it must; the place is wrapped around my skull and wanders through my eyes at night, and though its door was open I did not wish to look inside.

I climbed over the gate of the field and along past the pillars which mark the entrance to Stoodley Grange, past the house built on the copse next to the track which leads up the mountain. Again the ground crackled, the road sounding loud and sharp. I could feel small rocks pointing through my shoes. And the world dropped away—

[335] G. Hughes. (1975). *Millstone Grit*. Newton Abbott: Readers Union. 61.

there were the windmills miles distant, and clumped trees and dry-stone bordered fields, and then another stile—all before the true side of the hill beckoned. The only way was up: up to St. George's lair where the grass is thicker and stranger, and gorse and heather provide something like variety; where sheep chew and stare, and everything seems sideways except the blasted Pike. Where I walked a thousand times as my feet grew in my shoes.

And there it was, ticking the valley along, watching the valley from the lip of it, gripped to the roof of it, a sturdy stick of memory; a lightning rod which spelled horizon. Thin rain washed distance, and, half-way up the side of the hill, all around was undulating–perspective, criss-crossed with breezes and memories. They were written in, trodden in, all the dry-stone wall and clinging moss and the still chewing sheep. I heard the yell of trains and then their whispers. And sometimes, only peeking from the lip of the hill, was the black stone spire, still amid the moving sky, telling time like a sundial and like a memory, hidden in twists of perspective. Sometimes it even disappeared from view entirely as the path wound up the side of the hill. The way got rocky, gravelly underfoot, and the sheep watched as I walked.

When you reach the top of the mountain you can climb up the cold bowels of the monument, underneath the carved story of its history, and up, twisting through darkness. The climb is a test, with the rough stone on your fingertips and the gravel-shuffle of feet the only possible guide. It is cold inside the Pike even in the summer. But then, just as the steps seem to go on too long and the climb seems desperate, there is light and the valley opens up under the shifting, monstrous clouds. And then the distance is everywhere, the whole yawning distance between then and now and here and there.

Rain was falling and I did not have a coat but I could see the clouds would pass and they did—they went roaring past faster than they should have, and they changed as they went so that you could not find shapes in them. At the top of the hill where the Pike sat the whole world seemed to open out: the valley congealed and the moors rolled. I could see Heptonstall on the hill, but not the monument at Pecket Well.

Of course, I had to walk back down—I had a plane to catch. I knew the way though, down to the stream and through the fields and past the old, grand horse chestnut trees, to the bridge over the canal into the crux of the valley. There were birds on the wall at the bottom, near the road by the canal. They were crows, that day, and they were

smaller than they are in Australia, but still as black and shining. They stared calmly at me as I stood at the bottom of the hill and waited for the bus I knew where to catch. While I waited, I looked along the road to Hebden Bridge, a short ride from where I was, to the flat in which my grandmother was most certainly sleeping, or watching from her window all the shadows which moved behind her eyes.

Image credits

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p. 238. ‘The Einstein Plate’. Image 206797 from the papers of A.D. Ross. ‘Five albums containing photos of Wallal Solar Eclipse 1922.’ *Papers of Professor A.D. Ross*. Vols. 4130B/1-5. J.S. Battye Library of West Australian History, 1922. Manuscript.

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Appendix: Publications

The following is a list of all publications which have arisen from this thesis to date:

Juckes, Daniel. (2016). 'Ways to Feel the Past: Life Writing, Objects, and Nostalgia'. *Exploring Nostalgia: Sad, Bad, Mad and Sweet*. Anita Dremel and Daniel Juckes (Eds.). Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press. eBook.

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