# Five Dials

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*Five Dials* is brought to you with the help of MATT CLACHER, DEBBIE HATFIELD, ANNA KELLY, NICK LOWNDES, JULIETTE MITCHELL, JAMES CHANT, and SIMON PROSSER.

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A LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

# On Trees and Themes

One day, under the fluorescent lights of our office, which are much like the fluorescents of many offices, we started talking about trees. I own three books on trees: *Native British Trees* by Andy Thompson, *The Secret Life of Trees* by Colin Tudge and an old and exclamatory favourite from the 50s called *TREES: A Guide To Familiar American Trees* by Herbert S. Zim, PhD, in which species like the flowering dogwood are painted on the grounds of sturdy farmhouses with innocent curls of post-WW2 smoke drifting above. It may surprise you then to hear that I am terrible at identifying the trees around me, so useless I often break off conversations and interrupt friends mid-anecdote and strangers walking past to ask, 'Excuse me, what is that tree?' I often tear off bits of leaves and stuff them in my breast pocket to bring home and study further, as if I were Herbert S. Zim, PhD, but inevitably I fish the wet remnants from the barrel of the washing machine instead – never the sign of a good naturalist.

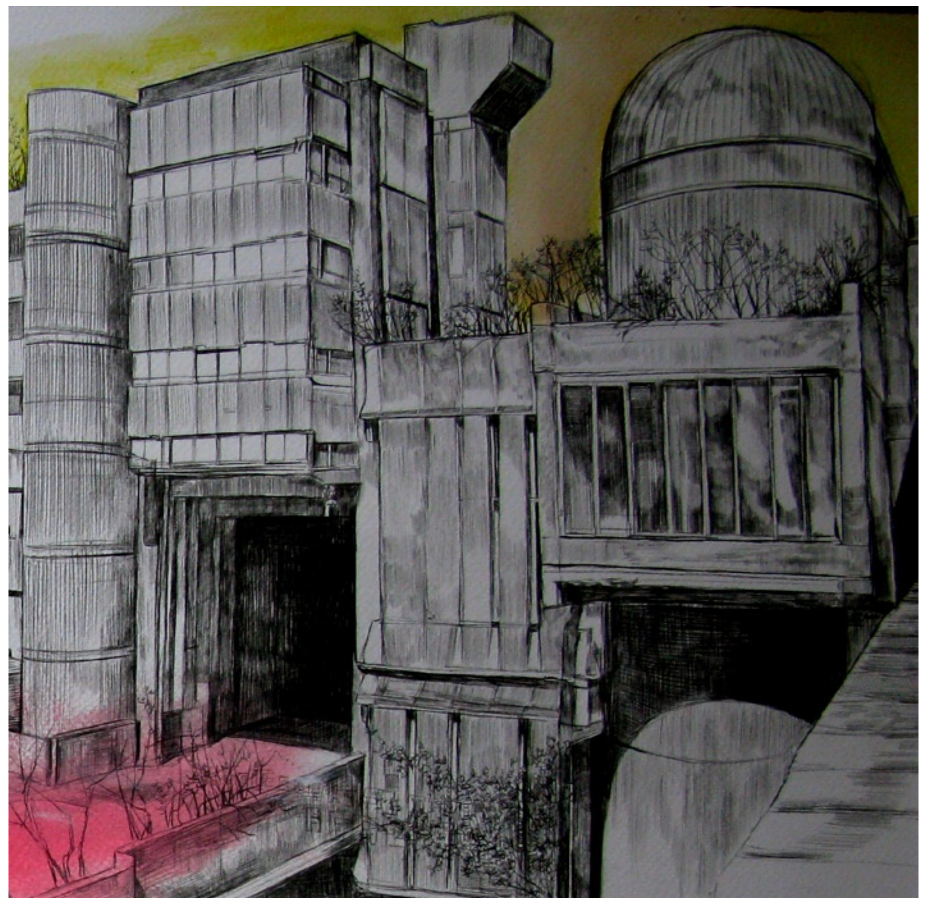
During our conversation about trees one of the *Five Dials* editors recounted a recent conversation with her husband on a train station platform. 'There I was,' she said, 'looking up at some trees two-hundred yards away and wondering what they might be. I asked James, who was standing next to me, and he told me: sycamore. So I asked him how he knew, because from where we were standing you couldn't see the trunk or the leaves at all clearly. He just knew, he said. Just like when he could see a bird in the distance and had a feeling for what it might be. It's all about the jizz, apparently.'

(Momentarily confused by the word, I did a bit of research and found that, regardless of other definitions, jizz is a term used by birdwatchers and naturalists to describe a feeling, an intuition, that orginates from the briefest of glimpses. Jizz is knowing a bird in the distance, a tree in the dusk.)

Why did I mention our fluorescents? Many of us sit under them and it's likely some of you will be reading this issue, or printing it up, under fluorescents. But many of us, myself included, have cultivated over the years a brand of frustration that comes from not knowing enough about what lies beyond the fluorescents. In this new era of nature writing we may not find time to scale glaciers (Macfarlane), plunge into the rivers and lakes of Britain (Deakin), or spend seven years wandering the earth (Griffiths), but we may be able to trade in one of the lesser talents we've cultivated – say, knowing which font will best fill in a spreadsheet – to gain a little more jizz in our lives. 'That tree?' I know I will one day be able to say after clocking its dark shape in the distance. 'That's a hornbeam.'

For the second issue of *Five Dials* we've gathered some excellent writing from our favorite adventurers and naturalists, including an unpublished essay from Roger Deakin. Still, we shy away from saying this is a nature issue. To be honest, it's worth confessing at the beginning of issue two that *Five Dials* is not a place to come for themes. Our themes, like rotting oak, break down, crumble and biodegrade halfway through each planned issue. It's more exciting that way. Even though, thanks to Jay Griffiths, you'll learn about trees in this issue (including information gleaned from the brilliantly-named anthropologist Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff) we also felt obliged to include an Arthur Bradford short story about travelling America with an aggressive drifter named Paul. There are two poems from Benjamin Markovits, some of Raymond Chandler's incomparable letters, and much-needed help with modern life from Alain de Botton. The American humourist David Rakoff once wrote: 'I do not go outdoors. Not more than I have to. As far as I'm concerned the whole point of living in New York City is indoors. You want greenery? Order the spinach.' And so, for readers with a Rakovian view of life and urbanity, there is also Alison Macleod's reflections on the seamier side of Brighton, a town known for the different breeds of wildlife it has hosted over the years. There is plenty of nature here. At *Five Dials* we prune, shape, even recycle a little, but it will always be a varied garden.

– CRAIG TAYLOR



# We Do Not Use the Word Lightly

*Richard Reynolds, guerrilla gardener, faces the Fuzz*

'Put down your tools or we're taking you in,' demanded Police Constable Ives. He was talking to me. It was late one April evening and we were both standing on the verge of the dual-carriage roundabout in London's wretched Elephant & Castle. I was holding a finely crafted oak-handled stainless-steel border fork and he was dangling handcuffs.

For four years I have been a guerrilla gardener, by which I mean an illicit cultivator of neglected patches of public land. I 'fight the filth with forks and flowers' and until now had never been confronted with the choice between arrest and retreat from a dig. There have been skirmishes with the law – a brief questioning about our weeding, a couple of false terror alerts about the contents of my car (it was heavily laden with sacks of wood chippings not bomb-making equipment) – but all encounters had been civil and sometimes even quite encouraging. This time it was heavy.

PC Ives and I were not alone with the swirling traffic. Alongside me were six other regular guerrilla gardeners and two film crews, including one from a Swedish children's TV show. For half an hour we had been weeding and clearing litter in a corner of the shabby roundabout and talking to the cameras. The disruption began when Ives' Vauxhall Astra careered clumsily along the roundabout's central footpath and stopped behind us. Another car drew up and soon the police outnumbered our ragbag international force of lawless gardeners and media. Eight or so officers (I was in no state to count) stood around us tensed as if waiting for a penalty kick and grim reinforcement glared from a fluorescent police minibus.

An hour earlier the director from the Swedish show had been coaxing us into 'looking dodgy' and said something about wanting to 'spice-up' what was otherwise an educational broadcast for English language tuition. He seemed anxious that his film of well-spoken gardeners tidying up a corner of central London might be dull to Swedish children so had contrived moody shots of us marching in single file down my tower block's dark public corridors with spades and forks over our shoulder. We had refused his urge to film us trying to hide behind lampposts, now he refused the police's request to put down his camera. The other cameraman articulated his media rights, 'I am allowed to carry on filming.' 'But don't show my face,' said Ives. The Carry On continued and with police lights and cameras on our action I took centre stage. The conversation continued something like this:

'Please explain what it is you object to?' I asked.

'You are causing criminal damage.'

'What is criminal about clearing weeds and litter?'

'You do not have permission.'

'No one objected to my display of nasturtium on this roundabout last summer nor the forget-me-nots just over there.'

(I don't remember their reply to this, but I do remember them getting more agitated. One of the policewomen muttered into her radio something about

reinforcement). So I continued.

'Why don't you go and catch some real criminals rather than waste your time stopping local people tidying up this shabby area?'

'You could be doing anything.'

'Now you know we're gardening please leave us alone!'

'You're vandals.'

'Yes, vandals with flowers.'

I was getting nowhere. The police were robotic and increasingly jumpy. The others were silent and potentially more nervous than me in my adrenaline-pumped performance. So I changed emphasis and gave them Establishment-friendly facts.

