PENINSULA

ALEX GARLAND, ROBERT MACFARLANE, JAY GRIFFITHS, ROY WILKINSON, TOBY BARLOW, KATHLEEN JAMIE & JAMES ROBERTSON

VISITATION

2012
It’s 2012 – Olympic Year. As crowds, competition and corporate branding descend on East London, it seems apt that this, the third annual edition of Peninsula, should reflect the transformation of the capital and the summer’s influx of visitors. Hopefully, however, what we have created will retain continued relevance long after the Olympic village has been left behind by the world’s athletes.

Overseeing the project, Craig Taylor was forced to fight the pull of the capital and attend early-morning meetings deep in Cornwall after sleepless nights spent flying west along the Cornish Main Line. Over machine-stale coffee, plans were conceived, lists were drawn up and within a couple of hours Craig would leave us and climb tiredly back on the train to the city, no doubt rueing his commitment to these Cornish visitations.

With no budget to speak of, we began approaching writers with nothing more to offer than our admiration and the promise of Cornish confectionery (hidden in the depths of the Peninsula hard drive, there lurks a spreadsheet entitled ‘The Fudge List’ that will ensure we keep our promises). Some writers couldn’t spare the time to contribute (and who could blame them), but gradually emails from agents and publicists began trickling back to us, bearing positive tiding.

In the end we managed to secure contributions from an immense and varied collection of writers. Booker nominees, New York Times bestsellers, Royal Society of Literature Fellows and the recipients of a whole host of other plaudits sent us great writing, the writing that now fills these pages.

It wasn’t all fudge and business, however. We sought the opinions of the clergy, the police and the family behind one of London’s most unusual tourist attractions. As if that wasn’t enough, things then got strange in the bowels of Bodmin Jail, where what should have been a straightforward interview escalated into a paranormal commune with the deceased, distant relatives of the editorial team.

At this point it is tempting to include a dictionary definition, so as to demonstrate the possibilities held by the theme, but were we to do so with ‘visitation’, this entire editorial would be consumed by nine definitions and countless sub-definitions of the word. Put simply, the only way we can demonstrate the scope offered is to point you in the direction of the contributions contained in the pages beyond.

Happy reading,

The Editors – Paul Tucker, Emma Easy, Rachel Santuccio and Helen Orphin.
TOBY BARLOW
Toby Barlow is the author of Sharp Teeth, the Alex Award-winning epic poem about wolves in Los Angeles. He is a contributor to n+1 and The New York Times. He lives in Detroit. His next novel is scheduled to be released by FSG in early 2013.

CAROLINE CARVER
Caroline Carver is a Hawthornden Fellow and has published four collections, the latest being Tikki Tikki Man, published by Ward Wood.

MELANIE CHALLENGER
Melanie Challenger is the author of Extinction. She was a Fellow of the AHRC Centre for the Evolution of Cultural Diversity at University College London from 2007–2010 and International Fellow at the British Antarctic Survey for International Polar Year 2007–2008. She is currently researching endangered music from around the world, in association with the World Oral Literature Programme at Cambridge University.

EMMA EASY
Emma Easy mainly writes non-fiction, and is interested in the natural world and the evocation of place. She also writes songs.

JAY GRIFFITHS
Jay Griffiths is the author of Wild: An Elemental Journey and A Love Letter from a Stray Moon.

ALYSON HALLETT
Alyson Hallett’s latest book is Six Days in Iceland. She currently works as a Royal Literary Fund Fellow and lives in Falmouth.

KATHLEEN JAMIE
Kathleen Jamie’s poetry collections include The Tree House (Picador 2004), which won both the Forward prize and the Scottish Book of the Year Award. She also writes non-fiction including the highly regarded Findings and, recently, Sightlines.

ALEX GARLAND
Alex Garland was born in London in 1970. He is the author of the bestselling novels The Beach, The Trespasser and The Coma. He also wrote the screenplays for 28 Days Later and Never Let Me Go (based on the novel by Kazuo Ishiguro).

DAVID LAWRENCE
David Lawrence is a design historian specialising in architecture, culture and design where people and movement meet. He studies human migration at the scale of the room and the city, is a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society and holds a doctorate on the topic of motorway service stations. He lives and works in London, teaching architecture at Kingston University.

ROBERT MACFARLANE

JEREMY MYNOTT
Jeremy Mynott has had a lifelong interest in wildlife and the natural world. He has explored the variety of human responses to birds from the ancient world to the present day in Birdscapes: Birds in Our Imagination and Experience, now available in paperback.

MATTHEW OATES
Matthew Oates is a naturalist and follower of the poetic approach, who writes purely to escape into the real world.

HELEN ORPHIN
Helen Orphin is an aspiring travel writer with a love of festivals, especially Glastonbury.

IAIN SINCLAIR
Iain Sinclair is a prolific writer of fiction, poetry and non-fiction. His books include London Orbital, Hackney, That Rose-Red Empire and Ghost Milk.

CRAIG TAYLOR
Craig Taylor is the author of three books, most recently Londones: The Days and Nights of London Now – As Told by Those Who Love It, Hate It, Live It, Left It and Long For It. He is the editor of the literary magazine Five Dials.

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Their absence was unusual. We were used to seeing them regularly around the grounds of the school. Many years ago, they had been students here, and since their return to Rumbek, they were often found wandering around the empty classrooms, discussing how those classrooms might be returned to their former state.

As, one day, Gabriel and I hoped to be students at the school ourselves, we valued any time spent in their company. They would tell us stories about how things were when they were students, and I would listen to their tales with fascination, always eager to learn more about the past.

The distance was too great to make out his face, but I could not mistake his slim silhouette. From the bright sunshine of one courtyard to the dark shadow of a passageway, one could tell the difference between the various governors of the regions. They were required to argue why their district would be preferable to all others. In Rumbek’s application, the governor gave practical considerations, such as the town’s accessible location and its supply of resources and livestock. But he also detailed the town’s unique quality of tranquility, which would be ideal for the function of study and education. Rumbek’s was the winning application. The architect described the day he spent much of his time examining the buildings. Sometimes this was to assess their damage, to see if there was any hope of repair. But more often, he was simply remembering the way the buildings had once been, in the years he had been a student here.

Surprised to see that my fears were unfounded, pleased that my sense of death was misplaced, I set off immediately towards him. But I had only taken a few steps when he set off himself, heading through the short passageway to the front courtyard, then turning right to disappear around the corner. Rather than call out, which would have been impolite considering the difference in our years and status, I picked up my pace.

When I reached the courtyard, I saw the table from which the headmaster had once conducted open-air assemblies. And I saw the abandoned truck that sat stripped behind the headmaster’s table, and the armoured personnel carrier with deflated tyres and open hatches.

But I didn’t see the Architect. I had not moved quickly enough. He had already disappeared into one of the several buildings and passageways that provide exits from the courtyard. It was impossible to guess into which of these buildings or passageways the Architect had vanished.

Rumbek School is vast and maze-like, with not simply the one courtyard I have already described, but several, which interlock around classrooms and dormitories that once accommodated a thousand pupils. And the maze extends further, because a school of such scale requires supporting architecture. The teachers and auxiliary staff and vice headmaster and headmaster all needed to be housed. Showers and toilet facilities were necessary, as were kitchens and eating areas. Space was set aside for recreational activity. Two churches were provided, one Catholic and the other Protestant.

With so many directions in which I might try to follow the Architect, but with no clue as to which to take, I chose to walk straight ahead. From the bright sunshine of one courtyard to the dark shadow of a passageway, then into the bright sunshine of another courtyard – the largest in the complex.
Apart from its size, this courtyard was notable for three things. First, the number of empty bullet casings that lay scattered on the ground. Secondly, a wall, which had been built by Northerners around the yard’s central fruit tree. Nobody knows why. It is too low to deter a fruit thief. Perhaps it was built to create an area in which senior army ranks could have a shaded place to take tea. Thirdly, another Northern construction: a small, red-brick mosque.

The Professor stood a few metres from the mosque; compact, dark, shimmering in the heat that rose from the ground. I was surprised to see him, because I had been surprised to see the Architect beneath the entrance arch. Beside him, only a short distance away, was Gabriel. Gabriel was always recognisable at a distance because of his long T-shirt, which hung so low over his small body that it entirely covered his shorts. They weren’t talking to each other. The Professor was looking toward some point behind the group, with his back to me, but Gabriel was facing in my direction.

Having seen and then lost the Architect, I wanted to run toward the Professor, to ensure that the same thing didn’t happen again. But I hesitated. Halfway over the distance between us there was an impossible to walk unless your eyes were directed at it, because it had nothing better to do. I wasn’t really expecting to find the Architect at the dining room. As I have said, the Architect’s chief work was the renovation of buildings, but the dining room was beyond repair. The structure had no roof, and the walls were badly damaged. And, even if the Architect had been feeling nostalgic, it was not a pleasant place to stroll around. Local children had chipped the concrete floor as their toilet. It was impossible to walk unless your eyes were directed at the ground, and the smell was fierce.

Sure enough, when we reached the dining room it was empty. The only figures to be seen were sketched on the walls – karate-kicking figures between lines of graffiti, drawn in charcoal by bored soldiers. ‘Are you sure you saw the Architect heading this way?’ I asked Gabriel.

Gabriel shook his head. He didn’t answer because he was using the bend of his elbow to cover his nose and mouth. ‘You aren’t sure you saw him,’ I repeated, hardly bothering to hide my frustration.

‘No,’ he replied, muffled. ‘I saw someone. But now, thinking back, I’m not sure it was the Architect. It may have been someone else.’ I see.’ ‘In fact, yes, I’m sure it was someone else.’ I might have spoken irritably to Gabriel again, but at the moment he admitted he had not seen the Architect, I saw the Professor. First out of the corner of my eye, as a stocky shape glimpsed through one of the dining-room windows. Then, as my head turned, seen clearly, framed by the rectangle of stone, striding quickly toward one of the dormitory halls.

This time, I was taking no chances. I ran toward the exit in a series of leaps, landing nearly between the scattered clumps of faeces. Then I ran around the outside wall of the dining-room area. But turning the corner, I saw that again I had been too slow. No one stood where the Professor had been. The yard was empty. For a moment, I was disappointed. Then, across the yard, a shadow seemed to slip inside one of the dormitory doorways.

The doorway led to a room that was pockmarked with a thousand bullet holes. There are bullet holes everywhere. The bullet casings lie in the dust, and the holes are in the exterior walls. But in this room, the holes are on the interior walls. The concentration is so heavy that in many places whole areas of plaster have broken away. I have found that if you stare at the holes, patterns emerge. You identify a stitch of bullets from a single burst. The stitch shows how the recoil of the weapon has pulled upwards, slanting from left to right. You can see how, as a person was shot, the gunner struggled with his aim. The only surprise would have been if the Professor or the Architect were inside this room. But they were not inside. And my mind had returned to its original fears: that the Professor and the Architect were dead.

I wondered if perhaps I had been following only their ghosts. Standing motionless, my feet warmed by the concrete floor, I began to think back. I remembered that although Gabriel claimed to have seen the Architect, he later said he had been mistaken. I remembered that he had not seemed aware of the older man’s presence. I remembered that the Professor had shimmered from the heat rising from the courtyard ground, but Gabriel had not. And I considered the elusiveness of the two men. That repeatedly, just as I was about to catch them, they would slip away.

The idea that I had been following ghosts disturbed me. I became lost in thought, as I had been while I lay in the teak plantation.

I have little idea how long I had been standing in the room before Gabriel appeared, or how long he had been with me before I noticed him. But I suspect it was quite some time, because when my eyes focused on Gabriel, he seemed as preoccupied as me. Eventually, he said, ‘I found them for you.’

In Rumbek School there is beauty, with its tranquil atmosphere, and many courtyards and mango trees. There is also horror, with its contaminated wells and abandoned tanks and execution cells. These two things, the beauty and the horror, are usually in conflict with each other. But not always. A few minutes’ walk from here, there is another room where bullets have left marks on the interior. But these are not on the walls. They are on the ceiling.

Here, a group of Northerners were trapped as the rebels mounted their final attack. And room where the rebels clambered on to the roof, the Northerners fired up at them, punching hundreds of holes in the corrugated asbestos. Through these holes, the light of the sun fires back. Chosen holes fire up at them, punching hundreds of holes in the corrugated asbestos. Through these holes, the light of the sun fires back. Chosen holes fire up at them, punching hundreds of holes in the corrugated asbestos. Through these holes, the light of the sun fires back. Chosen holes fire up at them, punching hundreds of holes in the corrugated asbestos. Through these holes, the light of the sun fires back. Chosen holes fire up at them, punching hundreds of holes in the corrugated asbestos. Through these holes, the light of the sun fires back.
As Gabriel had said, the Professor and the Architect were inside the constellation chamber. And – now I regain my capacity to be surprised – they were talking about me.

As I had previously considered, they were under the impression that I had been the missing person over the past few days. In their walk around the school, they had been attempting to search me out.

My pleasure was twofold. First, to see them before me so fit and well, and secondly that I could introduce myself and put their concerns to rest.

I walked toward them, and when they did not break off their conversation, I coughed.

This did not provoke a response, so I spoke. I said, ‘This is strange. To think that you were looking for me, when all this time I have been looking for you.’

They ignored me. So I spoke again. This time I said, ‘Here I am.’

Then, when they continued to ignore me, and left to search around the defence trench that circled the school, I followed them, and stood directly in their path several times, announcing my presence even more loudly than before.

And finally, when they began to talk about checking in the old teak plantation, and also to voice mounting fears about the location of Gabriel, I stopped and allowed them to walk on ahead.

Much later that day, close to sunset, but not so close that the mosquitoes would be swarming, I sat with Gabriel a short distance from the Professor’s house. Outside the house, the Professor and the Architect were discussing measures that would need to be taken. The teak plantation, they agreed, would need to be marked in some way. The only question was how, given the size of the area.

‘Mines,’ the Architect said more than once, ‘are a terrible problem.’

The Professor did not need reminding. Only last December, a boy was blown up and killed on a clearing in the centre of Rumbek Town. And now it had transpired that the teak plantation was one of the most heavily mined areas in the vicinity, given that it offered protection to any forces closing in on the school. Which, at the time, was being used as a barracks.

It made me sad to hear their conversation. One of my most treasured stories from the Professor and the Architect had been a description of how, in earlier years, the teak plantation had been a favourite haunt of the school’s students; a place where they could relax and escape into the quietness, and study beneath the shade of the trees. The description had entirely captured my imagination and had made me keen to seek out these qualities for myself.

You will remember that I asked you to close your eyes, and I explained that if you did so, you would hear an adult speaking, not a boy. Now, if you open them, you will be reminded that I am, after all, between fifteen and sixteen years old. Not an adult at all. My voice is an illusion of my education.

It is unfortunate that illusions only stretch so far. An anti-personnel mine, of the sort that might be found in the teak plantation, would destroy the leg of an adult. But a boy could easily be killed, as the blast reaches beyond the knee or thigh, and into the stomach. And if another boy, seeing his friend’s injury, attempted to help, he might be injured too. Even if he took care to follow the path, tread where someone else has been, his foot could stray in the panic and anxiety of the moment.

A smaller boy, shorter than me, could be killed outright by such an explosion. In this way, the shorter boy would be saved from a further ordeal that might last several days.

As the evening drew in, the Architect returned home to take his shower and eat dinner. But even after his companion had excused himself, the Professor remained outside. He turned his chair so that it faced the direction of the school’s old tennis courts and rested his hand on his lap and, despite the mosquitoes, barely moved for the next hour.

It was strange to see him sit so still. I imagine he was remembering a match that had once been played on the courts, perhaps in the early morning of a Sunday, when many of the students would have travelled home for the weekend, and the temperature was cool.

In 2007, Jay Griffiths published *Wild*, a book seven years in the making. Tracing a path through Earth, Ice, Water, Fire, Air and Mind, it documented her exploration of wildness, as she spent time with indigenous populations across the world and reachedsearchingly for a collective wild consciousness. The result was a work that exposed the perils of a disconnect with wildness, both on an individual level and a global scale. The work has been championed by names as diverse as Radiohead, Gary Snyder, John Berger and KT Tunstall, and acclaim is escalating.

**“PEOPLE HAVE NEVER CEASED TO FEEL A NEED FOR WILDERNESS”**

**EMMA EASY TALKS WITH JAY GRIFFITHS**

Wild is nearly six years old now. Has your relationship with wildness evolved at all, since then?

I think I feel more and more interested in the psyche’s wildness, and in the necessity for the mind to have dwelling in nature, which isn’t the same as literally being in a rural environment. I’m also more and more aware of how wildness edges on to the divine: that there is something ferociously sacred in the life of life.

What was it like, being a guest in such different cultures to our own for such long periods of time?

Well, it is probably the same for everyone all over the world: I was always curious but sometimes concerned that my curiosity might be ignorant. I was always excited to be in different places and sometimes exhausted by the overload of sense-impressions. I was always keen to listen and always, but always, sorry not to be fluent in all the languages I met.

How was your role as a writer regarded by the different tribes you stayed with?

My role as a writer was usually considered fairly straightforwardly. In the Arctic, I sometimes felt that people were a little tired of being written about, which is very understandable. There’s a joke that the typical Inuit family consists of a mother, a father, a grandmother, two children and an anthropologist, and sometimes it seemed that people were humouring and tolerating the presence of a writer. But a couple of times people came to talk to me when they felt that a particular anger they had was not more widely understood, for example that Inuit people still smart with an understandable irritation about being told by the West that they should not hunt whales, when it is massive industrial whaling that has caused such drastic loss of whale-life in the whale-ways (as the oceans were called in Anglo-Saxon literature).

In West Papua, my role was enormously, heartbreakingly welcome, as so few writers go there. From Britain, you could probably count on the fingers of one hand the writers who have gone there, many others embarrassingly and falsely claiming they can’t go because Indonesia ‘forbids’ them. It does, and it doesn’t matter: you just buy a ticket. It’s that difficult. West Papua is a land of beauty. It is a land of laughter, where, if someone knows they are going to fall over laughing, they lie down first. It is a land of song, everyone is a singer. And Indonesia is annihilating a nation of singers. It is strangling the laughter. Why? Because they invaded West Papua, and have mounted a genocide, with the connivance of the international community because international corporations are making enormous profits. Writers do not report on it. The media does not cover it. And that is why it continues.

