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“The general form of propositions is: ‘This is how things are.’ That is the kind of proposition that one repeats to oneself countless times. One thinks that one is tracing the outline of the thing’s nature over and over again, and one is merely tracing round the frame through which we look at it.’

Ludwig Wittgenstein

‘Then is Now. The star you steer by is gone.’

Basil Bunting

The sky is translucent that day: azure. My grandparents have one of those aspirational gardens: mini-rockery, bird-bath, two sheds, coiled hosepipe, salt for slugs, cut-out metallic cat-silhouettes with marbles for eyes, and a heavystained bench riddled with osteoporosis. I go to my grandparents' every Saturday because my mum's in work; she is a hairdresser in a purple tunic and matching trousers. Today is remarkable only for the rare Liverpool summer heat that is transparent; it has none of a holiday's closeness.

Do you have memories like this? Not collective rupture. No; I mean something quite different: these are manifestations of a confrontation between you and something that transgresses your sense of reality, your sense of self. It is a lacuna in the wrought texture of memory: it announces itself through the clarity of the absence it limns. That day distempers memory's adaptive powers and the event sustains itself, autonomous. I do not remember it; it does not remember me. We encounter each other, periodically; it is an intruder but not intrusive; it is immutable but amicable. The memory has a firm, exacting handshake.

I'm sat on the wizened bench watching two pigeons anxiously bob their heads into the water of the birdbath I have just scrubbed with a firmbristled brush, the type you use on car alloys. I'll clean it again next week. I go inside for a drink.

My grandparents' kitchen is scoured and burnished and wiped (and rewiped) to the limits of sterility. The washing machine is old; the sink is new. There's a glassfronted kitchen cabinet displaying the cutglasswear that we never use.

Details: the alluvium left by the receding tides of normal memory. There are no contingencies imbrications of self and place and time and other, or the possible; autonomous objects pertain here. They are manifest in and through their clamant, mute presence.

Do you have memories like this? They have their own internal narrative, their own reprehensible and implacable logic. They defy and are negatively defined by the memories that you retrace and reinscribe and remake in the image of yourself; they refuse to become an artifice mirror of your present. This is tangible as an impressive disinterest; there is an alluring probity and an enviable self-possession incommensurate with the floating scaffolds of the present.

They exist as they are.

They exist because they were.

I am in the kitchen drinking lemonade poured from a two litre bottle with a blue top into a Bell's whiskyglass and it is so fizzy that it is almost painful. I can see into the

hallway: bad carpet, glistening (rewiped and rewiped) mahogany book case with sliding glass doors, and a triptych of staged family pictures.

The phone is going in the living room; my grandmother answers with her antiquated refrain, '1573'; she shouts for my grandfather; he crosses the hall into the room; she hands him the phone; the door shuts. Their voices are inaudible but definite; they might be talking about anything. My grandfather emerges from the room and shuts the door and goes upstairs.

The lemonade slips down easier now.

He returns to the living room and then enters the kitchen in ascetic silence. Though the constituent parts are the same, the composition of the greyed moustache, age-striated cheeks and slightly sallowed skin is utterly different. Eyes that glisten above a smile or are milkily blued in thought are fastened beyond me, beyond now. He is wearing grey trousers and a soft, greyer coat. His white helmet is in his right hand, keys in another.

The silence and the heat suppress questions.

Out and into the shed: pigeons stare. He retrieves the red Suzuki motorcycle and wheels it past the kitchen and past the side of the house and past the parked car over the mottled bruisepurple driveway. The silence is uprooted by the rattling carburettor and he goes.

There are no indicators, no intimations: this is a set of actions happening sequentially with lemonade. The road of interwar semidetached houses used to be tree lined. Everything was deracinated. The road is treeless but it is irrevocably straight. Cars mounted the verges and obliterated the verdure. The grasses are effaced but the road goes straight. I walk along the side of the house and sit on the bench and watch the pigeons erupt into the sky.

Do you have memories like this? Coated with the flavour (not the memory of it but the teethcoated, tonguefeeling now but then of it) of lemonade; summer heat in the pores. I am sure: this is a memory and yet it cannot be figured as a memory; it cannot be narrated and renarrated and forgotten and re-membered. Birds come and go. I can name them but that naming would order time on this page and imply a comfortable contraction of that time.