'I actually have permission from Southwark Council to garden on the other side of the street. They gave it after I had guerrilla-gardened there for three years. And you know what? They told me they would never have granted it if I had asked them first.' Surely, I thought, this would melt their resolve; here was evidence (well, a claim at least) that I could work with the council but that a precedent was set that to do so legitimately I must first demonstrate horticultural vision and commitment? But it was futile. To these police it was as if 'the other side of the street' was the jurisdiction of another country. Which made my desperate and boastful grab to persuade them with an American vice-presidential celebrity endorsement failed too:

'Al Gore loves what we're doing.' (The god-like eco soothsayer had said, 'they're grrrreat' to British chat show host Richard Madeley.) But this plea was ignored by Ives and his squad without so much as even a raised eyebrow.

And so I had to choose: arrest or retreat? It was an easy choice. I retreated.

There was no need to be taken in to custody. I needed no additional headline grabbing drama because the whole ridiculous encounter was already being reported. And if we were to complete our garden it would get done sooner if I were not behind bars. So we carried our tools home and the media followed. I was angry and depressed – how could the police be so stupid? But I was also excited – we do not use the word *guerrilla* lightly to describe our gardening, and here, on film, was evidence why. As we rode the lift to the top floor of Perronet House we began discussing what to do next. Should we just leave the bare new patch for a while and let the situation cool? Or could we slip back and finish it off? After a bottle of wine the choice was easy. We went for victory.

From the safe haven of Perronet House we darted across the road two at a time in short sharp bursts and plunged our depotted purple primula, lavender and campanula into our curved bed beneath the chevron sign. As is often the case, when we dug deep we found remarkably healthy soil, imported purposely for planting. Such riches are a reminder of the ample budgets and naive idealism of landscape architects when they construct grand new traffic intersections. Sometimes, beneath the mat of weeds and litter, we also find plastic plant labels and old root systems, archaeological relics of a briefly glorious landscape. Encouraged by the vitality of the land we pushed on. Never have we gardened so fast and nor with such excitement. But never has a new guerrilla garden seemed so vulnerable.

For a while the incident nagged me, anxious that more time-wasting police threats would be repeated but three months on the garden is thriving. Last week I was out there on my own brandishing a watering can when a police car drove past. Seeing it made me flinch but the two officers inside turned to me waved, and cheerfully beeped their horn. The flowers must have won them round. ◊

A SINGLE BOOK

# Brighton Rock

## *Alison Macleod walks the line between seaside fact and fiction*

I CONFESS. I'm a push-over for those little mind-bender moments in life, when reality seems, fleetingly, to wobble – as when life imitates art, and you can't quite get a fix on which is the more real.

Currently, every morning I turn on my kitchen radio, it takes a moment for my mind to catch up. In that moment, it is tantalisingly unclear whether I am living in the seaside town of Brighton or in the first chapter of *Brighton Rock.* Because Southern FM, the local commercial radio station – the most I can absorb first thing in the morning – has sent a 'mystery person' into Sussex with the mouth-watering sum of £10,000 and a series of calling cards to be dropped at ordinary destinations – cards that let the finder know that they've missed a chance to challenge 'the fugitive' and win the cash. Each day the fugitive rings the station with a new, badly rhyming cryptic clue… 'Even though I hate roadworks, look out your car and there I might lurk.' 'I'm in the Hastings at Priory, come and look around for me.' 'I'm eating in a place with a boot, come find me and take the loot.'

In Graham Greene's *Brighton Rock,* any boot, of course, came complete with exposed hobnail-heads, all the better for kicking a man to death. And in 1938, the prize for spotting the mystery person was ten guineas, not 10K. The man behind the calling cards of yore was a character called Hale, Charles Hale, who was employed by the daily paper, *The Messenger.* 'He had to stick closely to a programme: from ten to eleven Queen's Road and Castle Square, from eleven till twelve the Aquarium and Palace Pier, twelve till one the front between the Old Ship and the West Pier.' Of course it wasn't a part of Hale's programme to end up (as they say, look away from your screens now) dead with a stick of Brighton rock rammed down his gullet.

Does Southern FM radio know it has propelled its listeners into a strange interzone between the real town of Brighton and *Brighton Rock?* Will their mystery man ever be spotted reading the story of Hale? 'I'm reading a famous Brighton novel about a man found dead. Find me at a seafront caff before I've fled.' More urgently, shouldn't he get out of the job before art completely overtakes life, and he comes to a (ahem) sticky end? Or does he take comfort in today's reassuring local

headline: 'Police Smash Brighton Gang'?

The truth is, most writers I know in Brighton are in some way pleasurably haunted by *Brighton Rock* – by its literary legacy of violence, nostalgia and pleasure; by its rich evocation of a landscape that is still so familiar. Pinkie claims 'with dreary pride, "I suppose I'm real Brighton," as if his single heart contained all the cheap amusements, the Pullman cars, the unloving weekends in gaudy hotels, and the sadness after coition.' There is desperate sadness in *Brighton Rock*. Almost all the characters yearn for something more, for a cure for their loneliness, for a sense that they are not as alone as they feel in a life that seems bitterly, flagrantly random.

I love Greene's unflinching eye for detail, for the painfully real glimpses of the harshness of life, as in the boy mobster Pinkie's very fleeting memory of the girl at school who, pregnant, waited for a train that was seven minutes late, with her head on the line. I love the way that everything in Pinkie's world is marked by a grimy grandeur. 'The sun slid off the sea and like a cuttle fish shot into the sky the stain of agonies and endurances.' I can think of few novels that are as physical, as thrillingly palpable. All writers need to draw on our senses to make us feel as if we are experiencing the story 'live' but, here, Greene casts an absolute spell – the spell all fiction writers want to cast. We walk into his rooms and smell stale beer or cooked cabbage or the perfume of pomade on hair. Ida Arnold's big, breasty and giving body is as solid a presence as Pinky's narrow, bony shoulders under the cheap suit, his bitten thumb nail and the twitch in his cheek. The tide sucks darkly at the piles of the piers. The night is 'a wet mouth' at the window of a forlorn pub as Pinkie contemplates the murder of Rose.

The life of the story hums in its very things, things which energize the story with an unstoppable force of their own: the bottle of vitriol – acid – waiting from the start in Pinkie's pocket, waiting to escape its bottle; the embroidered crowns on a pair of hotel chairs, the memory of which repeatedly taunts Pinkie with an awareness of everything he'll never achieve; the raw, disposable razor blade taped to his thumb under his glove, ready to 'carve' a traitor's face; the cheap gramophone record waiting for the ear of the gullible, loving Rose – on it, Pinkie's secret declaration of loathing for her.

Katherine Mansfield once wrote that she felt 'an infinite delight and value in detail – not for the sake of detail, but for the life in the life of it.' Here these apparently ordinary things actually release the life of the story in an inevitable expression of their own 'thingi-ness' (or in what James Joyce called 'the revelation of the what-ness of the thing'). It's a deeply satisfying experience for the reader, to feel a sense of fate – of unavoidable meaning – even, right there, in the inanimate matter of the characters' world.

And it's a strange, larger-than-life life that gets released in *Brighton Rock*.

Mystery isn't only of the murderous variety. The poloneys and the bogies, the totsies and the narks, the geezers and the buers, are all inseparable from a spirit as other-worldly as they are worldly, from a sense of mystery that would seem out of place in this sharply realist story if Greene hadn't made it so tangible: 'The car lurched back on to the main road; [Pinkie] turned the bonnet to Brighton. An enormous emotion beat on him; it was like something trying to get in; the pressure of gigantic wings against the glass. *Dona nobis pacem*… If the glass broke, if the beast – whatever it was – got in, God knows what he would do. He had a huge sense of havoc…'

Greene's prose is so good, line by line, I find myself wanting to eat it. For me, it's a deep and peculiar pleasure to be able to write in a place where he has already written.

There's a moment from a story of mine called 'Dirty Weekend':

> It is cool for August. The sea is already dark, choppy. The helter-skelter at the end of the pier stands bright, a crazy, candy-striped monument to chaos. The lights of the prom are faint, tremulous, in the twilight. In the other direction, the West Pier is beautiful, ramshackle, degenerate… Outside the Old Ship, night rolls in with the tide, and the seafront throbs with basslines that spill from open-top cars. From the window I watch a spiky huddle of lads on the bike path across the street. They're whistling and calling across traffic to three girls in dark tans and micro skirts. Eggs-on-legs, we used to call them fondly. Tonight they're on their way to the Escape or the Beach or the Honeyclub. In the dark of our room, you let your clothes fall from you and disappear below a thin blanket.

Perhaps like all writers of Brighton, I love the dirt, the tack and the bright ephemera that is the town, both on and off the page. Brighton is the setting for my next novel too. As I write, I'm enjoying once again the faded grandeur of the town and its cheap, the-show-must-go-on amusements. Above all, I love the sense that Brighton is always slipping – helplessly, debauchedly, cheerily – toward another story. That it just can't help itself. ◊

# Ancient Trees, Ancient Knowledge

## *Jay Griffiths on the wisdom of forests*

It seems a beautiful and universal acknowledgement that trees are good to think with. Everywhere in the world, people have associated tree and thought, idea and forest.