As you take us from element to element in the book, and from culture to culture, similar themes crop up: not taking more from the land than you need; having an intimate, sensual knowledge of your surroundings; how wildness deteriorates into wasteland if connection is lost.

Do you think that the Western world is waking up to these messages and starting to reconnect with the wild?

I think that people have never ceased to feel a need for wildness. I think the thirst which people feel for their pets and gardens is evidence. One window box in a first-floor flat in London might be all you have (it was all I had when I lived in London), but the need for it is not related to acreage but to the fact of its vitality.

More and more of us in the West are travelling – gap years, voluntary projects, honeymoons, business trips. It appears that it can either be an individual blessing – for yourself, for example – or a global curse. What are your thoughts?
Any travel can be either a curse or a traverse of understandings. If the latter (and one would hope it is always the latter), then it centres on the idea of the gift, that one must always give as much as receive, when one is travelling. It can be hard, I know, to work out what to take, how one’s trip is made to be useful to someone else, but it is a necessary part of planning. And there are certain situations where it is always a curse: the tribal safari holidays which are not managed by indigenous people but which use them like creatures in a zoo are odious. Visiting so-called ‘lost tribes’ is something which can be literally murderous, and should be illegal.

From time to time, you reveal glimpses of your note-taking process, writing things down whilst scaling a mountain, or at risk of frostbite in Arctic conditions. Can you tell us a little more about your note-taking process – and were any notebooks lost on your travels?

Notebooks, well, I took loads with me everywhere, I use pencil and keep a penknife with me to sharpen them. I never use gear, no recording devices, nothing except paper and pencils because they don’t leak and you can use them in different temperatures. At home, too, when I write, I write in pencil, sometimes biro, but never on the keyboard, except right now, typing emails. I find thoughts and language are more flexible, and words yield themselves more, like soft damp clay, if you write by hand. No notebooks were lost, no, though I did once give my notebooks to a man in the Amazon when we were crossing a very difficult river, as I thought he was much less likely than I was to fall.

What’s your next project?

I’ve just finished a short truanting novel called A Love Letter From a Stray Moon, which will be published as an e-book by Penguin, then as an actual book by Go Together Press. It is partly about Frida Kahlo, much to do with the rebellion of poetry, the necessary fire at the heart of art. I’m also finishing a long non-fiction book about childhood.

“ANY TRAVEL CAN BE EITHER A CURSE OR A TRAVERSE OF UNDERSTANDINGS.”
Two days short of the winter solstice; the turn of the year’s tide. All that cold day, the city and the countryside around felt halted, paused. Five degrees below freezing and the earth battered down. Clouds held snow that would not fall. Out in the suburbs the schools were closed, people homebound, the pavements rinky and the roads blackened. The sun ran a shallow arc across the sky. Then just before dusk the snow came – dropping straight for five hours and settling at a steady inch an hour.

I was at my desk that evening, trying to work but distracted by the weather. I kept stopping, standing, looking out of the window. The snow was sinking through the orange cone cast by a street light, the fat flakes showing like furnace sparks. Around eight o’clock the snow ceased. An hour later I went out for a walk with a flask of whisky to keep me warm. I walked for half a mile along dark back roads where the snow lay clean and unmarked. The houses began to thin out. A few undrawn curtains: family evenings underway, the flicker and burble of television sets. The cold like a wire in the nose. A slew of stars, the moon flooding everything with silver.

At first sight the field seemed flawless; floe country. Then I set out across it and started to see the signs. The snow was densely printed with the tracks of birds and animals – archives of the hundred of journeys made since the snow had stopped. There were neat deer slots, partridge fits, the two rear feet are placed laterally to make elongated eyes, and between and behind them fall the forefeet in a slightly offset paired print-trail seemed like a plot that could be read backwards in time; a series of allusions to events since ended. I found a line of fox pugs, which here and there had been swept across by the fox’s brush, as if it had been trying to erase evidence of its own passage. I discovered what I supposed were the traces of a pheasant taking off: trenched footprints where it had pushed up, then spaced feather-presses either side of the tracks, becoming progressively lighter and then vanishing altogether. I chose a deer’s trail to follow, which angled tightly across a corner of the field. The slots led through a blackthorn hedge: I snagged my way after them, and emerged into a surreal landscape. To my north, the land swooped smoothly away downhill for 900 yards or so. South and uphill of where I stood, big white humps surrounded what appeared to be a small neat lake with a flagstick in its centre. There were copies of beech and stands of pine, sudden drops and draws in the land, rounded hills and swathed valleys.

I walked over to the lake, stepped out on to its surface, and by its flagstick I sat down and took a drink of whisky. Edited of its golfers by the darkness, transformed by snowfall and moonlight, the county’s most exclusive golf course had become a strange realm of open country. Murmuring insincere apologies to the club’s members, I left the first green and set off to explore the course. I walked straight down the middle of fairway after fairway, my shadow falling undistorted by my side. In the bunkers snow lay calf-deep and sifted. On the fifth green I lay on my back and watched the stars’ slow wheel.

Most of the animal tracks on the course had been left by rabbits. If you’ve seen rabbit prints in snow, you will know they resemble a Halloween ghost mask, or the face of Edward Munch’s screamer: the two rear feet are placed laterally to make elongated eyes, and between and behind them fall the forefeet in a slightly offset paired line, forming nose and oval mouth. Thousands of these faces peered at me from the snow. Occasionally the headlights of cars on the road to the west showed as long yellow tunnels of light. On the twelfth fairway something large and dark ran from tree to scrub cover: it looked like a wolf.
but must have been a deer or fox, and set needles of silly fear pricking in the backs of my hands.

At the far end of the course, I followed rabbit tracks through another blackthorn hedge and on to the Roman road that runs for miles over low chalk hills. The road looked magnificent in the snow – the white line of its route leading the eye far in either direction – and I followed it south-east. Vast fields were visible through the hedges to either side, throwing the moonlight back up in hard pale sheets. A bird moving in a tall ash tree sent snow dropping across the path ahead of me, falling like speckles on early film.

Distance stretched oddly, or perhaps time compressed, for it seemed that I had been moving for many miles or hours before I reached the point where the Roman road passed the end of a wide avenue of beeches that I recognised. I walked up the avenue, skirted the earthworks of a large Iron Age ring-fort, crossed a road and then entered a wide meadow that rises to the top of a chalk down, whose summit floats 250 feet above sea level. Charcoal trees, a taste of pewter in the mouth.

At the down’s top, under the moon, near the outline of a Bronze Age burial barrow, I sat in the snow and drank whisky again. I looked back along the line of my own tracks leading up to the hilltop. Away to the north-west were dozens of other print-trails, spreading far and then further downhill. I picked a trail and set out along it, following those tracks to see where they might lead.

‘Track’ is an excerpt from The Old Ways, published in 2012 by Hamish Hamilton, an imprint of Penguin books.

POEM

THE WOOD

BY KATHLEEN JAMIE

She comes to me
as a jay’s shriek,
as ragged branches shading
deerways I find myself
lost among for days,
weeks, till the crisis passes.

When I weep
she strokes my hair and
calls me ‘babe’,
coaxing me to fall
once more for her
scarlet-berry promises –

This time, she says, I’ll keep you;
you’ll never have to face them all again.

Taken from the forthcoming collection The Overhaul, to be published by Picador in October 2012.
One warm spring evening not so long ago, I was able to sit down with the writer Iain Sinclair for a conversation. Sinclair had strayed from his beloved Hackney all the way across North London to leafy Hampstead, to Keats House, where we spoke in front of an audience of around one hundred. Already, early in 2012, it felt as though the London Olympics were bearing down on all of us and Sinclair, after telling the gathered a few anecdotes about NW3, was eager to discuss the folly of such grand projects, the effect this mass visitation of commerce, athleticism and tourism would have on East London, and also the mysterious substance at the heart of his latest book, Ghost Milk.

"I remember the day when this manuscript came in to Simon [Prosser, of Ghost Milk’s publisher Hamish Hamilton]. We looked at the title and thought, ‘Only Iain Sinclair could take these two words and force them together in this way,’ ‘Ghost Milk’, what does it mean?

I don’t want the book simply to be some kind of polemic against the Olympics or against great projects. It’s a much more mysterious thing than that and I feel that at the moment in the world there is a substance hovering almost like ectoplasm between the virtual and the actual.

We’re being overwhelmed by computer-generated imagery. I saw it when the lower Lee Valley was enclosed in blue fences – suddenly these images of something that doesn’t exist came into being. They were pin sharp and they included a vision of London that people were persuaded to believe, that was totally contradicted by the toxic reality that was going on underfoot.

Between the two there has to be a kind of buffer substance and I think we had to invent something that became that.

This quote from the book I found particularly lovely: ‘CGI smears on the blue fence. Real juice from a virtual host. Embalming fluid. A soup of photographic negatives. Soul food for the dead. The universal element in which we sink and swim.’

That’s the most important I think, this ‘universal element in which we sink and swim’. Because now, London is – and the media reinforces this so strongly – such an atomised, fragmented city.

There is a new kind of London emerging. We have to have a medium between the two, through which we sink or swim, and that’s our challenge, I think, as writers. And you’ve done it [in Londoners] with a very nice solution. Almost like [Henry] Mayhew, you analyse London by wandering and talking to people, just to voice it for themselves. So it becomes a sort of choral history.

In [Ghost Milk] especially there’s a lot to do with lost, forgotten space – space that’s changed. In one part you talk about what this land was: football pitches, a cycle track, a river shared by oarsmen and narrow-boat dwellers...

It was all there, and not only that, everything that’s being promised to be brought was already there and was allowed to decay. You had the little running track that someone built in Hackney Wick in the back of his pub in the Victorian period, enormously successful, at his own expense. There were the Manor Garden Allotments and the sporting facilities that were brought in and provided by patrons and then allowed to decay because they wouldn’t put any money into them. And all the little neighbourhood swimming pools, like where I taught my children to swim, round the corner from me. All of that has gone, to go into the big, grand showy thing.

You talk at one point about ‘wanderers who were not filmed, not challenged by security, trusted to make their own mistakes’, which I thought was a good phrase. And that’s something that perhaps is less tangible than a disappearing sports field.

They created, in Victoria Park, the first non-Royal people’s park, and the Lee Valley served as a wonderful safety valve; walkers, fishers, people who wanted to follow the bird life on the marshes, as well as all forms of industry, all went into this same landscape. It was a release, it was a break. It was so important to have that liminal land,
that edge-land accessible for people to walk to within twenty minutes or half an hour. And once that’s enclosed, then there’s a deeply disturbing psychological effect that takes place.

One of the interesting elements of the book for me was light. When I was doing my project a street photographer spoke about the way these big projects changed – actually changed – the light of London. In his case he did a lot of street photography in the City of London and spoke about this light that came off the Gherkin and how it illuminated parts of London in a way that had not been done before. And you talked, when it comes to Westfield again, you talked about manufactured light and imported light – ‘quotation light’ is what you called it.

In the Shepherd’s Bush Westfield, what you get is an entirely enclosed environment, a space station. And it has this great play of artificial light, so it’s a sort of film set that gives you a bizarre experience of the world, because it has restaurants that are genetically attached to France, Italy, Mexico, wherever – Vietnam. All of them around a single, central court, so that you could sit down and eat and experience, in a sense, all of the places in the world in a kind of Disneyland version, without having to go anywhere. There’s the other light that you mentioned, the kind of bonus light, reflections off the glass buildings. But, then, there’s also the darkness that’s cast by the enormously tall buildings. That certain places that were in a light are now in deep shadow. And the rules and regulations concerning how close you can build have been torn up.

There are other things we can do as well, there must be benefits. The quality of the opposition has provoked people to actually respond, to think ‘What is society? What is local? Do we allow the qualities of the locality and the details of the locality to be set aside for global, corporate entities? Do you realise that the only water that you can get in there is Coca-Cola, the only food you can get is McDonald’s? You know, ‘What are you giving up for that?’

So, the positive thing is it brings about these sort of gestures?

Yeah. And it has stimulated that, you know – it’s stimulated a mass of other activity. Because you’re challenged – do you let this thing roll over, or do you invent, create, recede? And that’s what I’m trying to do.

There’s a lot [in Ghost Milk] about these CGI, imagined environments you see on the hoardings of new buildings. I wanted to talk to you about this, because I felt – being someone, a writer, who rents a room – I get seduced by this ‘ghost milk’. It’s out there and I feel its pressing force, these bright shiny faces on hoardings.

I feel like this is an age thing, you know [laughs]. I talked to several groups of students and they just said ‘I don’t believe you, we’ve seen the footage, we’ve seen –’, and what they’d seen were these computer-generated images where the water’s blue and everything’s gleaming. And they would really prefer to believe that to any kind of written text. And pushing further, you discover that they actually don’t read books at all. So it is another world. I’m still in a world that asks that you do this very difficult thing of following the architecture of a book, and I think it is a process that is slowly disappearing from the world.

And that [process] helps when you encounter these things in the real world?

Yeah, exactly. Because otherwise you get into a very fast-twitch way of reading the world. Your attention span is short and you want something exciting and you want it here. I remember when the [images of the Olympic athletes’] flats first went up, it was beautifully cheated that you were in Hackney and you saw this and there was no Hackney. It was the canal and suddenly you were down to the Gherkin and the Shard and whatever else, this fabulous landscape. But the real thing in between was just eliminated, it was gone. They very subtly often combine a real horizon with a computer-generated foreground. And so the middle ground, which is an interesting place, just disappears.

Ghost Milk is a book of righteous anger, there’s some sadness in it. Do you still wander through London and feel wonder?

Absolutely. It’s an embattled wondering through the particular territory I describe there, but then why not wonder in a different direction, come through places that you haven’t seen for a long time. It doesn’t go – it shifts. London has always been a series of tectonic plates where the particular values move and drift. And the things that were in Hackney when I moved there in 1960 are now out in Loughton or Essex. The city revives. And wonderful new communities have grown up. It’s the most multicultural spot on the face of the earth. I move down the canal and I’m hearing Russian, French, Chinese, Vietnamese, Polish – all the languages of the world. And very little English.

This is an abridged version of Craig Taylor’s conversation with Iain Sinclair. Read the absorbing full-length interview on our website: www.peninsulamag.wordpress.com
A guid-lookin man, a wee bit boolie-backit but he had been tall yince, she could see that. He had on auld grey warkin claes but nae bitts, jist grey socks on his feet. He'll hae taen them off at the back door, she thought, oot a habit. The kindness in his face was whit she wis efter, and she scanned the land and the sky till she couldna see a tree or a hoose or a cloud, she just saw shade and licht, and that wis whit she whit.

‘Och aye, it’s cosy enough, this place,’ Agnes said. ‘Noon, dinna you be blate aboot askin for onythin. If somethin’s no richt, jist let us ken.’

‘That’s awfie kind,’ Elspeth said, ‘but I’m fine, really. Will ye let me pey ye for the eggs?’

Agnes snorted. ‘I will nae.’

‘Weel, dae ye hae time for a cup o tea?’

‘I’ll no say no,’ said Agnes.

In the late efternoon, when Elspeth cam back doon tae the kitchen tae mak hersel mair tea, there wis the mannie again. He wis sittin in the same chair that Agnes had sat in. Elspeth said, ‘Weel, mannie, ye seem richt at hame here. Did you like a cup o tea?’ Daft, but whit else wis she tae say?

‘Oh aye, it’s a braw cup o tea,’ Agnes said. ‘Och aye, it’s cosy enough, this place.’

‘That’s awfie kind,’ Elspeth said, ‘but I’m fine, really. Will ye let me pey ye for the eggs?’

Agnes snorted. ‘I will nae.’

‘Weel, dae ye hae time for a cup o tea?’

‘I’ll no say no,’ said Agnes.

‘Ye dinna bother me,’ she tellt him. ‘I’m fey, ye ken. I’ve aye been fey. Real folk bother me mair than the likes o you.’ And she wis on the pint o saying somethin about when she wis mairrit, whit it had been like afore she walked oot, no inger whit mood her man wis gonnae be in, his drinkin, her fear, the scanner and shame o it – she wis about tae speak aboot aw that, but she stopped hersel.

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the edge o somethin. The sky turnt grey, blue, blae, black. The tractor cut across her view, a Reid spot on broon. Sheep and kye grazed the green parks. She couldna wark fast enough tae capture it aw. By the time she wis done ye wid haurdly ken tractor or beasts had ever been in the paintin. They were mere traces o themsels, the faintest echoes on the canvas. And if whit she’d paintit wis a landscape it wisna real, it wis mair like a place that dreams micht venture intae, a floatin, eerie space athoot form or feature.

The ither bedroom across the landin wis whaur she slept. She aye had the windae open at nicht. The mune keeked in at her through the cloods. There were lichts in the faurawa hooses and syne they went oot and it wis just her and the mune. She fell intae a deep sleep.

But as the dawn wis risin she woke tae a creak on the stair. She sat up. The door swung open, even though there wis nae breeze. ‘Is that you?’ she cried. But naebody cam in.

She got oot o her bed, liftin the poker that she’d brocht up frae the sittin-room. She went tae the door. Naethin. She went tae the ither room. The greyness crept in at the windae and touched the canvases set against the opposite wa. They seemed tae be alive in the shilpit licht, like strange, unkent craiturs.

Back in her bed she cooried doon like a bairn. The uncanniness o the paintins dinna mak her feart. It calmed her that they were there, alive or deid. Somethin had happened, but she dinna ken whit. She felt a new assurance, that nae hairm wid come tae her in this place.

She never saw the mannie again, no in the cottage. She looked for him, but that wis nae use. If ye looked for ghasts they never shawed themsels. But on the first mornin o the new schuil term, as she wis laudin her car, she suddenly got a glisk o him at the road-end. He wis lookin ower the fields tae the sea, but when she shut the boot it wis as if he heard it, for he turnt tae the soond, and it seemed tae her that his haun went up in a kind o greetin. She raised her haun back, and he flickered and fadit awa.

Mibbe it wisna a greetin, she thocht, as she slowed the car at the spot whaur he’d been. Mibbe

it wis a fareweel: ‘I’ve seen ye richt, laus, and noo I’m on ma wya. Jist for a second a knot wis in her thrapple. Syne she pulled haun tae the main road, and drove aff tae teach the bairns hoo tae paint.

‘The Mannie’ was commissioned by BBC Radio Scotland and was first broadcast on 31st December 2010. This is its first appearance in print.
SAN SEBASTIÁN, MOVING ON.

PAUL TUCKER EMBARKS ON A SEVENTY-SEVEN HOUR, FIFTEEN HUNDRED MILE ESCAPE TO SAN SEBASTIÁN ACCOMPANIED BY HIS FRIEND SAM, AN ILL-USED SURF BOARD AND ONE VERY NEATLY PRESSURED GREY BLAZER.

GET A GOOD ONE OF ME AND THE VAN.’ SAM STANDS FACING THE CAMERA AND RAISES HIS RIGHT ARM, RESTING HIS PALM JUST ABOVE THE PASSENGER WINDOW, IN THE SAME CASUAL WAY THAT RICH PEOPLE SHOW OFF PRESTIGE SPORTS CARS: YES, THIS IS MY PORSCHE. BUT YOU SHOULD SEE MY LAMBOGHINI.

He wears stonewashed Levi’s and a white shirt / grey blazer combination that has hung neatly in the back of the van for the past two days, surrounded by mess, awaiting this moment at the roadside in the suburbs of San Sebastián. Sam sets himself, eyes softly narrowing and just the hint of a smile emerging at the corner of his mouth, the kind of hidden-depth gaze that had earned him a lot of money in the Vivienne Westwood days.

Months earlier, I had driven Sam to the back yard of a bakery in Teignmouth to pick up the van. It was no Porsche. For four hundred pounds, Sam had bought a 1994 Nissan Vanette, boxy and scuffed. The rust looked terminal and between the smashed rear lights a crooked ridge ran downward to a void where the bumper should have been. Inside, the van smelt of dust and cigarettes. Stuck to a strip of white painted plywood running down one side were stickers commemorating trips the van itself could never have made: ‘New York. BIG SHOT. The Empire State’; ‘Great Ocean Road’; ‘Bondoon Boots, Fremantle’.

For weeks, Sam worked to shape the Vanette to fit his image for it, probably with that San Sebastian modelling portfolio, late one New Year’s Eve. He had done so as a kind of offering, as if to say, ‘This is what I did, and I know it’s quite ridiculous, but I want you all to see it.’ I wasn’t sure he ever really missed modelling. But the other stuff – Billy Connolly, flipped flip-flops and so on – had been a major part of his life. The rest of us might have found it just as ridiculous as stalking the catwalks of Paris and Milan, but if we said so Sam’s face would slip into a look of bafflement: ‘What’s funny?’

Coming from anyone else, the tales Sam told would have seemed absurd. It was obvious that the catwalk had been a natural calling. His physique – surfer, with the long reach and big hands of a goalkeeper (as if a modelling career wasn’t enough, Sam had also been on Brighton & Hove Albion’s books as a teenager) – was supplemented by always-tanned skin and a rugged confidence that had been broken by the barrage of bafflement: ‘What’s funny?’ – I paddled with what strength I could muster, but was constantly beaten back by the barrage of waves, like a shack’s falling on you,’ he had later said.

Standing on the crest of the low dunes overlooking the beach at La Torche – a sweeping stretch of west Breton shoreline and our first stop after two hours on the road – Sam had pointed at the waves and suddenly yelped, ‘Shack Attack!’, twice, a third time. He bristled and bounced on his feet, like a sack of flour, and the waves, like a shack’s falling on you; he had later told me, miming the collapse of a roof’s inverted ‘V’ with his hands. At the time, I had laughed uncertainly; and Sam had bolted off into the water. ‘While Sam was out to sea – ‘getting shacked’ – I paddled with what strength I could muster, but was constantly beaten back by the barrage of breaking swell travelling in the opposite direction. When I did get far enough out and the waves did come, I tumbled back into the sea before I could
get off my knees. This was normal. Some days, other surfers would check on me as they paddled out. ‘Are you all right?’

‘Yeah!’ I would reply, my overly enthusiastic response and ridiculous thumbs-up baffling them. Afterwards, Sam would always make a point of moaning about the conditions as a consolation for my ineptness.

‘Strong rip out there, mate – I only caught a few waves myself.’

It was always something like that – strange currents, waves that didn’t break properly – some tidal anomaly that struck every time I entered the water. It was fine though, far better that he leave me to take what enjoyment I could from my stay. This was more than waste than his time trying to teach me the good technique that had eluded me in a year of surfing.

After La Torche, we spent the day on the road, struggling with vehicles over-taking suddenly on our left side (the wrong side), and, as the sky darkened, with the full-beam glare of blazing lorry headlights in the van’s mirrors. Increasingly, it seemed, I had to contain mid-winter nerves and mounting exhaustion. At one point I swerved wildly as a man standing on the verge leant into the road, inexplicably flashing a torch at us. ‘Well, you know. This sun’s great.’

‘How did you do, buddy?’

‘Wooof!’

I couldn’t even begin to explain. ‘Yeah, not bad. Thought I’d get out. This sun’s great.’

We arrived in the World Tour resort town of Hossegor after midnight. We drove past timber cabins housing extreme sports boutiques and bars – a purpose-built and overly immaculate townhouses; in the spacious, scrubbed slate townhouses; in the spacious, scrubbed slate beach for his second surf of the day, I thought to placate the exasperated fisherman. ‘NON!’ he replied, eventually planting his rod diagonally in the sand a few yards further along the shoreline, away from me.

The dog was a few feet away. A drooling Labrador, fat and gleeful, barking relentlessly, its entire hindquarters wagging with its tail. Eventually I relented and threw the dribble-soaked section of branch that the Labrador had placed at my feet. Just a short throw, a token effort. This proved to be a mistake, one that I was forced to repeat over and over, the only way to stifle the dog’s sharp, repetitive yelps. In the background I spotted Sam coming ashore. ‘How was it, Sam?’

‘It was fine though; far better that he got a van now,’ Sam had said to me, having driven the Vanette back from Devon that first day. For Sam, despite the fact that he had already been surfing for years, taking possession of a van had served to confirm his place among the most dedicated of surfers, lifers whose choice of vehicle was even dictated by their passion for waves. ‘Ideology’ was the word Sam frequently used, although he saw it as something to embrace, a term devoid of the negative connotations bestowed on it by his university’s English professors.

That was what showing us his portfolio had been about that New Year’s Eve. In Sam’s mind, we had reached a milestone as friends – a ‘proper’ group of friends.

Having negotiated San Sebastián’s complicated one-way system, we eventually left the van in an underground car park. While Sam headed to the beach for his second surf of the day, I thought better of following him and set off to explore the city’s streets in the afternoon sun. It was a city that blended past and present, coastal and urban. Tasteful modern apartment buildings sat inconspicuously alongside turn-of-the-century townhouses; in the spacious, scrubbed slate plazas, marble and granite statues stood majestic in the sunlight.

Two hundred years earlier, in 1813, summer was drawing to a close. British and Portuguese forces led by the Duke of Wellington had taken control of the city after a long struggle against the occupying French army. It was a key point in the Napoleonic Wars; within weeks, the French were being forced back over those same Pyrenean foothills that Sam and I crossed as we drove into Spain.

The unified city’s contrasting influences had been surfaced by the Kursaal Centre, a modern complex’s northern elevation. At one point I was crashed on to the sand immediately below the city’s streets in the afternoon sun. It was a city that blended past and present, coastal and urban. Tasteful modern apartment buildings sat inconspicuously alongside turn-of-the-century townhouses; in the spacious, scrubbed slate plazas, marble and granite statues stood majestic in the sunlight.

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The assault on the city had been tough. Repeated attacks had been unsuccessful, many of Wellington’s men had died, and the rest were injured or exhausted, angry that the final assault had seen cannon fire raining down near where injured comrades still lay. Fuelled by alcohol looted from the shops and houses of the city, the Allied soldiers rampaged, killing or assailing many of the locals. After a week of rioting, most of the city had burned to the ground. Of roughly 4,000 casualties of the assault on San Sebastián, as many as a quarter of them were residents of the city killed after the French had surrendered.

Where my mother lives, in the Hampshire

Peninsula 2012. Visitation

La Torche, a thirty-foot stature of Wellington astride his horse Copenhagen stands on a hilltop as a tribute to one of the great figures of British military history. It says nothing about his refusal to grant the payment of starvation wages to the surviving residents of San Sebastián. The dynamism of the place was no accident: San Sebastián had evermore. The portfolio had temporarily become a contract of Sam’s trust in the rest of us, a ‘proper’ group of friends.

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Where my mother lives, in the Hampshire
lot about the scattered, simmering resentment of outsiders I had begun to tire of. In San Sebastián I was able to wander the streets at random, observing the people who lived there, seeing what they saw without fighting the hidden currents that affected their day-to-day lives.

Meeting back up after Sam’s surf (he was ‘Amped!’ and it was ‘Epic!’), we returned to the van and retreated from the city to the hilltop suburb of Aiete. It was here that Sam would change into shirt and blazer for that carefully posed photograph next to the van, capturing model and outfit at their freshest, before we strolled back into the centre for the evening. Near the City Hall (an elaborate colonial dome and twin sandstone towers testament to its opulent past as the Grand Casino), sedate groups sipped wine on the sea wall as the last of the light faded behind Monte Igueldo, leaving behind its warmth.

Strolling through the Parte Vieja, we emerged into Plaza De La Constitución. Pastel-tinged baroque arches and columns rose on all sides, the most emphatic adorning the former City Hall at the square’s eastern end. In previous centuries, hundreds of people had roared from balconies as tormented bulls charged across the square at waiting toreros. As we sat at the Plaza’s edge, this brutal past was hard to imagine. The crowd’s roar was now replaced by busy chatter, spilt blood this brutal past was hard to imagine. The crowd’s roar was now replaced by busy chatter, spilt blood this brutal past was hard to imagine. The crowd’s roar was now replaced by busy chatter, spilt blood. In previous centuries, hundreds of people had roared from balconies as tormented bulls charged across the square at waiting toreros. As we sat at the Plaza’s edge, this brutal past was hard to imagine. The crowd’s roar was now replaced by busy chatter, spilt blood this brutal past was hard to imagine. The crowd’s roar was now replaced by busy chatter, spilt blood.

Back on the old town’s narrow cobbled streets, the party had livened up. We wandered between bars, stopping to nibble pintxos and drink red wine that was sometimes chilled. ‘I don’t know about that,’ Sam had repeated as he gave each sip a fresh chance. Our night in San Sebastián went as its inspirational embrace of progress, because in September 1813, the future was all San Sebastián had. Sam is concentrating on his next project, a pizza oven. At the moment he operates in a corner of patio outside the same bar where we all spent long nights in that first summer. Dusted in smoke and flour, he plucks cheese, peppers and chorizo from small tubs and tosses them across rough circles of dough. With the same careful determination as always, he thrusts pizza after pizza into 500 degrees of heat. The next step, Sam says, is to buy a trailer and take the pizza business on the road.

A year later, I am ready to leave Cornwall. Falmouth has just played host to the International Sea Shanty Festival, celebrating the songs sung by mariners to make an arduous life at sea more bearable. The headliners were Fisherman’s Friends, a group of ten Cornish fishermen, coastguards and lifeboatmen with an album deal on Universal Records and an opening slot at Glastonbury under the Belts. That Sunday in Falmouth, Fisherman’s Friends’ breakout success seemed justified enough. Their songs were in turn joyous, sombre and beautiful, their between-song banter a blend of Cornish wit and suave stagemanship that reflected two years of touring pedigree. But accompanying all of that were flashes of wistfulness, of rancour even. ‘People ask me how I can sell my house to a banker that were flashes of wistfulness, of rancour even. ‘People ask me how I can sell my house to a banker.

I suppose it might have been my latent English pride finally stirring, but I sensed that the group of elderly Norwegian singers, standing mute and baffled-looking onstage, would be saying something similar as they travelled back home the following day.

It made me think of San Sebastián. On the 31st of August each year, residents of the city unite in a candle-lit vigil to remember those killed by the British and Portuguese. But as important as the city’s commemoration of past tragedy, I had learned, was its inspirational embrace of progress.
HAIL TO PULP! HAIL TO THE GOATSUCKER!

ROY WILKINSON SEEKS OUT THE NIGHT JAR WITH ROCK’S FOREMOST NATURE LOVERS – AND HIS YOUNGER SIBLINGS –

BRITISH SEA POWER

British Sea Power are intermittently successful suppliers of ‘high-church amplified rock music’ – Top Ten albums, a Mercury Prize nomination, the admiration of both David Bowie and the National Maritime Museum. The band are also an odd and unwieldy family firm, fronted by two brothers. Neil Hamilton Wilkinson, singer and bassist, is often mystically mute and likes to walk home after gigs – sixty miles across country. Yan Scott Wilkinson, singer and guitarist, is self-possessed, remote and, like Stalin, given to composing odes to icebergs. The band are also the all-consuming passion of the BSP brethren’s father, Ronald Wilkinson – World War Two veteran and self-instructed expert on alternative rock from The Smiths to the Butthole Surfers. Reborn as octogenarian teenage acolyte, he’s ready to stop strangers in the street and ask them if they’ve bought the album they need – the album by British Sea Power. To complicate things further, the band is managed by third Wilkinson brother, Roy – who is also the author of Do It For Your Mum, a family / rock / forestry memoir recently published by Rough Trade in a limited run of 2,011 copies, from which the following extract is taken.
As 2002 wound around the summer solstice, we were on tour. We were in the woods with two strangely hallucinating creatures. There was Jarvis Cocker and there was the European nightjar. Happily, we would encounter auld Cocker on other occasions in the future. But concert investigations never again take us so close to the nightjar – that enigmatic bird of the twilight hours, a creature also known as churr-owl, gabble ratch and goatsucker. In the fullness of time the now-defunct magazine The Face would ask British Sea Power to select a ‘top ten’. Lemmy chose his ten favourite bass players: 1. John Entwistle, 2. Paul McCartney . . . 8. Corey Parks of Nashville Pussy. At British Sea Power we chose our ten favourite names of British birds. The nightjar only got to number eight. Imagine the other contenders.

1. Cuckoo – Welsh ambassador
2. Great crested grebe – asexuo
3. Blackcap – nettie monger
4. Fulmar – flying milkbottle
5. Peregrine falcon – tiercel gentle
6. Snipe – galloping horseman of Lapland
7. Swift – devil squealer
8. Nightjar – goatsucker
9. Wren – two fingers
10. Redstart – arrogant cat of the east

This was the stuff – being given the leeway to compose ‘Interstellar Overdrive’ could quite happily fill twenty minutes. At one date they came off stage to be confronted with a stern promoter: ‘You were thirty seconds over. Do that again and you’re off the tour.’

With BSP signed to Rough Trade and the band now traversing the land, Dad’s interest in the band began to accelerate. His indie-rock enthusiasms were growing more involved, ever more surprising. As we joined the Pulp tour in 2002, Dad was turning seventy-eight. Our first date with Pulp was a long drive from the band’s Sussex base – up near Inverness in the Scottish Highlands. We broke the long journey north with a stopover in Cumbria. Some of the tour party, including myself and another BSP brother, was laid out with sunburnt hands and dressing rooms were coated in grime and lumpen grafitti. These places sometimes amounted to a latterday manifestation of the world of Victorian child chimney-sweeps. In both cases the workers were locked away from the sun – and surrounded by powders and residues injurious to health and vitality.

As basic as our touring regime could be, we were on a long, long way towards the modern. The historical iniquities were legend. As when Duke Ellington was forbidden to stay at the same hotels he’d played in, subject to the colour bars of 1930s America. Or when the pale, ghostly frame of Hank Williams was jammed into the back of a car on endless drives across the American interior. The prescription drugs and bootleg white lighting failed to block out the pain from his spina bifida. He once walked into the ship’s galley and sobbed that he’d be ‘Gone, with tears on his eyes. He once walked into the ship’s galley and sobbed that he’d be ‘Gone, with tears on his eyes. He once walked into the ship’s galley and sobbed that he’d be ‘Gone, with tears on his eyes. He once walked into the ship’s galley…'

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As background research for our current tour, Dad had also dug out an ancient early Pulp EP from 1987, an artefact from the group’s pre-success years. The tracks included ‘Little Girl (with Blue Eyes)’ and ‘Will to Power’. Dad was surely demonstrating will to power on British Sea Power’s behalf. As he ushered us inside from the tour van, Dad told us how he’d written a letter to U2 asking for support slots. ‘I got an address for their record company from Kendal library,’ he explained. ‘U2 are charlatans, everyone knows that. But it’ll be good exposure.’ As Dad buttoned some teacakes, his conversation turned to Nick Cave. ‘He used to go shooting rabbits as a kid in Australia,’ Dad related matter-of-factly. ‘His father was a teacher.’

As my brothers spent their young lives in service of the contemporary rock experience, it all contrasted sharply with our father’s youth. Dad was born in 1924. As he approached his teenage years, Hitler’s Condor Legion was bombing Guernica. Germany was forming alliances with Japan and Italy. As soon as Dad was old enough, on his eighteenth birthday in 1942, he signed up for World War Two. He joined the RAF Regiment, ready to defend British airfields. He’d initially volunteered to be RAF aircrew, but had been turned down because of imperfect eyesight. Dad had gone to enlist with his friend Lucas, who was accepted by the RAF. Lucas was later killed on a training flight in Wales.