In one of the most fascinating anthropological accounts I've ever read, Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff wrote breathtaking studies of the thoughtways of the Amazonian people of Colombia. It takes five pages for him even to begin to describe the associations of just one tree for the Tukano people, to show how the 'bow wood tree' or jacaranda represents maleness, dominance, aggression and procreative energy. It also suggests a 'package' and 'thunder', 'pollination' and the 'semen spurt'. So many concepts are held in one tree, says Reichel-Dolmatoff, that it hints at 'dimensions of mind hardly suspected.' The Amazon forest itself, according to a Desana elder, 'is a wide expanse, similar to a perceptive human head.'

Trees have long been associated with knowledge; the Buddha meditated under a tree, and sought wisdom from it. In the early years of Buddhism it was thought that certain spirits of the trees lived in tree trunks and spoke from there. In India, Saddhus have always retreated to the forests for wisdom; the pipal tree signifies universal wisdom and in traditional Indian thought, trees, in their previous lives, were great philosophers. The English language recognizes an association between wisdom and trees: an idea 'takes root'; a book has 'leaves'; a small book is a 'leaflet'; an avid reader is a 'bookworm'; you 'branch out' into a new area of study – even corporate language doffs its cap in the form of Amazon.com.

For indigenous people everywhere, nature is an enlargement of your mind and your sense of kin – your social mind. The Malo people of northern Bangladesh used to have a custom of marrying a girl to a tree and a boy to the river, before their marriage to each other. For the Karen in the forests of northern Thailand, the umbilical cord of a baby would be tied to a tree; the spirit of the child dwelt there, and to harm the tree would be to harm the child; the ritual thus intricately linked person to tree.

Forests can also offer political lessons. Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore identified democratic pluralism and an ecological culture as the distinctiveness of Indian civilization. 'From the forests, we learnt democracy,' says Vandana Shiva: 'that every species has its place.' Black Elk of the Lakota people saw trees as having rights equal to people, referring to them as the 'standing peoples, in whom the winged ones built their lodges.'

In the Amazon, there is telluric thought, sunk deep in the earth, a wild way of knowing so utterly different from the West, that while we use the term 'vegetable' for a comatose mind, and 'vegging out' as a slang term for mindless laziness, in the Amazon the wisest men and women are called vegetalistas; plant experts steeped in plant knowledge. But there's more – people don't just learn about plants, they learn from certain plants called 'plant teachers' or 'doctores' which teach people medicine.

When I was writing my book on wildness, I began by staying with Amazonian shamans who used ayahuasca, considered one of the greatest of these plant teachers, shamans who believed there knowledge came from the song of the plant. And they certainly knew what they were doing: I had arrived sick with months of depression, yet after a few days – and a few extraordinary ayahuasca nights – it was gone.

But the Western way of knowing too easily scorns any way of knowing from animal, plant or tree. Socrates, pithily summing up an entire way of thinking, said: 'I'm a lover of learning, and trees and open country won't teach me anything, whereas men in town do.' The Dominant Culture has long operated an intellectual apartheid, arrogantly certain that its own expertise is the only knowledge worth the name. In the days of empire, that single way of knowing invaded the wild world and as it did so boasted that it was an age of 'discovery' and an expansion of the 'known' world, the false claims of European history that knowledge increased in that era. It did not. The truth was the opposite. For, by destroying forests and human cultures, there was in fact a net reduction in the world's knowledge. In the Amazon, the assault against nature is an assault against culture, hundreds of tribal cultures.

So kill pity. Crack down on kindness. Pour mercury over metaphor. Burn their books, hack down their languages and axe their philosophies. Tip Agent Orange into the eyes of a forest Picasso. Tie a Shakespeare's hands behind his back – with razorwire. Break Nureyev's ankles, stamp on Fonteyn's feet. Crack Joyce's head against a wall until the words whimper and fail him. Daub graffiti over an El Greco. Bulldoze the sculptures of Rodin. Burn the entire Oxford English Dictionary. Slash every copy of Dylan Thomas. Napalm the Berlin Philharmonic.

But beyond indignation, beyond anger, there is a terrible and infinite sadness: sadness to the treeless and gaunt horizon for the end of a whole way of knowing, a wild epistemology, knowledge gained through dream and song, songlines and shapeshifting. Native American Black Elk was born in 1863 (in the Moon of the Popping Trees in the Winter when the Four Crows were Killed). When he was nine he had a dream, a vision of being taken to the sky world where he saw the wild animals of the Plains all dancing. At the heart of the dream was a vision of the end of the Plains way of life and a dream of the end of dreaming itself. After the massacre at Wounded Knee, Black Elk said: 'I did not know then how much was ended … now … I can see that something else died there in the bloody mud, and was buried in the blizzard. A people's dream died there. It was a beautiful dream … There is no center any longer, and the sacred tree is dead.'

But beyond, again, beyond sadness, beyond tragedy, you can still smell it, this ancient knowledge, philosophy older than any history; they have survived, these trees, somehow, and uncertainly, but there still are forests, suggesting, prompting, speaking, a riot of language in irrepressible gusto, life growling, flowering, leafing, hooting, wriggling and budding, flickering in a forest fiesta of verdant and noisy verbs, the forest is chattering with language, a whole universe laughing with life. ◊

A REMEMBRANCE

# The Latter-Day Thoreau

*Robert Macfarlane recalls his friend Roger Deakin*

In 1968, Roger Deakin bought the ruined remains of an Elizabethan house, and twelve acres of surrounding meadow, on the edge of Mellis Common in Suffolk. Little survived of the original sixteenth-century dwelling except its spring-fed moat, overhung by hazels, and its vast inglenook fireplace. So Roger put a sleeping-bag down in the fireplace, and lived there while he rebuilt the house around himself.

Walnut Tree Farm, the house he eventually completed, and in which he died in August, 2006, is made largely of wood. It is as close to a living thing as a building can be. When big easterlies blow, its timbers creak and groan 'like a ship in a storm', as Roger put it, 'or a whale on the move'. He kept the doors and the windows open, in order to let air and animals circulate. Leaves gusted in through one door and out of another. It was a house which breathed. Spiders slung swags and trusses of silk in every corner. Swallows flew to and from their nest in the main chimney. As I sat with Roger, ten days before his death, a brown cricket with long spindly antennae clicked along the edge of an old biscuit tin.

The fields, well tended but unfarmed, were also busy with life. Sparrow-hawks busked for custom overhead, deer picked their way through the hornbeam wood and tawny owls hooted from big ash trees. The land was separated into fields by a mile of massive old hedgerow, in places five metres high and five wide. Roger had a habit of driving his cars until they were about to give out, then backing them into a particularly deep area of hedge and leaving them there, to be grown through by the briars and nested in by birds. Walking the fields with him, you would come across old Citroëns with their frog-eye headlights, peeping from the brambles. 'All that needs is a new engine, and we could drive it to France,' he would say, hopefully, as we passed one of these.

Roger wrote as idiosyncratically as he did everything. Thinking my way through his house now, I can count at least five different desks, between which he would migrate according to his different moods. His sleeping-places changed, too. Over the years he had established in his meadows a variety of outlying structures, including two shepherd's huts, an old wooden caravan with a cracked window and a railway wagon that he had painted Pullman-purple. He once emailed me happily about having been out in

the wagon with the rain whacking on the roof. 'An amazing thunderstorm last night as I lay listening. Like being inside a kettledrum with a whole symphony going on out there and with thunder in wraparound quadraphonic!' When he wasn't writing, he was usually swimming, most often in his moat. Swimming helped him think, in all sorts of ways. 'This weather's agony,' he e-mailed me three springs ago. 'It makes me want to write and write, but it also makes me want to GET OUT THERE. The moat is bloody cold, but a good solution because then I can't wait to GET BACK INSIDE IN THE WARM.'

In his relaxed contrarianism, his environmentalism (he was a founder member of Friends of the Earth, and co-founded Common Ground, the organization which has campaigned so significantly for 'local distinctiveness') and his enthusiasm, Deakin was a latter-day Thoreau. Except that where Thoreau lived by his pond for a total of several months over several years, Deakin lived by his moat for nearly four decades, watching and noting the habits of the trees, creatures, wind, sun and water around him. Walnut Tree Farm was a settlement in three senses: a habitation, an agreement with the land, and a slow subsidence into intimacy with a chosen place.

It was while doing lengths in his moat that Deakin had the idea for what would become *Waterlog*. Published in 1999 in a small print run, the book quickly became a word-of-mouth bestseller. Starting from the moat, Deakin set out to swim through the rivers, lakes, streams and seas of Britain, and thus to acquire what he called 'a frog's-eye view' of the country. The result was a masterpiece: a funny, lyrical, wise travelogue which was at once a defence of the wild water that was left and an elegy for that which had gone.

You finish reading *Waterlog* invigorated, and with a changed relationship to water and to nature. It is a book, as Heathcote Williams nicely punned, which leaves you with a spring in your step. I have often thought that a better indicator of a book's worth than its sales figures must be the number of letters that the author receives from readers. Roger got nearly seven hundred: he kept them all, and replied to each one on a handmade card.

The influence of *Waterlog* was immense. Despite its thoroughgoing Englishness, it won admirers in Australia, Canada and Europe. It prompted a revival of the lido culture in Britain, and even the founding of a wild-swimming company (a commercialisation of which Roger quietly disapproved). It also inspired untold numbers of readers to take to the open water.