During the war, by degrees, Dad was sent to the Isle of Man, Kent, Calcutta and the warm, on desolate training flight in Wales. He never thought he’d be demobbed until 1947. Dad’s memories of the voyage to India are few but vivid. Flying fish. The endless water disappearing astern. Mugs of ship’s cocoa (apparently a brew of unreplicable loveliness). He once walked into the ship’s galley to find the walls moving in a hallucinogenic shiver. They were covered in pulsating insect life. Dad would recall his years in the Far East with a mixture of detachment and melancholy. But before the pilot spotted the inattentive intruder. The pilot…’

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formed to protect the RAF and its aircraft. Instead he had brought about the destruction of the thing most emblematic of Britain’s war effort. Imagine the unknown factory workers diverting their wages to buy-a-Spitfire campaigns. Picture the endless colanders donated to Lord Beaverbrook’s ‘Savepennies To Spitfires’ programme. An illusory campaign, but that wasn’t the point. . . .

In an instant, Dad had become some antiterrorist in all to this collective effort. Dad had meant well. But he hadn’t done well. I would sometimes muse on Dad’s war. Was his service life some strange performance at the 1996 BRIT Awards. On the 10th February, Edwyn Collins and The KLF’s Bill Drummond launched an illusory wages to buy-a-Spitfire campaigns. Picture the unknown factory workers diverting their wages to buy-a-Spitfire campaigns. Picture the endless colanders donated to Lord Beaverbrook’s ‘Savepennies To Spitfires’ programme. An illusory campaign, but that wasn’t the point. . . .

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OF COURSE THE HEADACHES ARE KILLING ME. Dr. Rothstein had upped my dosage by 200 mgs and the program director approved it, so now I’m at 1400 mgs which makes my stomach nauseous, spins me into dizzy spells and keeps making me lose my focus.

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MIT, ran some stats and discovered that, on a per capita basis, accidental overdoses of prescription drugs have increased 31 per cent in the past five years across the continent. How does that happen? Nobody knows, but now my team is looking to see if there’s a connection. It’s our job to game it out. Perhaps people were getting pills they shouldn’t have, doctors purposely writing the wrong sorts of prescriptions and knocking folks off one by one? Or maybe the identicals are actually in the pill factories? That would be simpler. After all, I open my triple-sealed bottles and wash down what I trust a 200 mg dosage, but I don’t know, do I? It’s not like I can count the milligrams out by hand. Also, we know the hospitals can be hacked. We learned that the hard way.

How bad is the situation? There are 11 million identical twins in the world. Identical twins who have separated from one another, who are integrated into our lives, and who all want us dead. From one angle, 11 million is not a lot. Technically, it’s only about twice the size of Philadelphia and, on a planetary scale, that’s nothing. But when 11 million people are actively trying to kill you and you can’t spot them, when they’re untrackable, untraceable and impossible to ID, well, how do you fight that? But, wait, I haven’t gotten to the best part of what they can do. Originally, we came up with a few theories about the roots of their power. I’m thinking it was some combination of the three most likely ones, strands of chemicals and timing wound together into mutation. But when I say that, they look at me like I’m crazy. The higher-ups don’t like complex explanations. These are people who believe in God, not science. They want to keep it simple. But I take them through it. The strongest postulate is that it was the unintended side effect of a fertility drug. It could also be the influence of some external factor, the invisible energy of a solar flair or the tail of a comet, some force that took the low-grade unconscious connectivity we all share and turned it up on high. The third possibility is that the identicals have merely evolved, taking a giant leap forward in the same way some people are now born without wisdom teeth. Nobody likes to think that is the explanation, that the twins are superior creatures, but from a certain perspective that is the only explanation.

I’m walking a razor’s edge here, weighing Rothstein’s potential to be one of the identicals while simultaneously following his advice. He is a chatty fellow, talks about his kid rowing crew for Georgetown and, all in all, acts pretty normal, but that is easy to fake in these corridors. Ain’t a whole lot of other normal to compare it to. The mood around here is like Berlin in 1945.

They treat me like a loner, but on the outside I actually have lots of friends. But the rest of the Level 4 folk aren’t my sorts. They’re a nasty variety of geek raised on competition or government kids who hate to share information and won’t relax and talk because they’re too worried they’ll disclose some secret. So I lie in my bunk and use visions of sun-freckled Hannah in a red bikini to beat back the ultraviolet phantasms of paranoia, but it is tricky. Every step feels like we’re tripping another wire. This secret record might even be a trap, though I can’t logic out how. Recording the truth, isn’t that a basic human instinct?

So, yes, Rothstein is correct about one thing: the anxiety is profound, and why the fuck wouldn’t it be? So far, every situation I have gamed we have lost, each time the identicals wipe us all out. Same with the work Ned’s done, same with Collins and his team. We’re all playing to every dead end here. Worse, there are signs that the games are already coming to life in the real world, and every time a big event occurs that matches one of our games – a destabilized oil sector, a bad grain report, an unexpected drop of the S&P – we look at one another wondering if one of the scenario strings is being plucked or if it’s simply a coincidence. The worst possibility is that they’re only toying with us, tugging at threads they’ll never play, making us overreact. We know we can overreact. We’ve learned that the hard way.

It’s hard to keep up with all the possibilities. But the worst part of it is, if Taco was right, it’s not even going to be one scenario, it’s going to be all of them. The only reason we learned about it at all was thanks to one dogged security guard in a Laughlin casino. He had his security cameras all locked
on a suspect blackjack dealer because one of the dealer’s players kept taking home pretty healthy pots. The security guard started watching them closely. The player, named Taco, was two hundred pounds heavier than the dealer, with dyed black hair, a full beard and cheesy rose-tinted glasses, but even with all those layers of difference, the security guard sensed some connection. Picked up for questioning, the two wouldn’t reveal their trick. But looking at them seated next to each other, the guard finally caught on to their similarities, despite the serious effort they had obviously gone through to disguise them.

The casino was owned by some old-school guys, heavyweights, and while the dealer never cracked, it only took a few hours of bouts of emotionalism before Taco started talking all about the ESP. His story was quite a story. By the time he was done, the casino thugs were shifting their pants with fear. Someone smart found a phone and called Washington. That’s when all this went into serious play.

Before anyone could arrange to move them, both the identicals – the dealer and Taco – were dead and each of their hearts had stopped. All six of the jail guards were questioned but since the superiors had no way to tell who the poison pill was, the six were all detained and brought to Washington for questioning. They’re still in lock-up now. I felt bad for them when I heard about it but now I see they were kinda the lucky ones, because the identicals – the dealer and Taco – were shitting their pants with fear. Someone had photoshopped pictures to make singles look like identicals and then fed the imagery into the database, swamping us with false leads. Sounded like a good possibility. So much for the databases. Then we put the analyst and his sister into observed detention. I objected to that, I asked why the analyst would have ever brought us the picture if he really was an identical, why he didn’t recognize his own twin and implicate himself? They said maybe he was confused. If that was actually compromised; maybe he was an identical sent to make us believe that it was. They said we have to be careful. Those two are still locked up. We’re still trying to use the databases, although everyone knows they’re useless.

Actually, computer networks have been their simplest weapons. For instance, they took care of the records. Up until twenty-five years ago, the indexes or typewriter provided analog notes on every birth, joyful or tragic, in hospitals all over the world. Then, in our quest to modernize, all that was digitally converted and stored in server farms. The old paper files were boxed, then shredded. Over time, as hospitals and health-care systems were combined for efficiency, myriads of server farms were merged and consolidated then offshored, sent to the cloud, and then merged again until, in the end, all the birth records from the last fifty years sat on a half-dozen server farms. Six sitting ducks. Those crashes caused some major headaches and minor headaches but we didn’t know what it was about or why until Taco explained it.

We’ve all been interrogated about our past. I was an only child, I know that for a fact. I didn’t have some dead twin like Elvis Presley did. My parents never had an only child, I know that for a fact. I didn’t have any photos but my mom had a box of old videos of us all running around at the summer place and so I took those and I fed them to the database. This was literally the day before we figured out the database was compromised.

An analyst brought us a picture he had found in the system of him and his identical. Only problem was, the analyst claimed he didn’t have any brothers, only an older sister. His sister backed him up on this, we called her in Seattle. She is a twin. The superiors had no way to tell who the poison pill was, the six were all detained and brought to Washington for questioning. They’re still in lock-up now. I felt bad for them when I heard about it but now I see they were kinda the lucky ones, because the identicals – the dealer and Taco – were...
me the tells he had noticed, the ones that hinted Taco was cheating. I thought this might show some external sign of telepathic conversation. I wanted his help because casino guards are the very best, they watch faces like nobody watches. But the guard didn’t know, or at least he said he didn’t know. It was halfway through our conversation with him that I realized I might be over-thinking things. With all the identicals’ power, why was Taco fucking around with a poker game? Did they want to be caught? Was the guard in on it?

This is the hard part to admit. What happened next was my fault. First I turned the casino guard over for questioning. I didn’t know what methods they, by which I mean we’, had been using up until then. Civilian’s civil rights were mere corn-cob nostalgia at this point. We already had those other guards from the Laughlin jail locked up, shoved so deep down in the system that we had forgotten about their rights. Most of the bureaucracy had forgotten their existence.

The bad part happened when I was debriefing the greater team about the casino guard. I happened to mention, off hand, it wasn’t even a wholly formed idea. That what identicals share might not be limited merely to thought, maybe they shared feelings too.

That gave the team an idea, not one that I endorsed but one General Phillips took a shine to and then went and tested on the casino guard. The way the psychic connection was a web that could possibly be disrupted by the introduction of extremes, i.e. pain. So Phillips’s men made the casino guard suffer, first at high chemical refinery but the message we received was clear: they were happy to play dirty too.

Problem is, General Phillips took away a different lesson. He now thinks if we get enough identicals together and cause simultaneous pain, we’ll be able to seriously disrupt them. He said the reaction at the reservoir was actually progress. He called it a signal response. He thinks we just need to send a bigger signal. He said forty twins in extreme pain at the same time would, according to his gamers, disrupt them enough so that we could spot them. I reminded him we had only thirty-eight in all, and he was well aware of the moral and legal boundaries to this. Still, he said yes. I wasn’t sure if he believed in the theory that a psychic connection was a web that could possibly be disrupted by the introduction of extremes, i.e. pain. Some had gotten to the reservoir. Whoever did that is what I’m good at. In fact, if they had asked me before they tortured the guard, I could have told them much more. I am a theorist, I game, play out scenarios, for a couple of hours. But that’s too risky for any number of reasons.

Identicals have feelings, they laugh, they lust. They are of every race and religion, if you try and profile them you will discover they’re as diverse as us, because they are just like us, twice as good. We’ve been poring through personality tests, old Myres Briggs formulas, looking for some common root, some question we can ask that will imply a yes or no. Phillips says once we find that root we should just pull everyone in who fits into that category. He says, according to his own team of gamers, this would give him enough mass to warp it. Of course, a lot of them would be innocent. All of them might be innocent. One well-placed identical could hand us exactly the wrong question and then we would be rounding up only the wrong people for Phillips’s experiment, and lots of them. Phillips could be an identical too, only that seems like too obvious an answer. Then again, the obvious answer generally is the right one.

I spend a lot of time trying to predict their behavior. I’ve read every book there is on the subject and hundreds of academic papers. I think back, remembering all the Julys and Augusts I spent with my cousins Ash and Tyler out there at the lake house. We would swim all morning and water ski every afternoon and by the end of the long season we were all twins to date. He said yes when I asked him if he had those other guards from the Laughlin jail locked up, shoved so deep down in the system that they sent her to watch me even then, that Hannah has a twin, that she was really a twin. We set fire to our fire station with all the identicals’ power, why was Taco not watching us?

You find yourself hoping that you have a twin out there who is going to start talking to you, reassuring you, instructing you. Honestly, you lie awake praying for voices in the dark. I pray that Hannah has a twin, that she was really a plant, that they sent her to watch me even then, but I doubt it. I was chosen for this assignment because, though I had done some security work, I was unassociated with any research that the twins might have noticed. I’m good at games, that’s it. So was Hannah, but they didn’t pull her in, just me. I think about having her brought in for informal questioning anyway, if only so that I could see her for a couple of hours. But that’s too risky for any number of reasons.

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Somehow that awakening, that initial discovery, must have also come with some innate suspicion. The identicals knew, they instinctively understood, how essential secrecy was, how they had to keep their telepathy quiet. And then it spread. It wasn’t long before they realized they could communicate with all the other identical twins. I wonder how long before the conversation turned a dark corner?

They tell me not to worry about it. Worry about the future, they say. But the future is pretty easy, I know what’s coming. One of these days when it’s almost all done, when we’re done torturing and executing the wrong people, when society has chewed all the fat off its own bones and the infrastructure has collapsed and people are fighting in the streets over drops of poisoned water and scraps of stale bread, I’m going to be sitting here at this desk, within the bunker walls, way down in the warrens, locked in beyond all the high-level security checkpoints and the metal detectors, and there will be a knock at my office door.

It will only be one of them, though at that point they will only be a few weeks into the time when they can travel around in pairs again. I know how it will go. It will definitely go this way. I do this for a living.

I will put down my pen and look him square in the eye and I will say, ‘So, which one are you, Ash or Tyler?’

But he won’t answer. He’ll just smile. Then he’ll arrest me and he’ll hand me over to General Phillips.
WE WENT TO KAUA'I IN JANUARY. WE DROVE AN OPEN-AIR JEEP ON THE KAUMUALII HIGHWAY. THE AIR SMELLED LIKE PLUMERIA AND FRESH-CUT GRASS. FIELDS OF SUGAR CANE SWAYED IN THE BREEZE.

We stopped on the side of the road and looked at waterfalls, getting our sandals muddy and our toes wet. Roosters and chickens pattered around us, looking for food, clucking and bobbing their heads.

We canoed up the Wailua river. Overgrown brush curved to meet the water’s edge and tall, spindly palm trees perforated the blue sky. I shifted uncomfortably as my life vest cut into my armpits. We slid ashore on a muddy bank strewn with kukui nuts and dead palm fronds. My wet shoes squished over rocks and roots until we reached a waterfall. My brother took off his shirt and waded in. He dipped below the surface and came up, obscured by mist, beneath the fall. I watched him as the water pelted off his back and broke in all directions.

We went to a farmers’ market where a German expat with long hair and brown skin hacked open a coconut with a machete. He placed a straw in the opening for us to drink the milk. The tables were laden with fruits I had never seen before. Jackfruit. Atemoya. Starfruit. Apple bananas. We filled a bag and ate at a picnic table overlooking the water, staining our fingers and mouths with juice.

We drove from one side of the island to the other. We stopped at a small hut on the side of a road and got smoothies made with fresh pineapple. An orange cat with yellow eyes came out of the bamboo and sat at my feet. The sky turned dark. Laughing, Dad fitted the soft-top over the Jeep’s bones as raindrops pinged off the hood.

We went on a boat to see the Napali Coast from the water. Dolphins swam alongside the bow, their grey-blue bodies blurry. A woman said she saw a humpback’s tail flick above the water. The cliffs of the Napali Coast, cavernous and green, came into view. People held cameras to their faces. I went into the galley to get an orange soda from the ice chest and felt dizzy. I lay on my stomach on the warm deck and watched the others scuba dive, their hair slicked to their heads like newborns.

We went to a coffee plantation. Shrubs dotted with red berries grew in perfectly pruned hedgerows. Mom and Dad sampled coffees in shot glasses while we looked around the gift shop. My brother scratched his burnt-red shoulders. My sister got a tie-dye shirt as a souvenir.

We went to the beach. My brother bodysurfed until the sand caused red bumps to blossom on his stomach. Mom and Dad walked back and forth, the water washing up against their bare feet, cutting them off at the ankles. My sister wrote messages in the sand: Hello. I love you. Goodbye. I lay on a towel with my eyes closed, listening to the surf until it became fuzzy and far-off, like I was hearing it through a conch shell.

My sister and I walked to the nearest ABC store where I bought a tin of coconut macadamia cigars. We smoked them with our feet buried in the cool sand, the shrinking sun setting the red in my sister’s hair aflame. An old man wearing a tank top jogged by. A woman breaststroked in the gentle waves.

We went home.
ANDERSON SAID, ‘DO YOU WANT TO GET OUT AND WALK?’

DAVID LOOKED THROUGH THE WINDSCREEN AT THE MISERABLE STREET, THEN GLANCED AT ANDERSON TO SEE IF HE WAS SERIOUS.

‘Stretch your legs. Soak up the atmosphere,’ Anderson said. He had his window open a crack to let some of the smoke from his cigarette escape.

‘Well, I don’t know . . .’ David said. A gallon or two of rain landed on the car roof. Mini-storms of plastic and paper rubbish swirled desolately in the road. Some of that broken glass he’d always associated with Glasgow was in the gutter. There weren’t many people in evidence, but he felt them behind which a wide black stain spread across the stone. Further along the street was a modern high-rise block, already looking tired and grimy. There was graffiti sprayed on the lower walls, and many of the balconies were stacked with what looked like broken furniture, discarded cookers, old prams. Others were completely empty. David couldn’t decide which ones he found more dispiriting. The tower seemed to be at the centre of a maze of streets going to nowhere, a mixture of run-down old buildings, patches of wasteland and isolated plantings of new housing, entirely devoid of beauty, charm or even the doubtful character of the old tenements. There was a phone box with the last of its panes smashed, an up-ended concrete litter bin and, fifty yards away, a graffiti-covered bus shelter occupied by a group of teenagers smoking cigarettes and kicking a lemonade bottle around. Apart from Anderson’s Cortina, which David thought rather too conspicuously red although Anderson didn’t seem that bothered, there were hardly any cars parked on the streets and a couple of those looked as if they’d died against the kerb.

‘An hour not long enough?’ Anderson said. ‘Take longer if you want.’

‘I don’t know if I could find my way out,’ David said. ‘Back, I mean.’

David thought he knew roughly which direction would lead him to the depressing row of shops they’d left twenty minutes before, behind which was the solicitor’s office, but he couldn’t be sure. Down on the main road where the shops were it wasn’t too bad, there were crowds of women shopping, traffic, laughter, people going about their business, but up here he felt like Custer entering Indian territory. No, not Custer, he’d been confident, sure of himself, what they called gallus around here. Some Eastern greenhorn cut off from the world, that’s what he felt like. And the last thing he wanted to do was head in the wrong direction, deeper into the badlands of Granthill, on his own. Supposing he had to admit he was lost, ask for help? Who would he ask?