So it was that, for instance, on a cold grey April day in Sutherland in 2004, I was to be found in the sprawling and remote Loch Sionascaig, in the shadow of Suilven, back-stroking out to an island while the rain fell hard on my face, already looking forward to telling Rog about the swim. The loch was a mile or so from the road, and the pleasure came at a price: I returned to my car peppered with midge and tick bites. As I reached the road, another car came into view. Its driver stopped and wound down her window. 'You've been swimming,' she said. Dripping wet, and standing in my trunks, I could not deny it. 'A bit early in the year, isn't it?' she said. The midges were discouraging longhand explanations, so I said that a friend of mine had written a book called *Waterlog* about wild swimming, and now I couldn't keep out of the water. She gave a surprised smile, reached down, and picked up the audio-tape of Roger's book, to which she had been listening as she drove that lonely road.

Travel with Roger was even more unpredictable than travel under his influence. The dark-green Audi in which he

journeyed to his last escapades had moss growing in its foot-wells ('three different sorts', he pointed out, proudly), and a variety of useful knives in the glove-box. Its boot always held a bivouac bag, a trenching tool of some sort and a towel and trunks, in case he passed somewhere interesting to sleep, dig, or swim. When lost while driving, which was most of the time, he had a habit of slowing almost to a halt on roundabouts and squinting up at the road-signs while I assumed the crash position. He was always proposing adventures: a night stake-out of a new badger warren 'in a mysterious wooded tumulus in Thornham Woods', or a joint attempt to traverse an acre of ancient woodland from one side to another without touching the ground, like the hero of Italo Calvino's beautiful book, *The Baron Of The Trees*. 'He's over sixty,' a friend said to me, 'and he's still got the energy of a fox-cub.'

One July we went to Dorset to explore the system of hollow-ways or ancient drove-roads which seams that soft-stone county. We ended up sleeping in a hillside meadow, and cooking in the bed of the hollow-way. 'A Vedi shepherd in the Pindos once taught me how to make a smokeless fire', Roger remarked idly, before creating a tiny and, yes, smokeless fire that was hot enough for us to boil water on. His extraordinary life meant that he often began stories with sentences of this kind. 'When I was living in a cave in Southern Greece…' 'Did I tell you how a hunter once shot at me because he thought I was a bear?' (The point of the story was how pleased he was to have been mistaken for an animal). We had plans to travel together to Cumbria, and at some point, Australia. He wondered if we could earn our passage out to the Antipodes as oarsmen on a quinquereme. I wasn't sure that we could.

For the seven years after finishing *Waterlog,* Roger was at work on a book about woods. He disapproved of the habit of fetishising single trees – chieftain pines or king oaks. Trees to him were herd creatures, best understood when considered in their relationships with one another (he loved the way that oak trees, for instance, would share nutrients via their root systems when one of their number was under stress). Trees were human to Roger, and humans tree-like, in hundreds of complicated and deeply felt ways. Researching his book, he travelled to Kyrgyzstan, Australia, Tasmania, America, and throughout Europe and the British Isles.

Over the years the project sprawled, digressing into studies of the hula-hoop craze, Roger's anarchist great-uncle, the architecture of pine-cones. The numbered notebooks containing his research fill a wall of the main study at Mellis. It's now clear that a brain tumour was trying to scatter his thoughts, stop him finishing the book. But enough was done by the time he died: *Wildwood: A Journey Through Trees* was published in Spring 2007, and is another major work.

When my daughter Lily was born, Roger became a de facto great-uncle. For her first birthday, he gave her a tiny wooden steam engine, wrapped up in sycamore leaves. Before her first visit to Mellis, he said he had made her a present: this turned out to be a leaf-maze – thousands of bright yellow mulberry leaves that he had raked and shaped into a Lily-sized labyrinth. He showed this level of kindness and thoughtfulness to his many friends. This unstinting giving, this warmth without self-interest, drew people to him: I have never known a person so loved. It was a measure of his generosity and his devotion to nature that, even when he was ill with the cancer which killed him so fast, he could still speak unjealously of the ability of trees to heal themselves.

In early August 2006, I drove to Mellis to see Roger for the last time: held his hand, talked a little, until he fell asleep. The next day, I went with two friends, who had also known him, out to the north Norfolk coast. We swam in wild waves at dawn and dusk, and in the evening we read aloud the pages from *Waterlog* describing that magnificent coastline. We slept in the pine forests which run down almost to the sand at Holkham. I spent half the night in a hammock he had lent me, and half of it down on the needle carpet, where it smelt of sap and resin. Roger died a week later, still in the house that he had built around himself thirty-eight years earlier. ◊

DISPATCH

# On Roydon Fen

## *Roger Deakin takes a wander*

You sense the air of subterfuge as soon as you set foot on Roydon Fen. First, a little row of emaciated cottages that scarcely fill their trousers, flattened up against the potholed track with their backs pressed up again the bank like a row of half-starved soldiers trying not to be noticed, or shot. You can tell from the narrowness of it all that these are squatters' cottages, thrown up overnight on common land to beat the law, tucked away half-hidden up a mangy lane more used to the trundling of peat-cutters' barrows, or the swaying thatchers' wagons piled high with reeds than the tired, faded cars that huddle together on the makeshift cindered hard-standing of an old brickworks.

Across the lane from this East Anglian Skid Row is a landscape from the 1930s or the south of Poland: a shambling range of furtive, low tine sheds malingering along the lip of the wild swamp. Potato patches, merry-tillers just visible in the shadows, small tin shacks with cobwebbed windows, and even a wooden dacha or two with a stovepipe poked at an angle through the tin. Some of the plots are still horticultural in a weed-infested sort of way. The skeleton of a poly-tunnel a hundred yards long, embroidered with ringlets of convolvulus, testifies to a glorious moment of past enterprise. Several tractors, and parts of tractors, sit about in the dry nettle-clumps, attended by ancient cultivators or Ransome's ploughs, and the presence of trotting carts lurking beside makeshift stables, the long-tailed ponies that presumably pull them in a small paddock nearby, suggests the proximity of one or other of the local traveller familes. Other cottages have settled the margins of the Fen as gardens, one or two of them

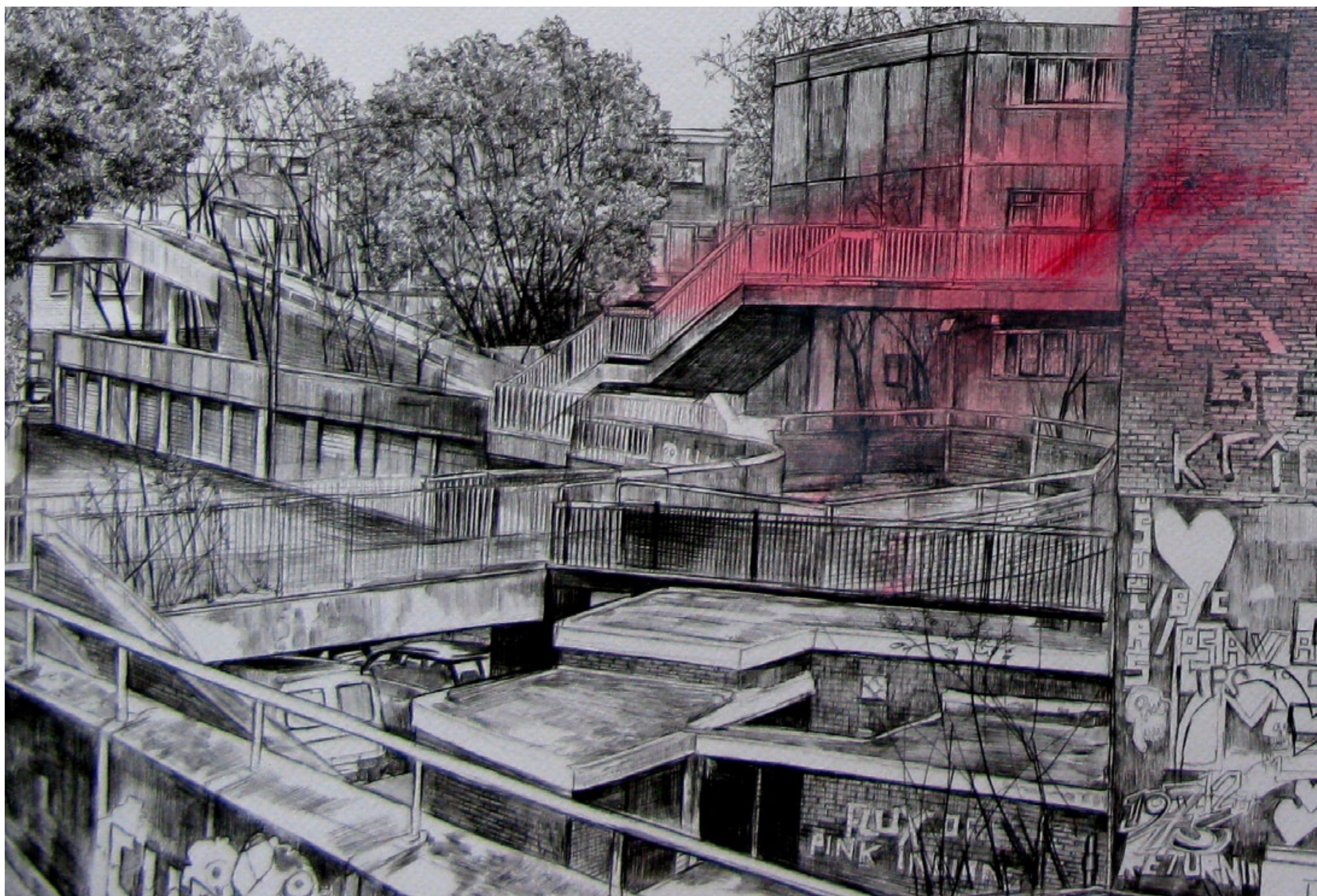
very extensive, a prospect of successive lawns venturing boldly into the reedy interior of the fen.