One of the boys at the bus shelter kicked the lemonade bottle against the foot of a lamp post and smashed it, to a round of jeers from his friends. Another boy jumped up and grabbed the edge of the roof. He hung there, bouncing his weight up and down. Another boy joined him. The whole shelter bounced with them.

‘Who do you think they are, son?’ Anderson said in a relaxed manner. ‘The Granthill Toi or the Granthill Cumbie?’

‘Sorry?’ David said.

‘Or maybe they’re just a bunch of wee shites with nothing to do. Any ideas?’

This time David said nothing. There didn’t seem any point.

‘Actually, that’s what they are. Wee shites. Their big brothers are in the gangs. I should feel sorry for them but I don’t. I want to kick their arses.’

They watched the boys for half a minute. They looked the boys for half a minute.

‘Which foot do you kick with, son?’

‘I beg your pardon?’ Was this related to the previous comment, David wondered.

‘You’re not a left-footer, are you? What school did you go to?’

Before David could answer there was a loud crack from over where the boys were. The two bouncers dropped to the ground. The shelter roof now sagged in the middle. The boys gave their handiwork a moment’s glance, then began to walk away. They seemed untroubled by life, untouched by it. David thought he was momentarily envious of them. ‘Wee shites,’ Anderson said. ‘Where was I? Oh aye, what’s your team? Are you a Celtic or Rangers man?’

‘I don’t really follow football,’ David said.

‘ Anderson shook his head in despair and pushed the end of his fag out of the window.
‘No, I didn’t think so. They’ve really landed you in it here, son, haven’t they? From a great height.’

‘Well, no. The local association selected me. I wasn’t just foisted upon them.’

‘Aye, right. Look, don’t take this personally. I can see you’re smart. I can see you’ll make somebody a very good MP. But no here. You know it, I know it, we all know it. You’ve nae chance of winning this seat. Absolutely nae chance. But we have to go through the motions. I just think when they pushed you oot the hairyplane they might have given you a parachute.’

This extract from an early draft of And the Land Lay Still (Penguin, 2011) represents an episode absent from the final, published version of that novel. This is its first appearance in print. Another exclusive piece, also taken from early drafts of And the Land Lay Still, is featured on our website: www.peninsulamag.wordpress.com
The Reverend Simon Cade is the Church of England Team Rector for Redruth. During the nineteenth century, Redruth’s fortunes echoed the boom and bust of the Cornish tin industry. Nowadays, Redruth – along with neighbouring Camborne and Pool – contains areas that are among the most deprived in Western Europe. The last tin mine closed in 1998. As Team Rector, Mr Cade oversees the running of five churches in and around the town. I sat down with Mr Cade in his study at home. Shelves lining the walls were filled with philosophical and theological texts; the work of Albert Camus sat alongside the Oxford Dictionary of World Religion. He spoke of his life work in Redruth eloquently, with great passion and, at times, with a mischievous glint in his eyes betraying an independent streak that characterises his work for the Church. That evening he was due to attend a charity performance by one of the parish’s youth groups. ‘Tragically, it’s at the Conservative club in Camborne,’ he told me. ‘Sometimes I find myself at some quite strange places!’

Most of the people I meet in the course of a day aren’t part of the life of the Church, in the sense that they’re not regularly there on a Sunday morning. If I’m doing a funeral, the chances are it won’t be for somebody who’s a member of the congregation, so it’s a case of starting from scratch to try and do something meaningful for them. Likewise, most of the people who are getting baptised or married won’t be part of the congregation. So, those people who I’m spending time with are just members of the community, they could be anybody.

The first parish that I worked in was in central London, in Chelsea, and we owned quite a lot of property. That takes quite a lot of running because of very demanding tenants and all the rest of it. My job was to look after buildings. I was a property agent, really. I restored a church and I renegotiated a lease, which took about a year, working with the lawyers. It was just hard-nosed business stuff. And that’s always been the case, I think. It all seems very modern, that the Church should be involved in business and have trading companies and trustee charities and all that sort of stuff, but it’s not at all. In a way, I’m doing less of that stuff now than I was twenty years ago.

There are far fewer people in church now than there were twenty years ago – but even twenty or thirty or forty years ago, the Church was a fairly small proportion of the population. The Church of England marries, buries and baptises anybody. We’re not a congregational Church – we’re there for the congregation, we’re there for everybody. There’s a famous misquote – it’s not true, but it’s a good line. A previous Archbishop of Canterbury called Archishop Temple is supposed to have said that the Church of England is the only organisation that exists for the benefit of those that are not its members, which is a brilliant quote, but (a) he didn’t say it and (b) when you think about it, it’s not true, because there are all sorts of organisations which exist for the benefit of others.

The difference is that now the people I come into contact with know almost nothing about the Church and have either no expectations or completely weird expectations of what the Church will offer them, whereas twenty years ago they probably had a bit of knowledge. They were more likely to have gone to Sunday School or lapsed from Church than they are now. Now, I can talk to people and basically what they’ll know about the Church is they’ll have got from the vicar on EastEnders or something like that.

But I’d rather the first thing they heard about the Church was what I tell them, rather than some dodgy thing they’ve half-remembered, so I don’t mind that. Actually, also, if they have had experience of the Church, those experiences might have been quite negative. I’d much rather they’d had no experience of the Church whatsoever than a bad experience. But the Church of England does, and so a lot of time would always have been spent with people who weren’t directly members of the Church.

The hardest thing is when somebody is absolutely sure that they know what’s right about the Church, which tends to limit what they can do. If they come completely blank, then I can make something that’s much more useful for them. There was a funeral last week. She loved Guns N’ Roses and played Battle Pirates on Facebook. So the fact that they had no Christian Church baggage meant that we could have Guns N’ Roses in church, coming in and going out and I could talk about Battle Pirates. I could make the funeral about her, rather than the baggage that they thought the funeral should be
about because ‘this is what the Church is like’. So we didn’t have to have ‘The Lord is My Shepherd’ and we didn’t have to have the organist playing Vivaldi or something as she came in.

Before I was here, I was in Basingstoke. I was there seven years. It was a lovely job. I didn’t have a huge amount of responsibility. The things they’d asked me to go there to do, I’d got done quite quickly, and the Bishop said to me, ‘Look, you need to do something more challenging or you’ll get bored and misbehave’, and that was probably right – he didn’t put it quite like that, but that’s what he meant.

So the diocese said, ‘We want you to look at these [churches].’ There was one parish where the previous vicar had gone a bit mad and, although it was a small parish with one church, and again fairly quiet, there was a lot of dysfunction and brokenness within the Church community which had really affected and fallen apart a bit. I could see why he had gone mad and I would have gone mad as well. I always remember, it was a very Anglo-Catholic, almost Roman Catholic church. As soon as you went through the door, there was a big poster which said: ‘I could see a thing about anti-abortion. I can’t remember what it said, but it had something about ‘praying for the children who’ve never had a chance for life’. And I thought, ‘God, imagine if you’d had an abortion and children who’ve never had a chance for life’, and I thought, ‘Well, you can do something with that sort of energy.’ And the other thing was that somebody had worked so hard to get it off. You know, they hadn’t just painted it over, they’d worked really hard to try and heal the door. I thought these two things together, that energy and anger in a broken community was really interesting and challenging – I suppose there’s a kind of a Messiah complex going on there – but also that somebody loved the church, they obviously cared for it so much. And I thought, ‘I can work with that as well.’

There’s not a lot of history to the thing, you see, down here; there’s a bit, not a lot. I tend to just go and sort of sit with it. The kids that used to sit outside the church drinking and smoking and swearing, getting moved on by the police, and the police coming back again, I just used to go and sit with them, which is the best way to get rid of them. Because if they think you’re going to go and talk about Jesus, they’ll clear off. Shouting at them is no good, because then it just turns into a shouting match and ten teenagers can always shout louder than anybody else, so they’ll win that. But if you go and sit with them then they don’t know what to do. Mostly they just talked. I knew I was really helping them when they offered me Special Brew. When you get included in that kind of thing, then you’re there!

When I came here I couldn’t find the church at first, because you can’t in Redruth – it’s just impossible to find. I went in the newsagents. She had her wedding booked and she knew where it was, so she walked round the corner with me and pointed it out. On the door someone had painted ‘FUCK OFF’, right across the door, and then somebody else had come along and worked so hard at getting the paint off – but you could still see it, you could just see the imprint of it.

There were two things about it really: one was that it seemed like a genuine, edgy place where someone was so cross with the Church that they could do that and I thought, ‘Well, you can do something with that sort of energy.’ And the other thing was that somebody had worked so hard to get it off. You know, they hadn’t just painted it over, they’d worked really hard to try and heal the door. I thought these two things together, that energy and anger in a broken community was really interesting and challenging – I suppose there’s a kind of a Messiah complex going on there – but also that somebody loved the church, they obviously cared for it so much. And I thought, ‘I can work with that as well.’

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The most important thing I learned – ever, probably – as a priest, was that there’s always much more than you can do in any day. And some of the things you can’t do will be things that you really must do. So you have to work out a way of being able to cope, knowing that there’s stuff that you can’t do. And that’s the most important lesson I think I’ve learned, because for me, I’d either be completely overwhelmed with guilt or I would be trying to work so hard, neurotically, that I would burn out and it would just be . . . I would just kill myself. Or, I think what some people do, what I might be in danger of doing, is you kind of push it away, you become hardened to it and you sort of become somehow less than human.

At a communion service, you break the bread and pour some wine into the chalice and then you show it to the people like a Messiah, ‘This is the bread of life’ and ‘This is the cup of my blood’. So the diocese said, ‘We want you to look at these.”

There’s not normally a service on Easter Eve, because there’s no liturgy for it, there are no words. Christ’s in the grave – you can’t pray to him there. There’s no energy, there’s a sense of ‘We’re the people who got left behind.’ Theologically, you’d say that the mines closing had been like Good Friday. In a way, I suppose you had Palm Sunday. Palm Sunday is the great celebration; they’re waving the palms and they think it’s a new king and they’re all singing coronation songs and it’s very exciting. And, in a way, that’s the history of Redruth, when it’s been grand and it’s been exciting and popular, that’s all in the past. Then you have Good Friday where there’s still an energy about it and a death, and then you have Easter Saturday.

There’s not normally a service on Easter Eve, because there’s no liturgy for it, there are no words. Christ’s in the grave – you can’t pray to him there. He hasn’t risen, there’s nothing. And, in a way, that’s where Redruth is. There’s no energy, there’s a sense of ‘We were once great, but we’re past that.’ It’s not Good Friday any more. And if that’s true, that picture of Redruth being an Easter Eve place, then it’s the Church of South Africa and Australia and all sorts of places, so part of what they lost is people. They’ve got a sense of ‘We’re the people who got left behind.’

Visitation is a frightening thing. It’s not without ambiguities. The thing that people like me have to remember is that you have to respect the corpse. Your response, in the tomb, you know, she’s in tears. She doesn’t recognise what’s going on. Visitation is a frightening thing. It’s not without ambiguities. The thing that people like me have to remember is that you have to respect the corpse, you have to respect the body. There’s no point in just saying to people, ‘Look, it’s gone. Knock down the engine house, knock down the old stuff, we’ll just build something new and shiny.’ You’ve got to respect what’s gone, what’s lost.
Andy Hocking is well known in Falmouth: he has a trademark grin that splits his face into two segments, mischievous, twinkling dark eyes, and time for a joke with anyone. He is the town’s Beat Manager, a role he talks about with passion. His job is to keep the community, in all its various sects, harmonious. His police force covers the town Falmouth, Penryn and a number of smaller villages and hamlets that stretch westwards and southwards, spreading the force’s responsibility over a significant number of square miles. We sit in a small, windowless interview room with just two chairs and a table. A couple of framed pictures, their subjects indiscernible from a brief glance, are mounted on the walls, the artwork of local children. ‘This is the nice room, you know. Here we’ve got the pretence of niceness on the walls.’ Andy wears a black, base-layer police uniform, and talks with me for an hour, answering every question with ease and sincerity, his hands gesturing openness as he bares his palms and spreads his fingers wide, and occasionally twists a golden wedding ring when he pauses to think.

The lesson I learnt on my very first day is that sometimes you’ve got to hit somebody to stop them hurting you, and you’ve got to hit them hard. I did my probation at Redruth – I’d just met my tutor constable for the very first time. He said, ‘Do you know Redruth?’ I said, ‘No, I’ve never really had a look around the area.’ He said, ‘You don’t look around Redruth! Jump in the car, we’ll have a drive around.’ We got thirty yards away from the police station, and there’s a pub called the Rose Cottage, and there’s a huge fight with lots of gypsies – there’s a big gypsy community in the Redruth–Camborne area. He said, ‘Stay where you are. I’ll get out.’ He’s trying to separate these men – on his own – and I think, ‘Oh god, he’s going to get his head kicked in. I’m going to get out and give him a hand.’ I’d not got any kit issued at that point, nothing. I get out the car and BANG! My nose was just smashed to smithereens. The guy had been wearing a signet ring – a big gold, signet ring. And it split my head, split the bone just there, and oooooohhh, I’ve never had such a headache in all my life. I went over backwards and smashed my head on the back of a kerbstone, so I was unconscious from there. The tutor constable had managed to call backup, so the cavalry arrived, but it was too late by then, I was for the hospital. I had a couple of operations and my nose is now made of stuff that’s not bone. You don’t get a nose like this naturally! I went home, and my wife, she says, ‘It’s going to be like that every day, isn’t it?’ And I said, ‘Don’t know! Don’t know, love!’ It didn’t put me off.

I’ve now been a policeman for twenty years. I’ve got lots of awards for it, car driver for nine years, and I was the kind of policeman that would have arrested my granny just to get another tick in the box. I was very keen on arresting people. I’ve got a lot of awards for it, I’ve got a lot of awards for it. There are three different streams of policing. You’ve got crime investigation, which is CID and CIT – the Criminal Investigation Department and the Criminal Investigation Team. so that’s uniformed officers actually investigating crime alongside the CID. You’ve got a response stream – they’re the guys who drive around with the blue lights flashing everywhere, and they respond to what we would refer to as prompts or immediates. They go, they take initial details, then if it’s a crime they hand details over to the Criminal Investigation Team, who investigate. The third stream, which I work in now, is Community and Neighbourhood. We deal with long-term, problem-solving issues, stuff that just . . . doesn’t go away, really. It’s the real nitty-gritty of policing. And in my stream, the frustration of policing, but also the great joy of policing, is that you develop relationships with people. Sometimes where a person has been a pest, or a problem for ten years, and they’re never going to stop being a pest, you can develop a relationship with them where you can manage them. As far as a typical day goes, there’s no such thing. I can turn up at 7 o’clock in the morning for work, and the day is literally a blank canvas. We try to be proactive, but in the main we are reactive to what’s actually happened, in the previous week, the previous day, even in the previous hour. I walk out of the door, and the day happens, in front of me. It could be wonderful, it could be horrifying; it could be depressing. Over the years, I’ve actually grown used to not knowing what’s going to happen, and being able to react. Sometimes, you’re thinking,
'Good god – what am I going to do? I've never encountered this before, what do I do? And you make it up as you go along – within the confines of law, legislation, what actually feels right . . . you make it up.

Last year, I was on the Prince of Wales pier, and one of the operators approached me and said, 'One of my skippers on my boat, I believe, is drunk!' and he's actually got passengers, forty something passengers, on the passenger boat. He's drunk! Driving it! And I'm thinking, 'Have I got the power to arrest the man when he comes back in?'

I've never dealt with legislation dealing with boats. It turned out that yes, I did have power of arrest. He's come back alongside the quay, and he's said to me, 'I can't go into the bag to get my bag and get back in.' So I said, 'Yes, go back to the boat, but come immediately back.'

And he's gone back to the ferry and taken it away again! As he's driving away – this thing's huge – I think he thought better of it, and he turned and put it back on the moorings, then came back in and said, 'Am I in trouble?' 'Well,' I said, 'you were in trouble before, but you certainly are now.'

I do police visits daily. The term is such a broad brush for what goes on. You can go in and see someone's door through, with a piece of paper called a warrant, saying, 'I've come to visit you!' Or you could go and drink tea with Mrs Smith down the road and ask her how she's been since her husband died last week, because she's worried about security within the house. Probably the worst visit that you would ever have to go and perform is to tell somebody that a loved one has passed away; they're some bloody ugly policeman coming into their house to fill out paperwork. You're sat there, asking them questions, and they're grieving, but you've got to fill out this paperwork, to send on to the coroner, to the mortician, over at the hospital. And so for them to be able to send you a card, a couple of weeks later, to say, 'Thank you for the way that . . .' And you know, then, that you've dealt with them fairly. Or to deal with somebody's wife, the wife of someone who's passed away: those people are absolutely traumatised because a loved one has died, and they're some bloody ugly policeman coming into their house to fill out paperwork.

I've seen it done well, and I've seen it done badly. I've seen it done badly in Hull's Lane! So I went to Hull's Lane, and I looked at it again yesterday and I had a little tear in my eye. And I thought, 'Oh, poor dear! You don't have to say thank you.'

The beat that I actually have at present is the 'sharp' bit of Falmouth. If you imagine drawing a line between the Prince of Wales pier, the unspoiled beach, and then drawing a big triangle going up to Pendennis Point, everything within that triangle is mine, is my beat. I would argue that my beat is probably the most diverse in the whole Force area. I've got a town centre; I've got a dockyard; I've got a student quarter up in the terrace areas; I've got high quality, million-pound housing out on the seaboard; hotels, beaches, part of a university complex . . . to put it all in one beat, it's unusual. Mind you need to have the public working with you to manage it. You can't do it on your own.

There are 35,000 people in Falmouth and Penryn combined. It goes up a bit in the summer, but then you get your student population moving away, so it levels quite nicely. You don't get those peaks and troughs that you would get at Newquay. Falmouth's a very stable sort of town. The visitors can believe we've got policemen walking around the town centre. They find that hugely reassuring – and the number of times people say, 'Don't get you where I come from!' And you say, 'Where are you from?' It could be Norfolk, it could be Staffordshire . . . they just don't see policemen walking around their town centres. And I think it's really good that they feel that they can come up and say that to us.