This is a classic squatters' landscape, and all the better for it. I always feel immediately at home in such makeshift places. Even the little palings carefully aligned along the very edge of the bumpy track to fence in the merest sliver of front garden have a Dickensian sort of attraction. Here are connoisseurs of the miniature landscape, people who discuss land in terms of square feet or even inches, not acres or hectares. Curiously, one or two of the gates bear 'Private. Keep Out' signs that remind me of the lowering resentment of outsiders I have encountered in the Forest of Dean amongst the free miners. Interesting questions about land tenure and boundaries no doubt arise when the time comes for any of these reclusive Norfolk properties to change hands, but even these transactions may, for all I know, be more informal, conducted in the pub over a pint or two and sealed with the slapping of hands.

Immediately beyond the last of the cottages, I began walking through the most prodigiously overgrown coppice woods for miles around. The path through the wood is a great cathedral nave, overhung and occasionally obstructed by the elephantine trunks of trees like hawthorn, hazel and sallow that are usually noted for their slenderness and curvy grace. 'Some mistake, surely,' you think. There's a coppice hazel at one end of the wood that must have been growing away for well over a century. The effect is of a knot of well-fed anacondas twisting out of the black ground, some with signs of dinner within them. One or two of the multiple trunks are not far off a foot in diameter. The stool itself must be twelve feet across. It is simply the biggest uncut coppice hazel I have ever seen. Generations of Diss or Roydon people must have come out and sidled down these old paths through the fen to cut firewood for themselves. The Roydon people would have had the right, but I wouldn't put it past the Diss boys to try on a little unofficial nocturnal wooding from time to time.

There's an odd mixture of holly, oak, poplar, goat willow, alder, birch, hazel, honeysuckle and wild hop growing here. Fallen trees lie angled everywhere, dead diagonals amongst the living perpendicular, roots up in the air. The puddles in the black peat and the iron-stained swamp-water reflect them back. Water flows quietly in all directions, zig-zagging its way under the trees to rejoin the main River Waveney, not much more than a drainage dyke along here, so close to its source on the next-door fen near Redgrave.

Along the boardwalk through the fen swamplands, some conservation volunteers have been busy with chainsaws cutting down alders. The orange scars are still weeping sap, and piles of logs flank the path. This seems a pity, because the alders and willows, half-fallen and caught in each others' arms like ballerinas, create precisely the antidote to modern arable farmland we all badly need. The sheer wanton unruliness of this disgraceful tangle transports me instantly to an era long before chainsaw and strimmers, or the new breed of college conservationists who reckon they know what's good for places. Even the boardwalk raises interesting questions, and I can't help wishing whoever built it could have had the wit to take it for a bit more of a walk; put in a few kinks and hairpins. Who wants to walk in a straight line across a fen? After all, real woods and fens are natural mazes. ◊



# Travels with Paul

*by Arthur Bradford*

I HAD BEEN FIRED from my job for a stupid indiscretion and needed to leave town. I packed up my belongings quickly and caught a ride with an acquaintance who was headed out west. I say 'acquaintance' because I'd only met him once before. He was an Irish fellow named Paul O'Malley and he was the cousin of a woman I used to date, or maybe they were lovers, I never really knew. She had introduced him to me one night in a bar by saying, 'This is my cousin Paul,' but things were rarely straight-up between me and that woman.

Anyway, the point is that Paul had been passing through town on his way to the west coast, and that night in the bar he announced that he would be gone in the morning. I saw him two weeks later though, right after I'd been fired from that job I told you about. He was wandering downtown, looking a little dazed and strung out.

'I haven't slept in three days,' he told me.

'I thought you were going west,' I said.

'I am.'

'But you said you were leaving two weeks ago.'

'I got hung up. Wait, two weeks? It hasn't been that long.'

'Yes it has.'

'Oh.' Paul scratched his head. His hair was thinning at the top. He was a skinny guy with a long neck and an enormous Adam's apple, which bobbed up and down as he spoke. He needed a shave too, or maybe he was growing a beard. The stubble was at that awkward, scruffy half-way point.

'I got fired from my job,' I told Paul. 'I'd like to leave town.'

'You want to ride with me? I'll leave tomorrow.'

This idea seemed to perk Paul up. He clapped his hands together and rubbed his fuzzy chin.

'Sure, yeah, okay,' I said.

'We'll leave in the morning.'

'Great, fine.'

We left two days later. Paul picked me up at my place, still looking tired and rundown.

'I can't sleep,' he said. 'I can't even shut my eyes.'

'What's wrong with you?' I asked him.

'Nothing. Insomnia. I'm fine.'

'You don't look fine.'

'Well, I feel fine,' he said. 'I just can't sleep.'

'Listen,' I told him, 'I don't want any funny business. I just need a ride out of town.'

'Sure, right, I understand that,' he said.

Paul's car was a small Ford hatchback. It was already crammed full with his stuff so I had to leave several of my belongings behind. I left them at the house of a friend with the understanding that I'd return for them later. I never did.

Anyway, we hit the road and began our journey west. Paul's car was equipped with a set of very worn out seats. The one I was sitting in, the passenger seat, had something wrong with the backrest. If I leaned back it would slope off to one side, and I'd twist around uncomfortably. I'd been hoping to get a little sleep while he drove, but I could see now that this wouldn't be possible.

After about three hours of driving, Paul pulled off the highway and stopped in front of a pizza shop. He unbuckled his pants and pulled them down to his knees. Then he looked at me.

'What are you doing?' I asked him.

'I thought maybe you'd like to give me a blowjob,' he said.

'No,' I said. 'No, I wouldn't.'

Paul pursed his lips and nodded his head.

'All right,' he said, pulling his pants up in a hurry. He put the car in gear and sped back out on to the highway.

Now things were awkward between us. We drove for a few hours in silence. A heavy rain began to fall as we crossed the state line into Ohio. When the big trucks passed by water splashed against our windshield and threatened to push the little car right off the road. Paul had to jerk the steering wheel this way and that to keep us on course.

'Are you getting tired?' I asked Paul. 'I can drive. I'm a good driver.'

'That's okay,' said Paul. 'I like to drive.'

But then a few minutes later he said, 'Actually, I'm getting sick of this. Maybe you should take the wheel.'

'Okay,' I said.

He pulled over and we switched seats, quickly running around opposite ends of the car so as to not get too wet from the rain.

The driver's seat was even less comfortable than the passenger seat. I felt like I was sitting in a bucket. The little hatchback was difficult to operate as well. The clutch was loose and I was never quite sure when it would kick into gear. Out on the highway the trucks cruised by and pushed us around like a rowboat on a stormy sea.

'I hope this rain stops soon,' I told Paul.

'Oh, it will,' he said.

Paul leaned back and tried to shut his eyes. Every time he did, though, he could only keep them closed for a few seconds. Then he'd pop them open and his head would snap forward.

'What was that?' he'd ask me.

'Nothing,' I'd say, 'I'm just driving.'

'I can't even take a nap,' said Paul, finally. 'This is a big pain in the ass.'

'Maybe you should take some sleeping pills,' I suggested.

'Oh, I won't do that,' said Paul. 'That's a vicious cycle. Everyone knows that.'

'Okay,' I said.

A while later Paul sat up and said, 'Are you trying to kill me?'

'No,' I said, 'I'm not. I was trying to help.'

Paul stared at me with his bloodshot eyes, and I could see then that if he didn't get some sleep soon things were going to unravel.

'I'm pulling over,' I told Paul. 'Maybe I should get out.'

'What do you mean?' he asked.

'I think I should get out here,' I said. 'I've gone far enough.'

'What are you talking about?' said Paul. He rubbed his face and leaned forward in his seat. 'You said you wanted to come west. We're only in Ohio.'

'I know that,' I told him. 'I just think you need some sleep. We both do, actually.'

'Well, that's fine, but don't abandon me here. We've got a long ways to go. I'm

not doing this alone.'

'You were going to do it alone before,' I pointed out.

'Oh, don't pull that on me now,' said Paul. He slapped his hand against the window. The rain was letting up, at least. I thought Paul was going to cry.

We passed by a sign for a town named Zanesville and Paul said, 'Hey!'

'What?'

'I know someone in Zanesville.'

'We've already passed it.'

'No, let's stop there. She's a nice gal. She'll give us food. I haven't seen her in years. She'll be happy to see me.'

I wasn't so sure about that, but I thought this might be my chance to make a clean break, so I pulled off at the next exit and we backtracked to Zanesville. It was a muddy town situated on the bank of a river. Paul had me drive around in circles for over an hour looking for a street name with the word 'Cherry' in it.

'Cherryvale. Cherryville, something like that.'

When we found the street it was called 'Vine St.'

'Cherries grow on vines,' explained Paul. 'They're vegetables. They grow on vines.'

After some more aimless driving along this street we stopped in front of a brown cottage with a mailbox shaped like a football.

'This is Alberta's house,' said Paul. 'This is it!'

'Are you sure? How do you know?'