There's some incredibly diverse. It's got a thin veneer of middle-class respectability, it's got some very nice parts, but it's got a lovely underbelly of reality. And it's a real town. It's a great, undiscovered secret – you get policemen who are posted here, who didn't want to be posted here, and after a couple of months they've said, 'It's really quite nice here, actually.' And Penryn has changed dramatically in recent years because of the uni. It used to be very insular. Do you know where the little yellow house – the craft shop – was? That was used to be a fruit and veg shop, called the Orange Pipp, all those years ago. I used to go in there for a cup of tea, every day. The lady who owned it came up to me one day, and she was talking about going shopping, and I said to her, 'Where else do you go?' She said, 'What do you mean, "go"?' I said, 'Where else do you go?' She said, 'I don't go anywhere.' 'Well,' I said, 'ever?' She went, 'I've never been outside of Cornwall, ever.' She'd never left Cornwall in her life. And she was an elderly lady. It makes you realise how parochial Cornwall was. Yes, the uni has had a huge impact on Falmouth and Penryn. Huge. Falmouth's always been a little bit more cosmopolitan, but Penryn wasn't. It was very inward-looking.

The student population are just fantastic in the main. I don't even mind about the drinking late-night culture, as long as they're safe – it actually adds to the economy of the town. Every year I meet with certain student groups, and the international students that have come, and I just think how brave they are, to come from other parts of the world, to come here . . . I couldn't do it! I couldn't step on to a plane in Mumbai, or somewhere like that, and go to a university here . . . I'd just be so scared! But they come from the world over, don't they? The students have changed the town, mind you. Marlborough Road is a lovely road – used to be aspirational. People aspired to live there. Now you've got people wanting to escape. That's what's happening to Marlborough Road, it's what's happening to Budock Terrace, Norfolk Road, Tralænway Road . . . all the terraced areas, at the back, that the students have moved into. I've actually heard it on more than one occasion from students: 'It's our area, why would people complain about student parties and noise when it's ours?' In other words, why are these people, residents who've lived there for thirty, forty years, complaining about our behaviour when it's our area, anyway?

The only thing that really annoys me is the student graffiti. That's the one bad thing about the students coming. The other day – it really gets to me because at the time I didn't have my warrant card with me, which was the problem – I was walking through the town, and a member of the public, who's recognised me without my uniform on, has said, 'Those bloody lads! They're doing graffiti in Hull's Lane!' So I walk to Hull's Lane, and true enough, there were two lads doing it in Hull's Lane, and I looked at it again yesterday and I had a little tear in my eye. And I thought, 'Oh, poor dear! You don't have to say thank you.'

The beat that I actually have at present is the 'sharp' bit of Falmouth. If you imagine drawing a line between the Prince of Wales pier, the unspoiled beach, and then drawing a big triangle going up to Pendennis Point, everything within that triangle is mine, is my beat. I would argue that my beat is probably the most diverse in the whole Force area. I've got a town centre; I've got a dockyard; I've got a student quarter up in the terrace areas; I've got high quality, million-pound housing out on the seaboard; hotels, beaches, part of a university complex . . . to put it all in one beat, it's unusual. Mind you need to have the public working with you to manage it. You can't do it on your own.

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WHEN THE ROOKS COME

My angel’s moulting her feathers lie on the ground like used up snow without them she’s shrunk to the size of a pin. Where are the bees of summer I ask this shrunken creature where are their little striped bodies hiding? Are they dreaming the day away dancing the polka foxtrot maybe even the pavane kicking their legs in front of them in a sprightly way? Did you know they sleep on their backs? Dear friends are you also sleepdreaming? remembering your ancestors running through woods with their spears held in front of them? or are you listening to your daughter buzzing in textspeak twitterspeak lovespeak grumbling like snowdrops forcing their way up through rain-sodden ground? She’s becoming a bee and you must too or she’ll displace you as her suitors sing songs of the world hive. No one should have to answer these or any other questions there’s too much angst in the air. When the rooks come home to roost in those green-spark moments before evening their language is the language of stars that have had a hard day mygawdtoomuchgoingontoomanywordsouttheretwittering facebookingsutubingcomplainingtogoogletwitterspeaklovespeakgrumblinglikersnowdropsforcingtheirwayupthroughrain-soddenground

[First published in Orbis magazine, no. 156.]

ELIJAH HERE

I thought it’d be like Elijah a whirlwind raising her to heaven before moths and thieves broke into our special world didn’t see how life was really going even when nightmare drove me into her room and I heard the click of a trigger half-pulled back thought I was headed for the departure lounge but it was my mother who flew that night up to the magpie bridge and the Milky Way

SHE COMES

EliCaroline Carver
ONE OF MY CHARISMATIC BIRDS

JEREMY MYNOTT SEARCHES FOR A RARE VISITATION IN THE FLANNAN ISLES

LEACH’S PETREL: IS ONE OF MY ‘CHARISMATIC’ BIRDS. IT IS IN TRUTH A RATHER DRAB LITTLE THING: IT’S ABOUT THE SIZE OF A SWALLOW AND A SORT OF SOOTY BROWN IN COLOUR, THE ONLY MARKINGS BEING A PALE BAND ON THE UPPER WING AND A NARROW WHITE RUMP. YOU WOULDN’T RUSH TO SEE ONE JUST FOR ITS PLUMAGE. ITS ATTRACTION AND MYSTIQUE HAVE QUITE ANOTHER SOURCE.

There are only four sites in the British Isles where Leach’s petrels regularly breed, all of them isolated, remote and uninhabited islands in the North Atlantic, beyond even the Outer Hebrides: St Kilda, the Flannan Isles, North Rona and Sula Sgeir. The species is actually quite numerous, but it remains very hard to encounter (and so is effectively ‘rare’), partly because of the extreme inaccessibility of these wild places and partly because of its elusive nocturnal habits.

The Leach’s is a truly pelagic species and uses the islands only for breeding purposes. Even then it feeds way out in the open ocean all day, up to one hundred miles from its nesting site, returning only late at night, and just to make things more difficult, the nesting burrows are usually on the side of precipitous rocky slopes. So even if you brave the long and uncomfortable journey by small boat to one of these remote locations you still won’t see a Leach’s unless you venture out in the wee hours on to just the right cliff ledge and cling there hopefully in the dark in whatever weather conditions happen to obtain (the odds being heavily in favour of strong winds and rain).

But then your reward may be great. If you are lucky, the returning birds will mill around you on all sides, exchanging an extraordinary range of weird cries with their mates in the nest burrows to guide them home in the dark to just the right hole. The general effect is a hystericall banshee wailing. I had only ever heard these island spirits on tape but they sounded quite ‘other’, even in the reassuring surroundings of my own living room. I wanted to hear the real thing, and at the right time and place.

I had already tried once before in St Kilda, but the weather was just too stormy to let us stay overnight; so back we sailed again through mountainous seas, leaving somewhere in our wake about fifteen thousand Leach’s petrels, unseen and unheard. The next year I determined to try the Flannan Isles instead, where I could be put off for the night in my tent and be right on hand for the 2.00 a.m. performance, if there was one.

The Flannans are just as remote as St Kilda but much less visited and I would hope to have the islands to myself. Moreover, there was an intriguing unsolved mystery there. The Flannans have never been properly inhabited in human memory but there was a manned light there once. In December 1900, after a violent storm, it was noticed by a passing vessel that the Flannan light was dark. A relief boat was duly dispatched to investigate but on arrival the crew could find no sign of the three keepers. A meal was still on the table, the last logbook entry had been neatly completed, and everything seemed to be in working order; but no trace of the men was ever found, then or later.

This Marie Celeste-type story provoked much speculation at the time and one long narrative poem, which ended with the portentous lines:

‘We seemed to stand for an endless while,
Though still no word was said,
Three men alive on Flannan Isle
Who thought on three men dead.’

(Wilfrid Wilson Gibson, ‘Flannan Isle’, 1910)

So even if I miss out on the Leach’s again, there are perhaps other spirits to look for. I am duly landed (and abandoned, since the skipper of our small boat has decided to retreat to the safety of the Isle of Harris). It’s raining hard and I set up my small tent to wait and to listen. It stays light until nearly midnight this far north and west and there is a surprising amount to hear: the resident raven croaks, a deep thudding bass; two whimbrels go past, wittering in flight; then in the dusk a cuckoo calls close by – goodness, Wordsworth was right when he spoke of ‘the cuckoo-bird / Breaking the silence of the seas’ / Among the farthest Hebrides’.

Even after dark the noise from birds goes on: the oystercatchers break into a nervy piping every so often; there are occasional grunts from puffins and harsh cries from the gull roosts; and once I hear the clear whistling calls of some golden plovers. So even if I miss out on the Leach’s, there are perhaps other spirits to look for.

WITCHELING 2

At 1.45 a.m. I put on my boots and rainwear and unzip the tent flap. Immediately I hear a strange, muffled call nearby, in the bog between a chuckle and a gurgle. Can it possibly be . . . ? As soon as I get outside I hear it again more clearly, and then several more, and then a longer sequence of calls in a wild, chattering rhythm, and then the whole devil’s chorus.

I walk in what seems to be the direction of these screaming spirits, just the other side of the lighthouse; and suddenly there they all are, whirling around me in their bat-veering, butterfly-floating flight, even brushing me with their wings, several hundred birds, shrieking like Gaelic goblins on acid, as someone put it – the full Leach’s experience. Each time the beam from the great light comes round I see them briefly illuminated in the air, as if blown in like leaves, and pitching down right by my feet to enter their nesting-holes.

Magic. I stay with them for an hour or so and decide against going to look for the related species, storm petrels, which are also nocturnal and are likely to be nesting in the tumbledown walls of the old cleits at the other end of the island. Storm petrels have class but not charisma, and I don’t want an anticlimax. By about 3.30 a.m. the
colony is falling silent. I return to my tent, with light already appearing in the east, and I suddenly realise how wet I’ve got in the rain. I sleep.

In the morning light they are gone, leaving me wondering if it was all just a marvellous dream. As another and better poet put it (Shakespeare in The Tempest):

> Be not afeard: the isle is full of noises, Sounds and sweet airs, that give delight, and hurt not. Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments Will hum about mine ears, and sometimes voices That if I then had waked after a long sleep Will make me sleep again

I had seen Leach’s a few times before, storm-tossed birds flicking and gliding low over the waves off the East Anglian coast, rare and displaced vagrants driven close inshore by rough weather. But to encounter the Leach’s on the Flannans at two in the morning was to feel as though I was experiencing them very much in their place and at their time. They define these wild landscapes and are in turn defined by them. The Leach’s is the genius loci here.

The above is an excerpt from Birdscapes: birds in our imagination and experience (Princeton University Press, 2009, now in paperback)
I finished my job in mid-September 2011. But before leaving London for good, there was a trip I needed to take. I headed west on a Central line tube train, towards the small, north-westerly piece of the London borough jigsaw known as South Ruislip. In South Ruislip, a mock Tudor, semi-detached house with a black-and-white striped door stood on a suburban street. I’d last seen it twenty years ago, the day my parents followed a removal van out of London and into Hertfordshire.

But now I was hurrying towards it again. The tube cleared Zone 1, exhaled out into the open air behind them, branded with a postcode, NW10. Platform, while blue warehouses hunkered down behind them, branded with a postcode, NW10. Trees started to thicken a little around Hanger Lane: the first indication that we were making an escape, following a route that thousands of Londoners took seventy-five years ago in search of a place called Metroland.

Metroland was ‘a country with elastic borders rising and skyscrapers. whose very presence denoted the absence of high-rises and skyscrapers. I saw it only in the stretch of uninterrupted sky, still valid to the flocks of Londoners moving in. It seemed a common theme for so many fringe residential area after another rose up in London’s north-west, houses barely discernible underneath their caps of uniform brown. Metroland grew houses and streets on its fields and meadows; it also raised my parents. Greenford was where my father was born and lived out his youth, while my mother grew up in Watford, Metroland’s north-western tip. They met, married and settled in South Ruislip until 1990, when they tried to escape. Mum and Dad hovered in Hertfordshire for fifteen years, their getaway overridden by the spreading suburban wave that engulfed the Home Counties. By 2005, they felt as if they were back where they had started. So they moved to Cornwall.

South Ruislip finally came into view; the clouds parted once again, making the platform and its TfL-branded signs gleam with a clean brilliance, as if blue protective film had been peeled from its surfaces only hours before. When I exited the station and turned back, I saw a modernist, metallic rotunda, a space-age portal that clashed with the uniform brick of the high street flanking it. It seemed a common theme for so many fringe tube stations – Arnos Grove, Southgate, Canada Water – to make the tube station an inviting place through which to escape.

The high street stretched a little to the left of the station, but mainly to its right: Chinese medicine stores, newsagents, florists, carpet shops. I tried to imagine how this street might have looked in the 1950s, when the promise of the countryside was still valid to the flocks of Londoners moving in. I saw it only in the stretch of uninterrupted sky, whose very presence denoted the absence of high-rises and skyscrapers.

Along the road, beyond the railway bridge (under which traffic dawdled and the strain of car radios was deepened by the acoustics, and where I breathed with a familiar and odd comfort the fume of exhausts), I walked mapless, following a taut thread of intuition, trusting it would lead to a memory.

(When I first started making regular weekend trips to Cornwall, I’d get on the sleeper at Paddington and step off at Truro. I’d take the clean air so deep into my lungs, I fancied I could feel the colour of the blood in my brain brighten with the oxygen. And when I finally reached Falmouth on the branch line, I breathed deeper still.)

I kept moving, kept inhaling the city air for support: a small flutter of anxiety had started in the base of my throat. I walked to the end of the high street, reaching a junction. Two-storey flats started out over the crossing roads, their murky brown bricks complementing tarmac and grey sky. Across one of the roads was a Sainsbury’s supermarket, fronted by fiascos of deep brown and the warm neon of orange-red lettering.

(In May and June, wild flowers in Cornwall hold the entire colour spectrum in their petals and grass-heads: they spread themselves over its moors and cliffs, in roadside verges and gardens. In the evenings, when the weather is right, the flowers converse with the teal-milk blue of the sea.)

There was a road across the junction called The Fairway. A bell rang in my memory: the house had to be off that road somewhere. I crossed at the pelican crossing, walking with the growl of car engines and the distant hum of heavy machinery that was moving Metroland earth and stone somewhere nearby. That hum had always been around me, reassuring me that others were close to, carrying on with their own lives and their own plans.

The Fairway was a wide road. Luxuriously wide. Cars parked at its sides without chafing hubcaps against the kerb; traffic moved along it smoothly. I walked past people tending front gardens, unexpected squares of green, yellow and
A woman hosed a Vauxhall Astra. I heard a lawnmower, somewhere a few roads away. Not quite the ‘patterned roar of motor mowers, accelerating, braking, turning, accelerating, braking, turning’ that Julian Barnes wrote of in his novel *Metroland*, but still, it was there. Spaces of grass still remained in Metroland, and were cared for.

I seemed to remember this road: observations were beginning to slide over and correlate with the outlines of old memories. The road swung, a lazy snake, in a similar way to a road I remember when I was very young; I passed a modern-looking church with an open courtyard, which chimed with me. In its courtyard, an effigy of Jesus hung from planks of mahogany-coloured wood, sawn and nailed in the shape of a kite. Out of a deep archive arose a memory of a dark diamond: the shape fitted.

I’d always thought I’d conjured up these images with a child’s fantastical imagination, these memories of houses with enough space around them to breathe. Suburbia to me had always been about road after road of identical builds, car-crammed pavements and the occasional fabricated green space. But here was a road in suburbia with few cars, with cultivated gardens, and with established houses, settled upon their foundations.

I stood for a few minutes, looking again at the fresh, modern church. In a few weeks’ time, I thought, I would be living in a part of the country where cemeteries held gravestones hundreds of years old, lichen crusting over their names, where the weather slowly smoothed away the identity of the dead.

The air had become a little too tense, a little too still. I started to walk again, reducing the length of The Fairway with each of my steps. I was slowly approaching a street sign, Queen’s Walk. The road where I was born.

No laboured searches for the house: I found it immediately. I stood across from it on the other side of the road, my camera swinging from my wrist, knocking my knee. It was just as I remembered it: a front garden with two small wrought-iron gates, separated by a strip of rectangular hedge. A silver car sat behind one of the gates while the other hung open, left that way, perhaps, by the postman that morning. A crazy-paved path led to the black-and-white door. Something out of *Beetlejuice*.

And with a look at that door, the journey ended. I couldn’t enter the space beyond, where some of my core childhood memories nested. I couldn’t rush past the stairs and swing right at the kitchen into the house’s living room, where the only memory of my grandmother was held, its detail worn away through repeated visualisation so that it was now faint as pencil. I couldn’t scramble down them again to crouch on the landing, suffused in a pink light that I supposed – I jumped into the scene, scouring it for detail – was produced by the sun shining through my bedroom curtains.

This was what I came for, to recharge memories now so old that nearly all the detail had left them. I knew that for each detail that was lost, I provided an imaginative embellishment, a prop so that the memory could still stand upright. The memory of my Nanna probably came from a photograph. Maybe the staircase was never slatted, perhaps the light had never been pink.

In Cornwall now, I can recall the smack of rain hitting a window in November (like a bucket of water hurled at the glass); the whisk of a spoon in an empty cereal bowl in April (the cry of a herring gull); and the efflorescence in the sea at midnight in May (glitter passing through my hands, glitter on the seafront as I turn to look at the lights of Falmouth town). Memories are sticking, down here. My senses reel them in with a pole and a line.

I walked back to the tube station a little faster than I had come. I had not taken a photograph. This chapter had closed the day we moved away; I could barely read it, let alone rewrite it. I had come for grounding, for identity, for a set of starting blocks against which I could push my feet when the gun went off. I left with simply the sensation of the city’s air tugging at my frame. I waded through it with each stride.
“TOM SELLECK WAS NOT ALLOWED TO TAKE THE TOUR”

BETWEEN 1979 AND 1999, DENNIS SEVERS TRANSFORMED HIS SPITALFIELDS HOME, DESIGNING EACH ROOM TO DEPICT THE TWO HUNDRED YEAR HISTORY OF A FICTIONAL FAMILY. RACHEL SANTUCCIO TALKS TO M. STACEY SHAFFER ABOUT HER 1980 STAY AT HER UNCLE’S UNIQUE RESIDENCE.

When M. Stacey Shaffer was a teenager in the 1980s, she travelled from San Francisco to London to stay with her uncle, Dennis Severs, at his home at 18 Folgate Street in Spitalfields. The house was host to regular public tours, as Severs had outfitted each room in the five-storey home in a different historic style, from early Georgian to late Victorian. The house was also host to an imagined French-Huguenot family named Jervis. The tour was constructed to make visitors feel as if they had stepped back in time, and were walking through a house still occupied by the Jervis family. I caught up with Shaffer as she reminisced about what it took to make visitors believe they were trespassing in another century.

My uncle’s focus was creating these atmospheres, and the illusion was so important. For me what was fun were the tricks behind it, but I know there are certain tricks that he wouldn’t want me to reveal, because that was part of the mystique.

LIVING THEATRE

The thing that a lot of people don’t get, and it’s sort of the key to my memories of the house, was the tour that Dennis did – he called it a tour, but there never was a good word for it. It really was more like a theatre experience, and all of the effects and smells and sounds that were done as you wandered around the house were specifically geared towards ‘living theatre’. You know how modern theatre actors will perform on stage with just their bodies, and they won’t have any props or sets or costumes, and they have to create it all with just themselves onstage? Well, this was the exact opposite of that. It was theatre with everything the actor, or the people in the house, had just left behind them, including half-drunk glasses and food with bites taken out, and they’ve just left the room, and they’ve left pieces of clothing, and their stuff. And you would hear them as you travelled through the house during the tour. You would hear them in the next room, it was like you were chasing them, but you never quite caught up. The things they left behind would tell their story for them. That was the atmosphere he was going for.

His technique was to overwhelm you for three hours. Sights, smells, sounds and endless talking, and it was to so overwhelm your senses that you finally gave up, and your mind let go and your emotions took over, and you had a sense of not just sitting in a house of antiques by fire and candlelight, but that you actually time-travelled.

PREPARING THE HOUSE FOR A TOUR

He spent the afternoons preparing the house, but it was like it never really stopped, it was just constant. It was real important the house be just the right level of clean – it couldn’t look like a museum, but it also couldn’t look like Miss Havisham’s. Because there was food on the table and half-drunk glasses, it couldn’t be mouldy and covered in cobwebs, so that constantly had to be changed and fresh fruit had to be put in all of the still lives and then there were all of the fresh flowers. All the candles had to be replaced. I added it up recently – typically each room had right to twelve burning candles during the tour, and some of the landings had the chandeliers, and those were dozens. In the olden days the owners would start with the tall fresh candles, while the servants would get the candle ends after they had burned down and these would be taken to the upstairs poverty rooms.

So we were constantly refreshing the candles but also swapping them around to make sure the right rooms had fresh tall candles and certain rooms had the half-used candles. And all the fireplaces had to have fires laid, ready to light. That took a lot of work.

All the silver had to be polished. Everything had to be dusted. The carpets had to be swept, and in the drawing room, all around the edges of the room, was lavender and that would get swept over the carpets to absorb the odours and then get swept back into the corners.

And each room had its own special smell. And a lot of the smells were enhanced just before the rooms were entered for the tour. The kitchen already had plenty of smells because it was a working kitchen, but just before the people came in he would take a sugar cookie and waft it through a candle for that fresh-baked smell – a little bit of
burnt sugar, just enough. It was very subtle. It took skill. In the dining room – and this was hard on me as I was in my vegetarian phase – we took a couple of pieces of beef fat and held that in a little metal sieve over a candle, and it would sizzle and fill the room with a roasty, beefy smell. And the smoking room was tobacco leaf, but there’s two tobacco smells, there’s tobacco after it’s been smoked and there’s the fresh leaf, the cured leaf, which is the better smell, so that was that room. And the drawing room had the lavender. The worst one was the poverty room. Dennis had a covered pot that he would uncover just before that was filled with rotting cabbage. Really, really foul.

It was like living on a film set rather than in a museum, because you had to learn when you reached for food to make sure that it was edible. Dennis’s attention to detail was so incredible that everything had to be clean, but you had to know how to clean it just right. He would go through just before the tour and put fingerprints on all the glasses to show that they had just been used. He was constantly moving things a half an inch there, and a little to the right. It all had to have the human energy put into it. One of the last things he would do in the kitchen is he would take a piece of carrot and he would put his teeth marks in the carrot because little Sophie Jervis was teething. He would make sure there were little bits of carrot sprinkled around. It was all crucial.

**A GHOST IN THE DRAWING ROOM**
There were a couple of special effects that he had, mostly in the drawing room, to give the illusion of a ghost. He had a fishing line tied to a fan on the chair in the drawing room, and it ran down along the carpet through a hole in the wall into the smoking room, and at just the right point in the tour when he said a certain phrase, if you were helping him, you would pull the string so the fan would leap off the chair. The rooms were dark enough so that you couldn’t see the clear fishing line, of course. Then you had to grab the doorknob and open it at just the right moment, so the people on the inside of the room would see the door open by itself. If you didn’t do it right, it just looked wet, and I never did it quite right. And I never pulled the fan cord quite right either. It wouldn’t leap, it would just sort of topple off.

**CELEBRITY GUESTS**
Famous people would want to come on the public tour, but if they were too recognisable and too famous, he would refuse them because they would distract people and become the focus. So Tom Selleck was not allowed to take the tour. ‘Tom Selleck, oh please, I want to meet Tom Selleck!’ ‘No. Besides, he’s too tall.’ People were much shorter in the eighteenth century, so tall people bumped their heads on the low doorways. He did have private visits for a lot of people, but the actual tour experience was restricted to just the right kind of group. He was totally unimpressed with celebrity anyway though.

**THE SOUNDS**
The other key to the atmosphere was the sounds. This was the 80s and 90s, so they were all on cassette tapes. Each room had hidden speakers in the floors, and as you were on the tour you would hear voices and chatter and sounds of parties and talking from other rooms but never the room you were in. He had this wonderful effect of moving horses clip-clip-clip in front of the house. They always sounded like they were outside the window, and they would move left to right and right to left. He used all of his neighbours; he brought them over and they were the ones who recorded the party sounds. The tapes had to be all prepped and cured up to the right places.

**THE CUPBOARD OF NO RETURN**
The kitchen cupboard was nicknamed ‘The Cupboard of No Return’, and it was notorious. ‘God forbid, don’t show anybody The Cupboard of No Return!’ It was where we stuck everything that visitors shouldn’t see. There was an old radio, because you had to have music, all sorts of strange postcards, packaged modern food, recent magazines, a tin of fruit cake with Buckingham Palace on it from ten years before, things like that – the stuff that spoiled the illusion. I loved ‘The Cupboard of No Return’.
No one tells me how to grieve
when the doctors
give their thumbs-down,

loosen the guy ropes
holding you to life,
withdraw your feeding tube,
stop the useless antibiotics.

No one explains about grief,
or warns me that one tear
will put me under house arrest for years.

Look. The ward nurse
bends her mild head to her paperwork.
Snow is our timekeeper. Every hour in Antarctica reflects the snow. The endless daylight releases us from the habits of sleep and we trail into the dining room with yesterday’s shadows at our heels. The Dash 7 and Twin Otter aircraft, defying the snow with bright orange paint, fly to the remoter parts of the continent at any time of day or night, allowing the first continuous photographic efforts to take place in 1882–3, followed by another in the 1910s. But the complex of permanent scientific stations was not constructed on the continent until the International Geophysical Year of 1957–8. The two major objectives of the International Geophysical Year were explorations of space and of Antarctica. In 1947, the Russian military fired the first intercontinental rocket, technology which led to the more significant launch of the first satellite.

I spent time in Antarctica during International Polar Year, a global, concerted effort to gather as much information as possible from the continent and its environs. The first phase of these international scientific efforts took place in 1882–3, followed by another in the 1910s. But the complex of permanent scientific stations was not constructed on the continent until the International Geophysical Year of 1957–8. The two major objectives of the International Geophysical Year were explorations of space and of Antarctica. In 1947, the Russian military fired the first intercontinental rocket, technology which led to the more significant launch of the first satellite.

Smiths into the atmosphere in 1957 at the peak of the Cold War, Sputnik 1 spoooked the American government sufficiently for them to fund a continual vigil by military planes loaded with hydrogen bombs, weapons with a considerably greater destructive capacity than the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki during the Second World War. Sputnik 1 was the first man-made sound from space and anyone with a shortwave radio could eavesdrop on it. There is some evidence that President Eisenhower delayed the launch of an American satellite to allow for relations between the Soviet Union and the United States to settle down. Whatever the truth, Antarctica staged an important ideological and expansion and retreat of the sea ice and the ice caps. In the 1960s, the Space Race and the lunar landing swelled mankind’s sights back towards the Earth, inspiring some of the environmental movements of the coming decades.

But snow is a cover-up, a natural spin doctor. It causes a kind of catacatastrophe in all those that work amidst it.

A few weeks before I left for Antarctica, I was given a tour of the British Antarctic Survey headquarters in Cambridge. After a cup of tea in the ‘Icebreaker’ cafeteria, I was taken to a chilly laboratory which stored cores of Antarctic ice. Inside these were bubbles of prehistoric air and traces of dust, captured in snowflakes that had fallen over thousands and millions of years. Research into ice cores began in the late 1940s with the work of Danish scientist Willi Dansgaard. In 1954, he proposed that through the frozen annals of ice scientists could establish climatic changes in the past. Engineers adapted technologies used in mining and oil exploration to the conditions of ice and snow, and one of the greatest means of understanding the ancient past became possible. Along with evaluating the composition of the bygone atmosphere, and estimating the global mean temperature from the oxygen isotope ratios, scientists could measure the presence of windborne dust in each layer of ice to distinguish phases of climatic cooling. I found it a provocative idea that the pristine polar ice cowered past realties in this way.

In 1998, scientists detected pollutants blasted into the world in 1945 in ice cores drilled from the Agassiz ice cap in the Nunavut territory of the Canadian Arctic.
Towards the end of the war, one of the leading scientists working on the atomic bomb communicated to President Truman that they had succeeded in manufacturing ‘a new explosive of almost unbelievable destructive power’. As a teenager, this single most horrifying innovation of the war years fascinated me. When I began researching extinction, I decided to go and listen to some testimonies of those who survived the atom bombs of 1945. One late summer day in 2007, not long before I left for Antarctica, I visited the archives at the British Library in London. Entering one of the small listening booths, I spent the day eavesdropping on the wretchedness of the past.

The raindrops were big and black,’ one woman said in a small, gritty voice. ‘What I felt at this moment was that Hiroshima was entirely made up of just three colours – red, orange and brown. The fingertips of those dead bodies caught fire – and the fire gradually burned down. I was so shocked to realize that fingers and bodies could burn like that.’

American forces dropped the first atomic bomb on 6 August and the second on the city of Nagasaki a few days later. Many people died instantly but others inherited the damage from their exposure, from the poisoned atmosphere, through their mother’s breast-milk or their father’s genetic material; 100,000–150,000 people died by the end of the year. The sound that I heard on the archive recordings was like elastic sheeting being jerked in and out, the noise expanding and contracting in queer, rhythmic intervals. The invention that destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki could obliterate life swiftly and even alter a person’s cellular structure, the invisible qualities that made them human. On the tapes, one of the witnesses, Taeko Terumae, born on 19 July 1930, spoke about the days after she began to recover. ‘I found a piece of mirror,’ she said, ‘I looked into it. I had scars just like a mountain range on a map, and my eye like a pomegranate. I almost wished I had died like my sisters. I was so surprised to look like a monster.’

The experiences of those who survived the first nuclear attack were of such incomprehensible proportions that they found it difficult to articulate what they had witnessed. One survivor, a photographer, said that the world became bright white as if he’d gone blind. He had his camera with him and, at first, he took a few pictures. But as he neared the centre of the city and saw the mounds of people dead and burned in the middle of their customary activities, his urge to document the reality was completely overwhelmed by his mind’s refusal to accept or comprehend the horrors. ‘I walked for two to three hours but I couldn’t take a single photograph of the central area. Nobody took photos.’ Few survivors effectively communicated their experiences of an event of such abnormal suddenness, but in ten thousand years, the polar ice will still speak of these mutant blasts, if melting hasn’t hastened the world’s amnesia.

Snow. White space. Blank space. It recalls the aspect of human nature that is most particular to us – our ability to return our minds to earlier experience and our knack for remembering the past, the better to re-imagine the future. But the pregnability of the snow, its gift for receiving the imprint of movement and intention, is also its downfall. When the great snows of the world melt, it will be a huge act of collective forgetting. The snows’ records of our acts, our choices as individuals and societies, will soften and disperse, taken up by other elements that do not carry and preserve but endlessly wash over.
WE ARRIVED ON A DOUBLE-DECKER BUS FROM BRISTOL.
TEMPLE MEADS, OLD, CREAKY AND LACKING OPEN WINDOWS.
THE BUS WAS PACKED TO BURSTING. IT WAS FILLED DOWNSTAIRS WITH LUGGAGE FOR FIFTY PEOPLE, WHILST UPSTAIRS ITS UNLUCKY OWNERS FANNED THEMSELVES AND BEMOANED THE ABSENCE OF THEIR WATER BOTTLES.

The windows intensified the sun so that many of the stewards were showing signs of heatstroke before we had even arrived at one of the hottest Glastonbury Festivals on record.

After the inevitable wait to unload the bus, we had to traipse, hot and already exhausted, to the campsite. We hunted around to find a good site for the tent: one that wasn't too far from the food van, water supply or Oxfam tent, but was as far upwind of the toilets as possible. It took longer than it had to be, hot and already exhausted, to the campsite. We hunted around to find a good site for the tent: one that wasn't too far from the food van, water supply or Oxfam tent, but was as far upwind of the toilets as possible. It took longer than it was expected. It was typically only us and two security guards on the vehicle gate, so we soon came to appreciate the value of these quirky sense of humour in making our shifts entertaining.

Our first year we loitered around the South-East of the festival: Arcadia, The Unfairground, The Common, Block 9 and Shangri-La. Just prior to sunrise, festivalgoers stumbled out of the South-East Corner and headed to the Stone Circle. There we watched the sun come over the horizon, to the accompaniment of ‘Hey Jude’ and cheers echoing around the field. After the revellers left to get breakfast, the debris left behind included balloons and canisters, the butts of cigarettes and joints, plastic bottles with the remnants of alcohol and anyone who used all the above in copious quantities and canisters, the butts of cigarettes and joints, plastic bottles with the remnants of alcohol and anyone who used all the above in copious quantities and passed out. Predictably, many of those later woke up with amusingly shaped sunburns.

Shangri-La is the strangest and most beautiful part of the festival. From the moment we came across it, unfinished, it captured our hearts. Dora’s photo album is entitled ‘Shangri-La Regional Kidney and Liver Hire’, a call which echoed hauntingly around the alleyways, broadcast through tinny speakers. A club called the Snake Pit bore the legend ‘No tattoo, no entry’, whilst the skywalk was covered with a banner reading simply ‘We wanted to be the sky’. It is a provocative, dystopian pleasure dome where anything is possible; where Fish and Tits is a bar with pole-dancing mermaids and a backroom straight out of the set of Avatar.

There’s a place in The Unfairground that we found in our first year, the Reverend Sharky’s Church of the Holyroller, but we knew it simply as the Church. Like everything in the South-East Corner, it had an otherworldly look, framed by brightly coloured racing cars and a replica of a bomb. It was the place we went after we’d temporarily exhausted the rest of the festival, we turned up at about three or four in the morning to an already packed dance floor. Inside, an enthusiastic crowd waited for the beat to drop, shouting ever louder in anticipation. In the second it dropped we were already close to the front of the crowd, dancing as best as possible with the mud encasing our boots, then the club filled with smoke. It was almost impossible to see, shifting and squatting to grin at Dora beside me when the strobes cut in: instant white blindness. I reached out to grab her hand and then lost myself completely to the music. It was liberating, unable to see or be seen; we forgot how we appeared to others. When our vision came back we glanced, sheepishly, at each other then carried on. Much later, we stumbled out into the precursors of dawn and found a wooden beam to sit on, panting and sweating but exhilarated. The only dancer left was a young woman, writhing to the music, contorting her body until it touched the floor.
TO WALK IN THE AIR HAS BEEN A DREAM OF MAN SINCE HE ELEVATED HIS GODS TO THE SKIES.

FROM A FRIEND I HEARD ABOUT A SYSTEM OF LOST ELEVATED WALKWAYS ACROSS THE CITY OF LONDON, A CRUMBLING SKELETON OF DEVELOPMENT FROM THE 1960S.

Now and then I caught intriguing glimpses of the walkways from a double-decker bus or over a construction hoarding, but I wanted to discover this network in detail for myself.

I knew that the utopian architects of the early twentieth century believed that taking pedestrians up above the cars and their oily thoroughfares was to be healthy and modern. In the mid-1960s urban planners had surveyed the bombed London quarter between Finsbury in the north and the River Thames in the south, and from Petticoat Lane in the east to Farringdon in the west. They conjured a dream of creating a thirty-mile pedestrian circulation system over the rubble-spotted barrows of a devastated quarter. There would be highways below, and footbridges above, with shops, gardens, cafes and office blocks. Then workers keyed into convenience and efficiency could go from tube station to high-rise desk, desk to dining room, and desk to theatre uninterrupted. These routes would take advantage of ancient ruins revealed by the bombing, so that while they added a layer above, they also revealed old city strata below.

A longing for empty space in the crowded capital kept the network in my mind but out of reach until serendipity intervened – I started these walks just before my daughter was born. Faced with the impending austerity of sleepless nights, the waiting period brought a windfall of nocturnal credit. I chose to spend it traversing the lost City of London network, from city market to river’s edge and from mediaeval Tower to the margins of the West End.