'I was here before,' he said, 'I spent a week and a half here. I remember this place.'

We walked up to the front door and Paul pounded upon it.

'We go way back, me and Alberta,' Paul said to me. 'We had a good thing going.'

'When was this?' I asked.

'Six years ago,' said Paul. 'Or maybe seven. She'll remember me.'

He knocked on the door again, but it appeared that no one was home. Paul leaned over a hedge and looked through the window.

'Hmmm,' he said. He tried turning the door handle but it was locked. He looked back in the window again.

'We shouldn't go in there,' I said to him.

'I know, I know.'

We sat down on the doorstep and watched the cars drive by. I had seen a bus station back in town when we were driving around. I thought maybe I could catch a ride over there and find a bus going west.

'I think I'll head over to the bus station,' I said to Paul.

'Oh no,' he said. 'Oh no you don't. You haven't even met Alberta.'

'She's not home,' I pointed out. 'She might not come back for days.'

Paul thought about this for a moment. 'She wouldn't do that,' he said. 'She wouldn't just disappear.'

'You haven't seen her for six years,' I said. 'You have no idea what she might be up to.'

'Look,' Paul said, 'Do you trust me or not?'

I could have told him honestly that I did not. What kind of question was that? But instead I said, 'I trust you, Paul.'

We sat on the step for a while longer. Paul shut his eyes and rested his greasy head on my shoulder. I was afraid to move because I knew he needed sleep. We sat like that for perhaps twenty uncomfortable minutes and then a pick-up truck rumbled to a stop in front of the house. Two teenagers, a boy and a girl, both overweight and pale, got out and began walking cautiously towards us. They were holding hands. I jiggled my shoulder and Paul opened his eyes.

'That's not Alberta,' he said to me. He shut his eyes again.

'They're walking this way,' I told him.

'So what?' said Paul. He refused to move.

The pudgy girl squinted at us and said something into her boyfriend's ear. They stopped walking and looked us over. The girl was wearing a lot of dark make-up around her eyes. She had dark lipstick on too. The boy had stringy black hair and was wearing a hefty pair of black boots afixed with many buckles. The two of them could have been dressed up for Halloween, but it wasn't that time of year.

It appeared that no one else was going to do any talking so I said, 'Hello.'

'Hi,' said the girl.

Paul still had his head resting on my shoulder and I jerked it off so that he would sit up. He rubbed at his eyes and blinked at the rotund young couple in front of us.

'What the fuck happened to you two?' he said.

'I live here,' said the girl.

'Here?' said Paul.

'Yes.'

Paul stood up and turned around as if he didn't know there was a house behind him. I stood up too, trying to look apologetic.

'This is Alberta's house,' Paul said.

'Right,' said the girl. 'She's my mother.'

Paul eyed her sceptically. 'Your mother? What's your name?'

'Linda,' said the girl.

'Linda!' Paul cracked a smile and moved towards her. The girl stepped back, away from him. The boy shuffled uneasily in his enormous boots.

'I know your mother,' Paul said to the girl. 'And I know you too. I remember when you were just a little whippersnapper who wet her pants every morning. Remember that? You and me used to read the comics in the paper together. Boy, you've really grown up. Gotten fat, actually. It's me, Paul O'Malley, remember? What the fuck are you two doing to your faces anyway?'

Linda said, 'I don't remember you.'

'Sure you do,' said Paul. 'Seriously, what is that in your lip, a fish hook?' He was referring to a ring which Linda had stuck through a piercing in her lip. The boy had one too, except it was stuck through his eyebrow.

'My mom's not home yet,' said the girl. 'She's at work. She gets home at eight.'

'Great, no problem,' said Paul. 'We'll wait inside.'

He stepped aside so that Linda could get by. Linda and the boyfriend walked past us and opened the door.

'Don't do anything stupid,' said Linda. 'My mom's boyfriend will kick your ass if you mess anything up.'

'It's cool,' said Paul, 'I just want to take a nap.'

The house was cluttered with various knick-knacks, a lot of stuffed animals and products associated with the Ohio State football team. We sat down in the living room and talked to the kids for a while. Linda's boyfriend was named Ryan. They went to school together and had been dating for about three months. Ryan pulled out a pipe and offered us some marijuana, but Paul wouldn't touch it. He said it would keep him awake.

Linda and her boyfriend got bored with us and went into her bedroom and

shut the door. Paul poured himself a glass of milk from the refrigerator, sat back down on the living room couch, and turned on the television.

'I'm going to leave now,' I said.

'No fucking way,' said Paul.

'Yes, I'm leaving.'

'Just stay here until I fall asleep,' he said. 'I haven't slept in five days.'

'Turn off the TV then. Go to sleep.'

Paul turned off the TV, drank his milk, and lay back on the couch. I was tired too and decided I could use a little rest. I lay down on the shag-carpet floor and shut my eyes. Paul kept shifting about on the couch and cursing so I found it hard to actually sleep. I kept thinking I could hear Alberta coming and would sit up, afraid she'd find us lying there – and horrible confusion would ensue.

A rhythmic thumping noise drifted out of Linda's bedroom and Paul said, 'Hey, those kids are humping in there.'

He jumped up and before I could stop him he was knocking on Linda's door saying, 'Stop that, you fat little rabbits!'

He burst through the door and indeed the two of them were naked rolling about amongst the stuffed animals on her single bed.

Linda said, 'Will you shut the door?'

Paul said, 'Not until you get dressed!'

It was an uneasy standoff, but eventually Paul left them alone and lay back down on the couch. There was no more noise from Linda's room and I finally fell asleep on that shag-carpet floor. When I woke up, Paul was in the kitchen coughing and making a big racket. I went in there and he was kneeling on the floor with his head stuck in the oven. The room smelled of gas.

'What's going on here?' I asked.

'Fuck,' said Paul. 'Shit.'

He was trying to inhale the gas fumes and kill himself but couldn't create a proper seal around his head so the gas was escaping into the room. I grabbed his legs and pulled him away from the oven.

'Leave me alone!' he cried out.

We wrestled about on the kitchen floor and during the struggle Paul tried to kiss me, his hairy face and puckered lips lunging out towards mine.

'I'm not a gay,' he said. 'I can't sleep. Just kiss me.'

Finally I got him to calm down and we sat together on the linoleum floor, breathing heavily, sucking in that gas-filled air.

'I've got a headache,' said Paul.

There was a clicking sound from Linda's room and then a warm blue flame rushed across the hallway floor and burst into the kitchen with a loud hot boom. For a brief second the whole room filled up with a wall of fire and then suddenly we were sitting in the charred kitchen with little flames flickering around us. The paper towels were burning and so were some potholders and the curtains. Paul and I stood up and slapped at the flames and threw water everywhere. Ryan came in and helped us. We yanked the curtains down and tossed them in the sink. A smoke alarm went off and its shrill noise drove us nuts until Paul swatted it down with a broom. After a while we managed to put out all the fires in the house. The shag carpet was seared black and some of the stuffed animals were still smoking. Linda was crying in her bedroom. The place smelled awful now, like burnt plastic. Paul and I noticed that our hair was singed too. Our eyebrows were mostly gone and the skin on our faces was red and welted.

'We could have died,' said Paul.

'That was your goal,' I reminded him. 'You had your head in the oven.'

Ryan apologized because it was his lighter which had set off the flame.

'That's what you get for smoking those doobies, you little fornicator.' said Paul.

'I'm sorry,' said Ryan. He was really shaken up. We all were.

It was nearly eight o'clock and Alberta would soon be coming home. Paul decided maybe she wouldn't be so happy to see him after all. He and I had a brief discussion away from the kids and then we dashed out to his little hatchback and drove away, leaving Linda and Ryan to explain the mess we'd left behind.

'That Linda has really changed,' said Paul. 'I remember when she was just a cute small girl. Now look at her, all clad in black and punched full of metal.'

A police car passed us going the other way, its lights flashing and siren blaring. Paul began to get paranoid and insisted that we ditch the car. That was fine with me.

We parked the car on a side street and walked over to the bus station where we purchased two tickets to Seattle, a thirty-seven hour ride. As we waited for the bus to show up, Paul lay down across three of those plastic bus-stop seats and he finally fell asleep. It was chilly in there and those seats looked about as comfortable as a pile of rocks, but there he was, snoring away. I briefly considered waking him up when the bus arrived and they announced that it was time for us to load on, but then I thought better of it. He was still sleeping like a baby, curled up contentedly under those pale florescent lights, when we pulled away and headed west without him. ◊

# A Change of Climate

Snubbed by her cheerfulness like a loud door
how can I greet her without adjustments?
So when she's gone I always stray
after her temperament, her air –
hoping to keep step with her in her absence.

So when she calls again, I rise to meet her
as if I, not she, paid the visit.
Our seasons shift, slowly, together.
I see her now without a change of weather,
almost, after a minute.

You call me liar and I suspect myself.
But no one suffers, what's improper?
I learn her through and through – she's someone else;
and with my added step deepen her pace.
Mine falters, true; towards being happier.

# Cantelice

When we got in my cousin said
let's climb that hill. We had just
got in from Rome and Cantelice
twisted away from the second story

window in cobble and brick. I
had been warned against scorpions
in the bath by my tante Nicole and
had overheard my mother addressing

Onkel Jens like a brother. At the toilet
seat I stood tiptoe pissing and looking
out across the town to that unsur-
mountable summit covered in scraggly

brush and rutted it seemed by
a large scraping hand with uncut
fingernails. Let's climb that hill
he said again while I zipped up.