There were good reasons for exploring this tangible combination of The Fountainhead and Metropolis. First, there was the journey itself. The project was to have inspired an urban citizenry as they moved around at high level. I wanted to be in the footsteps of this departed cohort of white-collar workers, to see what they saw and what they left behind. The simple fact of the walkway network’s partial construction and disappearance in three decades was fascinating for its audacity and waste. With rapid clearance of several monumental buildings.

Time in the archives equipped me with a stash of drawings showing alternative routes in red and blue. Piecing these A4 fragments of a master plan together, there grew a chart of traces and deletions, somewhere between the present and the irretrievable past. The ways and nodes of the walk conveyed historic activities concentrated into tight pockets, once places now passages: The White Lion, Sugar, Post Office, Fish, Wine Office, Goat, Mermaid, White Lion, Love.

I took my trips most nights of an eight-week period, going from soot-crusted inner suburbs to the heart of the central zone, high ground to waterfront. Joining the network always meant ascending an escalator or stairs, or stepping between two buildings into half-for gotten paths, melancholy charms, maribund courts and secret gardens. The static emptiness resonated with a sense of holding and waiting, encompassing hope, desire, possibility, novelty. And there was a deliciously edgy feeling knowing that the last bus home had gone, that the convenient route home was being let go as I turned towards the dark with the cool joy of abandonment. Without tourists, without commuters, unseen, it felt like my network.

That’s the history, so let’s pause, and prepare for a walk. Music first. I’ll think of filmic compositions, Kraftwerk or Barry Adamson or Air; sometimes the music transforms into remembered segments of dance-floor fugues, pulsing and flowing in company with my steps. Picturing music videos or underground clubs, my imagination washes the subdued palette of city night with shimmering harmonies of colour. With camera, notebook, snacks, I’m ready.

Walking now. Shuttered concrete shifts to bronze and glass, terracotta abuts Portland stone. The ground changes character too; velvet asphalt and textured brick and flow-anywhere cement. Without money to realise all its plans, the city administration had to manoeuvre the network through the obscure geometries of speculative building. This brought a clash of territories, so that here monumental concrete balcony overshadows a fragile Georgian churchyard, and there a cluster of generic blocks is penetrated by a Lilliputian underpass. Floors wrap up into walls, and walls to ceilings. Painted railings give way to stainless steel, so I can tell where I am in the city by the ring of my knuckles on the different metals. When the metal runs out, the lighter, rain-washed planes of concrete and the gilded church weathervanes allow a semi-marine navigation through town guided by the prevailing breeze.

To negotiate the route I pass under copies of scaffolding, from which emerge bright white blocks piercing the night. Luminar are compressed into a dense changing sequence: sodium orange turns to blackness, then office fluorescent white, blue LED and orange again, with the occasional distant ellipse of a phasing traffic signal. Security cameras suck the light out from wetted stairwells; city cloister becomes Clockwork Orange. I glide over an empty six-lane highway. Perfuminary drag strip pointed at an occidental exit to the suburbs, it worked as an armature for the network, bridged several times to stitch back together the territory.
Peninsula 2012. Visitation

Beyond the garden, itself poised incongruously against a guild hall. Sit here for a moment, to inhale the fragrance from sweet topiary; pause longer and against a wall, a hedge. A suntrap by day, dense scorched brickwork, I discovered a parterre break in the railings. A pergola and box-hedge avenues were a quick transit before I can ascend again.

Eastwards in breaks and runs I gain ground on a silver monument to banking, opened just as its design was made redundant by microcomputers. The tower is the only nexus on the system, a pedestrian roundabout and centrifuge for points south, east and west. South, passing the old church. Shrubs edge the way here as it wind down around an older building immovable to the planners. The steps sink and drift until they meet another patch of green in the nave of a ruined church. Shrub edge the way here as it appropriates a short, verdant ambulatory a few steps above ground. Regaining the street, there is a quick transit before I can ascend again.

Switch to north. It’s quieter away from the road. Taking a serpentine passage through the 70’s version of a barbian, all in purple brick. This is the location from which the main network grid is derived, aligned on to two millennia of fortifications angled precisely eighteen degrees east of north, twenty degrees south of east. And over here, down narrow steps, is a tiny nameless triangle of grass with three modest trees huddled against a wall. Sit here for a moment, to inhale the fragrance from sweet topiary; pause longer and the night settles around you like a million moths of solitude until even the electricity seems to sleep.

Beyond the garden, itself poised incongruously to trap the noonday sun. With every yard travelled, it is evident that each building contemplates the realm of glass and metal, thinking about how the pool beside the magnificently patterned sets of water, cafe, chandeliers of the private club for which this system, a pedestrian roundabout and centrifuge for points south, east and west. South, passing the old church.

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Thousands of stones, iced on their shadow-sides, half-grey half-white, each one its own world, hard water refracting light. The ice further down, in the stream, is different, it curves over stones, makes air-moons in its belly, takes colour from black-water below. Sky re-cast with lapis lazuli.

In a private field a ruined house, roofless, almost wall-less, two beech trees horizontalled by wind, branches barnacled with moss, lichen as long as hair, so pale it’s hardly green. Ghosts are here, we think, the hair catches their words, cards their anti-breath into the breeze. Leave the house, leave ice-whitened stones, leave land blasted by wintering sun. The next morning a miscarried baby comes to mind. It echoes the brief bloom of air in ice, lichen hair, and like all lost things it is remarkable, fractional, in search of its own small, vast, allotment of grief.
It was a rainy night in late April when I made the drive to Bodmin Jail to meet with Mark Rablin, the jail’s resident paranormalist. Filled with preconceptions from dodgy ghost films and a healthy dose of fear, I was ready to learn more about his world. The room was small and dingy, with whitewashed walls and plastic chairs laid out in rows. Our voices echoed around the room and we had to take a break midway through for the clattering in the hallway to die down. I wasn’t entirely sure if the goosebumps I was feeling were down to the bone-chilling cold or whether it was a ghostly presence making itself known. Rablin, however, was relaxed; clearly accustomed to the cold and odd noises after almost six years at the jail. Refreshingly open-minded and eminently believable, it was easy to see why his ghost walks at Bodmin Jail are so popular. He sat back, hands folded in his lap, as we discussed the impact the paranormal has had on him and it soon became clear that the paranormal, for Rablin at least, is a way of life as much as a profession.

Let’s start with the most obvious question, what is the paranormal? What does it mean to you?

My perspective is a world of energy: everything that I perceive in this world is energy resonating at a different frequency. Einstein said that energy cannot be destroyed, it will change form due to the frequency that it resonates at. Therefore these people that we have here, the spirits that passed over, their energy is absorbed back into the environment where they were. Basically, we’re not dealing with anything nasty out there at all, we’re dealing with the energetic imprint of a person from a moment in time and that’s pretty much the way I work with things. That seems to work quite nicely; the guys in particular will come out and spend more time with you when you start talking about them as normal people.

So have you always been able to see spirits then?

I ended up driving an articulated lorry up and down the motorways doing night trucking, where I had a few experiences. One in particular was on the M4 at 4.00 a.m. I stuck all the brakes on because I thought I was going to hit a Mercedes in the middle of the motorway. The guy had the car jacked up and he was changing the nearside wheel. It was a white Mercedes 190. I just sailed straight through, there was nothing there, but I still see him clear as a bell even now when I think of him. The only thing I can’t see is the registration number because the boot was up, but I see the warning triangle and matey sitting there looking at me as he’s changing the wheel. That was an interesting experience and I thought, ‘Somebody’s obviously had a moment there in the past.’

When I was forty there was a charity night here at the jail for Children in Need; I thought, ‘Well, that sounds exciting, I’ll come and have a look.’ So I came for this charity night where I had a fantastic evening. I got pushed off the wall, had a misty manifestation go past me and a stone thrown at me. I thought, ‘This is good,’ so I went off and trained with the company that was here and eventually I took over. I’ve been here for nearly six years now hosting events. Obviously those were very memorable events, what about since then? Are there any cases that stand out?

A good case is the one up in Essex where the gentleman’s mother was roaming around the house at night after she’d passed over. The mother didn’t like the gentleman’s wife at all: she didn’t keep the house tidy enough, she didn’t cook for her son, she didn’t do all the things that this woman did for her son. The mother was roaming around the house rattling pots and pans, she was classic poltergeist activity, but poltergeist is just German for a noisy ghost and that’s what she was being. She was being very noisy because she didn’t like this woman in the slightest.

You mentioned poltergeists – are there different kinds of paranormal activity then?

We have the classic ghosts, which are an imprint or recording. Scientists now call it the stone tape theory: the energy of the person gets recorded at a moment in time in the fabric of the building. If you come along and you’re resonating at the same frequency as them you’ll trigger it and turn it on like a video recorder. They walk out of the wall, down the corridor and disappear. They’re just a

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recording; they do the same thing over and over. The other ones we’ve got are the spiritual entities: they’re the ones that are connected with people and they will interact with you. The kids will tug on your trousers and they’ll throw stones.

What about evil spirits and that sort of thing?

In mythology you’ve got the demon, but though that conjures up all kinds of images, they’re not particularly nasty in any way. The non-human entity then is a collection of energy in a certain location and it works as a repeater of people’s emotions, so if you’re quite bored, fed up or negative it will take that on board and throw it back at you. You become more bored, more fed up or negative until you start to get to the aggression stage. If you’re one of these gigglily nervous types it will take that and throw it back; the giggles turn into hysterical laughter, which turns into gasping for air, which turns into passing out. So once you know how these spirits work, you can work with the environment surrounding them.

So what about things like orbs and cold spots?

There’s defining shapes for orbs. Basically, if it’s spiritual then generally it’s fragmented on the inside. It will have a pattern or sometimes it will provide a recording; they do the same thing over and over. We haven’t got a lot of the plans for this place and the government won’t release them because this was the prototype for the ones that followed. I’ve got a whole bit of the jail that’s missing according to my reckoning. From this wall here all the way to the front door below us isn’t missing according to my reckoning. I often hear tourists saying to their kids, ‘No, don’t be silly, they don’t come out till night-time,’ and I’m thinking, ‘No, they’re here all the time but you won’t connect with it in the daylight because your eyes are grabbing the light and you’re looking at the walls.’ We’ve had a full manifestation up on the third floor; she manifests to very stressed-out women with children. Generally when it’s been chucking it down with rain and they’ve been sitting on the motorway for four hours or so they’ll come in here and she will appear to them as a fully formed Victorian lady.

How much do you know about the history of the jail?

I’m still exploring the jail, so I’m digging my way underneath the floor at the moment. I found a tunnel last Christmas and I’ve got no idea where it goes. We haven’t got a lot of the plans for this place and the government won’t release them because this was the prototype for the ones that followed. I’ve got a whole bit of the jail that’s missing according to my reckoning. From this wall here all the way to the front door below us isn’t replicated in the basement, so there are big bits of this jail which are yet to be found. This jail was operational from 1779 to 1929 and there’s just so much we have yet to know.

Given the close ties between the paranormal and history, have the spirits been able to give you any information about their time here?

You think you know what the prison system was like, then you start to interact with spirits and they give you physical symptoms of what they’ve experienced. They give you a new perspective of the whole history of it, especially things like the way they used to treat the prisoners who were mentally ill. You’ll get imprints of various things going on and if you listen to them and interact with them, the spirits will tell you their stories. We’ve also got children here: most of them were unfortunately victims of various diseases that came from the jail. In the old days of this jail the women would have the children with them, it wasn’t the best environment for them and a lot of them didn’t make it. Their energy is still occurring here and we play games with them and look after them, we have a great time really.

Speaking of children, how do the hours you work fit in around your commitments to family and friends?

Family-wise, they tend to have adapted over time. I’ll be here on commercial nights from 18.00 p.m. until 7.00 a.m.; by the time breakfast has finished it’s about eight, I tidy up and I’m at home in bed by nine. On Sundays I sleep most of the day then I get up, generally pretty grumpy, at about 4.00 p.m., potter around the house for a few hours and then go back to sleep. There is no pattern to it, it’s waking or sleeping, you basically just adapt to it. In the case of today, I was here in the jail at 9.00 a.m. this morning and then we had a tour through the jail. I went home at 12.00, had two hours of kip and I was back here earlier to set things up. Friends, I don’t tend to have a lot of, apart from the ones that are in my profession, because it just doesn’t work. That’s the way it goes, unfortunately, especially in this part of the world.

What do your family think of your job?

Oh, they think it’s fantastic. It’s nice that when I first started out my mum and dad were still with us and they were really quite supportive. So I thought, ‘Okay, fine, I’ll stick with it.’ They all find it really interesting, some of them can’t really understand it but then that’s not a problem. We get round it; they all think I’m going to sort of conjure stuff up for them.
The high bracken is full of spirits – its prehistoric scent takes me home to childhood in Kent, blackberrying, beating back the sap-filled stems
to reach brambles no one else can be bothered with, fearing, and longing to see, the deft flick of an adder.
The spirits of that village are here now, clear as day in the island light that’s half sky, half water – Nanny, old Nunc, Mrs Noakes and Mr Palmer, Mr and Mrs Monk, those girls –
Michelle and Maureen – none living now – (not as the mainland understands living), but present in these dense acres of green where I’m lost,
surrounded by sea, not knowing where I’m going, nor quite where I’ve been.

(First published in Quadrant (Australia), June 2010, www.quadrant.org.au)
The spirit of the butterfly

In ancient Greece, the soul was often imagined as a butterfly: the two apparently diverse concepts even shared the same word, Psyche (ψυχή). This powerful combination lies at the base of modern psychology.

In several European cultures there are sayings to symbolise to us, as lovers of Nature, and within our culture generally? Answers seem surprisingly diverse and complex, and may beg the question of what actually flies within us.

People have, of course, long been fascinated by the wondrous transformation that is metamorphosis. The concept may speak volumes about human existence. (Perhaps we are merely caterpillars, for we periodically change skin; in which case death must be the pupal period; and then . . . No! That way madness lies.) To modern science, metamorphosis is rather old hat, but it is worth noting that a significant number of the world’s leading conservation biologists study butterflies, and not merely because long-term studies of these weather-sensitive creatures can tell us much about climate change.

Away from science, butterflies are strong symbols of freedom, the freedom of the soul and of Nature’s freedom, and they offer a strong link with happiness. Van Gogh’s Prisoners Exercising shows a group of grey-clad prisoners, one of whom is Vincent himself, walking the line in a tiny prison yard; above them spiral two white butterflies, symbolising freedom and the soul, joy and beauty.

On another level, butterflies are quintessential elements of sunlit spring and summer days in gardens and countryside. They are spirits of the warmer months, providing a vital dimension that would be missed, at least subconsciously, if absent. In Britain, our scarcer butterflies, which are restricted to specific habitats, go a stage further: they take us deep into the heartlands of our most wondrous landscapes, when those places are at the zenith of their annual cycle of natural beauty.

Then there is the poetic approach, which sees butterflies as ‘the souls of summer hours’ (John Masefield, King Cole), ‘winged flowers’ (Robert Frost, ‘Tuft of Flowers’) and, of best of all, ‘as the first of insects to have earth / And sun together, and to know their worth’ (Edward Thomas, ‘The Brook’). Poor Keats was not on this earth long enough to write an ode to a butterfly, but his ode to ‘winged Psyche’ offers: ‘Yes, I will be thy priest and build a fane [temple] / In some un trodden region of my mind.’

WE ARE A SUPERSTITION LOT

In several European cultures there are sayings to the effect that if your first butterfly of the summer is golden, you will experience a happy summer; if it is white, you will have an average summertime – and heaven help you if it is any other colour! The odds for us in Britain are a trifle worrying, providing a vital dimension that would be missed, at least subconsciously, if absent.

The most remarkable of these incidental social-science findings is that people have profound experiences involving butterflies, often at times of bereavement. Several contributors wrote in to say how visitations by butterflies had helped them come to terms with loss of a loved one. They are not alone. My own diary for 11 April 2005 included: ‘a Holly Blue, a blue Mother’s thorn as it was being lifted from the hearse, then a male Brimstone joined in and the two accompanied her through the lychgate.’ I was left pondering whether my mother and long-deceased father had in some way been reunited. One National Trust member went even further, writing: ‘Butterflies have almost seemed to guard me, helping me through life.’ Perhaps Psyche is no legend – or, as Christian thinking holds, the Holy Spirit does indeed move in mysterious ways.

THE WONDER OF THE MORNING

One morning at the end of the sublime June of 2009, I blundered into a new dimension. I had been probing its boundaries for some time, unwittingly; then, without warning, suddenly crossed over, for the colours and intensities were right, a hidden Turtle Dove was calling. The passion had deemed itself ripe.

It was my favourite forest that did it, for forests are steeped in deep magic from beyond the dawn of time. A heady mix of honeysuckle and dog rose scent breathed through living air, the forest rides danced in a mosaic of dappled light, within a stirring breeze, and a miscama of insect life pulsed under, amongst and within the myriad oats Sudden in a shaft of sunlight, even as the day’s dust began to move, there before my waking eyes was a pristine specimen of the impossibly rare all-purple version of the Purple Emperor butterfly, aberration Iole no less. Once in a purple moon – which is considerably rarer.
than a blue moon – this most elusive and mystical of our butterflies discards its standard white markings and emerges clothed entirely in purple iridescence, a veritable Emperor in purpuratum. That experience fulfilled a personal dream of over forty years’ gestation, one of those dreams that means all and everything to the dreamer without offering any hope of comprehension, and which naturally lacks meaning to anyone else. These dreams are of the uttermost importance, being the passion of the individual soul.

Such moments in our lives reveal the true inadequacies of prose, and guide us into poetics, the language of the soul, and of Psyche herself:

To Psyche, in her persona as a butterfly

Scatter me, these living ashes, here,
Within this forest, my cathedral,
For all I truly sought from life
Was Nature’s glory, personified
Within the sanctus of a dream
That dreamt itself, and danced
A life along some woodland path,
Before becoming, sudden, real,
Within the calling of a summer day.
Spirit, on iridescent wings, in light
Descending, holding the words of life,
That all true dreams may be fulfilled.

(ΩΗ)