My cousin continental and blonde-
haired was bigger than me and partly
French conversant with women and
cigarettes and able to take life lightly

in stride. I was then not. Growing
out of one youth into another more
shameful more conscious of sweating
my way. He childless still rounder

now lobbies in Brussels backing
eccentrics and chasing older
women seemed always a symbol
of the charming and underhand ease

of a man in the world. Before the
inevitable I won't say disappointments
but let's put it this way: before
his old charm of being in the know

turned into the charm of lost causes.
But let's climb that hill he said let's
climb that hill if you've finished
pissing around so we fought our way

scratching and fly-bitten to the windy
top and looked down.

# The Agony Uncle

## *Alain de Botton is here to help*

*Problem: I was born in a small village near Manchester, in a humble family (my father was a farmer). When I was twenty-three, I moved to London in order to go into business. I left most of my old friends behind, and started to make quite a lot of money. I wanted to impress people with my wealth, and I enjoyed the money that I made (I went to restaurants, on foreign holidays etc). However, increasingly (I am thirty-six), I notice that I am quite a jealous person. If I meet people who earn more money than I do, I immediately feel a kind of agitation and envy. I want to be as 'big' as them. This is really ruining my life and I hate myself for feeling envious like this. After all, I have enough, so much more than my family ever had or my friends from my village have now – and yet I feel dissatisfied, like I never have enough. Any thoughts on what I can do or why I feel this way?*

Writ large, your problem is really the problem of Western Civilization: the West is growing richer almost every year, and yet people don't actually feel they have enough. A decline in actual deprivation seems – paradoxically – to have been accompanied by an increase in a sense of deprivation – or at least a fear of it. Populations blessed with riches and opportunities far outstripping those that could have been imagined by their ancestors tilling the unpredictable soils of medieval Europe, have shown a remarkable capacity to feel that who they are and what they have is not enough.

However, these feelings of deprivation (or envy) may not be so peculiar once we consider the way in which a person decides what is enough. Our sense of an appropriate limit to anything, for example, to wealth and esteem, is almost never decided independently, rather, it is decided by comparing our condition with that of a reference group; with that of people we feel ourselves to be like. If we lived in the Middle Ages in a West Coast village and were forced to dwell in a draughty, insalubrious cottage and yet if at the same time we observed that all members of our reference group lived as we did, then our condition would seem normal, regrettable perhaps, but no grounds for particular resentment or anxiety. If we are small and are surrounded by people no bigger than we are, our height will not sadden us unduly. But if others in our group were to grow even a little taller, we would be liable to a feeling of sudden unease, and perhaps fall prey to anxiety and humiliation – even if we had not ourselves diminished in size by so much as a millimetre.

The most striking feature of envy is that we do not envy everyone. There are people whose enormous blessings leave us untroubled, others whose minor advantages are sources of relentless torment. We only envy those who we feel ourselves to be like; we envy members of our reference group. It follows that the more we take people in elevated 'wealthy' society to be our equals (to be our reference group), the more we will be at risk of dissatisfaction. Your problem is that by moving to London, you have not only shifted geographical location, you have also shifted your 'reference group.' Instead of comparing yourself to your family and friends, you now compare yourself to the richest of London society – and not surprisingly, you find yourself feeling 'poor' by comparison. So even though you have grown richer in reality, you have grown poorer in your own mind.

The psychologist William James has written nice things about this disease. For James, satisfaction with ourselves does not require us to succeed in every area of human endeavour. We are not always humiliated by failing at things, we are only humiliated if we first invested our pride and sense of worth in a given achievement, and then failed to reach it. Our goals determine what we will interpret as a triumph and what must count as a humiliation. James, professor of psychology at Harvard, had invested his pride in being a good psychologist. Therefore, if others knew more psychology than he did, he would, he admitted, feel envy and shame. However, because he had never set himself the task of learning Ancient Greek, the fact that someone could translate the whole of *The Symposium,* whereas he would struggle with a single line, was a matter of no concern.

There is a moral to be drawn from this: we have to learn to compare ourselves to the right kind of people and we have to learn to set ourselves a target of what is 'enough' and stick to it. No doubt, if you started to earn as much as the richest people in Zurich, you would start comparing yourself to the richest tycoons of America. This is the way to madness. To stay sane, we have to find a correct kind of reference group, we have to set limits to desire. The sociologist Émile Durkheim put this nicely in his book, *Socialism and Saint-Simon:* 'What is needed if social order is to reign is that the mass of men be content with their lot. But what is needed for them to be content, is not that they have more or less but that they be convinced that they have no right to more.'

One of the first people to recognize how ambitious, capitalist, democratic societies might bring with them a peculiar set of problems was Alexis de Tocqueville. Travelling around the young United States in the 1830s, Tocqueville observed the many advantages of democracy, but also detected a cancer corroding the souls of the citizens of the new republic. In his chapter, 'Why the Americans are often so restless in the midst of their prosperity', he attempted an analysis of the disease:

'When all prerogatives of birth and fortune are abolished, when all professions are open to all and a man's own energies may bring him to the top of any of them, an ambitious man may think it easy to launch on a great career and feel that he is called to no common destiny. But that is a delusion which experience quickly corrects . . . This constant strife between the desires inspired by equality and the means it supplies to satisfy them harrasses and wearies the mind . . . When inequality is the general rule in society, the greatest inequalities attract no attention. When everything is more or less level, the slightest variation is noticed . . . That is the reason for the strange melancholy often haunting inhabitants of democracies in the midst of abundance, and of that disgust with life sometimes gripping them in calm and easy circumstances. In France, we are worried about the increasing rate of suicides; in America suicide is rare, but I am told that madness is commoner than anywhere else.' ◊

# Raymond Chandler to Jamie Hamilton

## *Shakespeare would have done well in any generation*

*'I don't know why the hell I write so many letters,' Raymond Chandler once wrote, in a letter. 'I guess my mind is just too active for its own good!' Chandler didn't write fiction after night fell because he felt it made it too 'ghoulish'. Instead, he wrote letters, or spoke them into a dictaphone for his Mexican secretary to type up in the morning. The following letters are all to Hamish 'Jamie' Hamilton, who was Chandler's UK publisher from 1939 and became one of his closest friends. From an initially rocky start – the first letter begins with Chandler challenging a statement he believed Hamilton to have made about him – they blossom into a series of fascinating digressions and anecdotes about Hollywood, about what he is writing, about what other people are writing, about what he likes – and a fair bit about what he doesn't like too…*

*11 January 1945* · 'I gather that he is a very big shot in Hollywood these days and might resent advice, whoever the sender may be and however good his intentions.' That really cuts me to the quick. I am not a big shot in Hollywood or anywhere else and have no desire to be. I am, on the contrary, extremely allergic to big shots of all types wherever found, and lose no opportunity to insult them whenever I get the chance. Furthermore, I love advice and if I very seldom take it, on the subject of writing, that is only because I have received practically none except from my agent, Sydney Sanders, and he has rather concentrated on trying to make me write stuff for what we call the slick magazines over here. That is, the big shiny-paper national weeklies and monthlies which cater principally to the taste of women. I have always felt myself entirely unfitted for this kind of writing. I much prefer Hollywood, with all its disadvantages.

Why not try me with a little advice some time? I am sure I should treat yours with the greatest respect and should, in any case, like to hear from you.

*26 February 1945* · It was nice to hear from you and to be writing to you. I suppose agents are necessary to a writer because the writer, living a more or less secluded life as a rule, cannot possibly know what is going on in the literary world, what he ought to get for his material, and on what sort of conditions he should sell it. But I think the agent's function ends there. The moment he tries to influence a writer in his work, the agent just makes a nuisance of himself.

*6 October 1946* · My title may not be very good. It's just the best I can think of. I have peculiar ideas about titles. They should never be obviously provocative, nor say anything about murder. They should rather be indirect and neutral, but the form of words should be a little unusual. I haven't achieved this here. However, as some big publisher once remarked, a good title is the title of a successful book. Offhand, nobody would have thought *The Thin Man* a great title. *The Maltese Falcon* is, because it has rhyme and rhythm and makes the mind ask questions.

*10 August 1948* · Just read an English opus called *Blonde Iscariot* by Lustgarten. The year's worst for me. Half-cent pulp writing. What the hell's the matter over there?

I am trying desperately to finish *The Little Sister,* and should have a rough draft done almost any day I can get up enough steam. The fact is, however, that there is nothing in it but style and dialogue and characters. The plot creaks like a broken shutter in an October wind … Am reading [Graham Greene's] *The Heart of the Matter,* a chapter at a time. It has everything in it that makes literature except verve, wit, gusto, music and magic; a cool and elegant set-piece, embalmed by Whispering Glades … there is more life in the worst chapters Dickens or Thackeray ever wrote, and they wrote some pretty awful chapters.

*19 August 1948* · The end of Greene's book is great. It atones for a lack I had felt before.

The story has its weaknesses. It is episodic and the emphasis shifts around from character to character and it is, as a mystery, overcomplicated, but as a story of people very simple. It has no violence in it at all; the violence is all off stage. If it has menace and suspense, they are in the writing. I think some of it is beautifully written, and my reactions to it are most unreliable. I write a scene and read it over and think it stinks. Three days later (having done nothing in between but stew) I re-read it and think it is great. So there you are. You can't bank on me. I may be all washed up.

Lately I have been trying to simplify my life so that I need not rely on Hollywood. I have no longer a business manager or a secretary. But I am not happy. I need a rest badly and I cannot rest until this is done, and I sometimes think that when it is done it will feel as tired as I am, and it will show.

Assuming, for the moment, that the thing is any good, I feel that you may rely on receiving some kind of script in a month. It may need more work, but it will give you a chance to see whether I am crazy or not. I guess Carl Brandt would tell you, up to a point.

I hope this is some help.

—Ray

P.S. It contains the nicest whore I ever didn't meet.

*29 November 1948* · It's nice of [J.B.] Priestley to want to read my stuff. Bless him! I remember him saying, 'They don't write like this at Dulwich.' That may be, but if I hadn't grown up with Latin and Greek, I doubt if I would know so well where to draw the very subtle line between what I call vernacular style and what I should call an illiterate or faux-naïf style.

*21 March 1949* · I remember several years ago when Howard Hawks was making *The Big Sleep,* the movie, he and Bogart got into an argument as to whether one of the characters was murdered or committed suicide. They sent me a wire (there's a joke about this too) asking me and dammit I didn't know either. Of course I got hooted at. The joke was in connection with Jack Warner, the head of Warner Bros. Believe it or not, he saw the wire, the wire cost the studio 70 cents, and he called Hawks up and asked him whether it was really necessary to send a telegram about a point like that. That's one way to run a business.

*22 April 1949* · I like this fellow [Stephen] Spender very much. In fact I like him better than [W.H.] Auden, about whom I have always had reservations. (I am also disturbed at your remark that [Cyril] Connolly has no conscience.) His account of the silken barbarity of Eton is wonderful, of course, and the way these fellows thought and wrote and talked, at an age when Americans can barely spell their names, is also most impressive. Nevertheless, there is something about the literary life that repels me; all this desperate buildings of castles on cobwebs, the long-drawn acrimonious struggle to make something important which we all know will be gone for ever in a few years, the miasma of failure which is to me as offensive as the cheap gaudiness of popular success. I believe the really good people would be reasonably successful in any circumstances; that to be very poor and very beautiful is probably a moral failure much more than an artistic success. Shakespeare would have done well in any generation, because he would have refused to die in a corner; he would have taken the false gods and made them over, he would have taken the current formulae and forced them into something lesser men would have thought them incapable of. Alive today he would undoubtedly have written and directed motion pictures, plays and God knows what. Instead of saying, 'This medium is not good,' he would have used it and made it good. If some people had called some of his work cheap (which some of it is), he wouldn't have cared a rap, because he would know that without some vulgarity there is no complete man. He would have hated refinement, as such, because it is always a withdrawal, a shrinking, and he was much too tough to shrink from anything.

*17 June 1949* · I am very uneasy in mind. I seem to have lost ambition and I have no ideas any more … I read these profound discussions, say, in *The Partisan Review,* about art, what is it, literature what is it, and the good life and liberalism, and what is the definitive position of Rilke or Kafka, and the scrap about Ezra Pound getting the Bollingen [poetry] award, and it all seems so meaningless to me. Who cares? Too many good men have been dead too long for it to matter what any of these people do or don't do. What does a man work for? Money? Yes, but in a purely negative way. Without some money, nothing else is possible, but once you have the money (and I don't mean a fortune, just a few thousand quid a year) you don't sit and count it and gloat over it. Everything you attain removed a reason for wanting to attain something. Do I wish to be a great writer? Do I wish to win the Nobel Prize? Not if it takes too much work. What the hell, they give the Nobel Prize to too many second-raters for me to get excited about it. Besides, I'd have to go to Sweden and dress up and make a speech. Is the Nobel Prize worth all that? Hell, no.

… You cannot have art without a public taste and you cannot have a public taste without a sense of style and quality throughout the social structure. Curiously enough this sense of style seems to have very little to do with refinement or even humanity. It can exist in a dirty and savage age, but it cannot exist in an age of the Book of the Month Club, the Hearst Press, and the Coca-Cola machine. You can't produce art by trying, by setting up exacting standards, by talking about critical minutiae, by the Flaubert method. It is produced with great ease, and without self-consciousness. You can't write just because you have read all the books.

—*The Raymond Chandler Papers: 1909–1959*

# I Speak for the Silent

## *Looking back to 1935*

*'This is a narrative of what befell a Russian scientist under the Soviet regime,' Vladimir Tchernavin writes in the forward to his harrowing and melodramatic account of torture, imprisonment and arctic fishing practices. The latter is included to set the scene. In 1925, after a long spell of poverty, Tchernavin accepted a job with the North State Fishing Trust, organizing the haul of fish from the Arctic Ocean to a settlement on the 'exceptionally austere' Murman coast.*

*All went well until 1929. He worked in peace – 'relatively speaking – as much so as is possible in the USSR.' until the Fishing Trust began to attract the attention of the government's secret police, the GPU. Not long after, Tchernavin was accused of 'wrecking' the Trust, a vague and terrible crime in the Soviet Union. Tchernavin was never sure of the charges. What was 'wrecking'? Comrade, why must you ask unless you yourself are a wrecker?*

*His account is blunt and vivid. 'The bell rang,' Tchernavin writes of the moment the net closed around him. 'I opened the door and saw the house superintendent with a stranger in civilian dress. I understood … 'I am ready,' I said to the GPU agent, thinking to myself, "ready for death."'*

*'What was striking at first was the extreme pallor of the prisoners,' he writes about his comrades in the House of Preliminary Detention. 'Their colourless faces, overgrown beards and hair, dusty and shabby clothes. In the filth of the cell they could not look otherwise. And yet, the majority in this cell were not only intellectuals, but foremost specialists in their lines, men with well-known names and reputations … "In no other place in the world is the work of scientists valued so highly as in the USSR." So speak the Soviet statesmen and the Soviet press. In order to appraise these words I would suggest that they cast a glance into the prison kitchens.'*

*Tchernavin's author photo is a mournful black-and-white portrait. Taken just after he finally reached refuge in Finland with his family, his beard is tatty; his blank eyes stare out. In passages like the following and many others, Tchernavin recounts what it took for the older men to survive in the work camps of the northern Solovetsky Islands.*

'THE ONLY ONES who did not aspire to work were the old-timers of the prison. There were only a few of these, but one of them had been in prison already for over two years. We could not discover exactly why they were being held so long or of what they were accused. The case of one of them apparently had been hopelessly complicated owing to a mistake in a name. He had been sentenced to ten years in a concentration camp and then had been returned from Popoff Island, the distributing point of the camp, but his case was still dragging along. Others had either been forgotten or had ceased to interest the examining officers. Having outlived all excitement and fear they had now become apathetic and indifferent to everything except the trifles of prison routine which for them had taken the place of real life.

'You are too young, you still know nothing,' an old German liked to say. 'Stay as long as I have and then you will learn. Two years and a half! Is that the way to sweep the floor! Here's how it should be done.'

And he would pick up the broom and explain to the novice the principles of sweeping the floor which he had worked out for himself. Others would expound in a didactic manner the rules for washing, exercise and meals. Keeping strictly to the established prison routine these old-timers nevertheless spent the day according to a special system of their own. They got up before the official time and, without hurrying, thoroughly washed themselves, unceremoniously splashing the novices who slept on the floor. Then they carefully folded up their bedding and cots, timing this task so as to finish it exactly at the moment of the general 'getting up'. And during the ensuing commotion and forming of lines they leisurely stood to one side smoking rolled cigarettes in home-made holders.

One of them especially attracted attention. He was extremely thin, delicately built, with hands and feet so fragile that it was frightful to look at them. He could not bend his knees and his legs, encased in puttees, looked like those of some strange bird. His head, completely bald and covered with yellowish skin, was unsteady on a long thin neck. He wore huge, dark-rimmed spectacles that made his eyes enormous; his sharp nose almost touched his chin across a toothless mouth. Eating was most difficult for him; he would lose his spoon and then his bread, while both lay right under his hand.

Their attitude towards food was original. Provisions which they received in remittances were divided into daily rations and wrapped in a special way in paper or packed in small bags. They would drop a small pinch of tea into their mugs, then carefully cover them up with a piece of paper cut out in advance and wait with a dignified air for the tea to steep. They even ate the prison kasha seasoning it with butter received in remittances. The prison soup they improved by adding to it small pieces of bread or salted cucumber – one of the favorite remittance items. They had their own favorite soups and kashas: some preferring barley cereal, others millet. There were no other varieties. They had already been eating these for a year or two, yet still continued to discuss their merits and drawbacks at length.

All day long they played chess, checkers or dominoes, giving themselves with such earnestness to their games that they considered everything else a hindrance to what had become their calling in life. With difficulty would they tear themselves away from the game to eat or go out for exercise and they were greatly annoyed when preparations for the night halted their games.

Their eccentric egotism, possible only under prison conditions, expressed by a complete indifference to and disregard of all the hardships experienced by other prisoners, had reached such proportions that they would not even stop their game of dominoes when men were being led out of the cell to be shot. The harsh voice of the guard would be heard from the other side of the bars: 'Well, get going, hurry up!' The victim would collect his things with trembling hands and murmur his last 'Good-bye, comrades', and still they would continue slapping down their home-made dominoes.

—*I Speak For The Silent Prisoners of the Soviets*
By Vladimir V. Tchernavin, 1935