The sky is azure that day: translucent.

The birdbath casts a resolute shadow across the grass and slopes away from me. I go back into the kitchen and rinse the legs of the lemonade from the Bell's whiskyglass.

There is a carrot suspended in water on the sill. The plant is artificial and the window PVC. In an unlidded commemorative tin, a marker of a distant royal date, my grandmother's almond flecked fruitloaf lies interred and slightly charred; the oven is electric and she hasn't quite got the knack of the temperatures or the times. The pigeons return.

The phone rings again: '1573'.

Clockticking silence; time is in there.

This is a quiet house but it is more heavily sedimented than before. I can hear the creasing of my shoe's vulcanised rubber sole; I can hear the tap of water dribbling into the sink; I can hear the distant engagement of hedge and hedgetrimmer.

I skirt past the pine kitchentable's chairs and go into the hall. The living room door is shut and I push it open over the gently resistant pile. It has a resonant and pleasing half-click, half-ping as the pliable ball bearing is relieved in its soft mechanism by the door's motion.

This room is subject to the all day sun. According to a greataunt, having spent some time in Rhodesia, the white blinds are drawn and the windows are shut; the windows are to be opened in the evening and have been open in the morning. All is close and warm in here: white wallpaper, small couches, depthless television and an obtrusive darkwood coffee table, rewiped and pregnant with the smell of polish.

My grandmother sits facing the window.

She had copper hair like mine; my mother sustains the illusion now. The phone is in her doughsoft freckled hands; she is wearing a cream blouse and bifocal glasses just perched off the bridge of her nose, waiting to be repositioned; her skin is pale and her cheeks are silk.

Clocktick.

We are alone in this room: blind to the outside.

The phone is in her hand.

There are plates fixed to the wall with pastiche painted pictures of an imagined and false pastoral; a crossword hangs half complete on the armchair in the baywindow.

'Where has grandpa gone?'

'To your house.'

'Why?'

The phone is in her hand.

Why?

Do you have memories like this? Everything is unalterable. There are no vacillations between fiction and fact; there is no space for conjecture. The memory is whole. You cannot change the constituent parts: every part is the keystone. Alter the atom and you obliterate the whole. The position of the clock and the shadow of a pot of pens behind the drawn blinds are the part and the whole. It would be wrong to think of this memory as unspooling before you now like a narrative.

‘Why?’

Tick.

The sound of the motorbike engine invades the room through the blind windows. The frontdoor of the house opens and shuts quickly. My grandfather walks into the kitchen and takes off his helmet and puts the keys on the pine kitchentable.

I cannot see his face.

The heat and the gestures and the clocktickquiet temper the day.

My grandmother leaves the room and goes to her husband in the kitchen. She shuts them in. I stand in the living room and stare at the phone she has left in the gentle, humanpressed dimples traced into the couch. The house is completely still; there are no voices from the kitchen. I go to the armchair in the window and examine the crossword.

A car descends upon the house; I recognise the squeal of the brakes and map the muffled tyre sounds on to the ruination of the grass verge outside. The blinds are drawn. The car is a dull silvergrey with a superfluous low spoiler and wide chassis: my mum’s Honda.

She should not be here, in the middle of today.

Car doors (three) open simultaneously and shut fractionally apart: a fractured thud outside the blinds. No voices; the hard rap of a key’s point on the glass of the front door.

Pulled, the kitchen door opens with the same resonant and pleasing half-ping, half-click as the living room door; my grandmother opens the front door as my grandfather enters the living room.

‘Sit down.’

My brother (same height; same father) precedes my sister (eight years younger; pastoral blonde curls; miniscule in pink) and my mum in a purple tunic and matching trousers; she wears old leathered flipflops for work and there are dark filaments of hair stuck to and between her purple painted toes with the resilience of tungsten. I feel-hear the slap of sole on heel.

We four sit together on the three seater settee held fast by its arms. My grandmother resumes the chair facing the window and my grandfather blocks the television and looks at the blinds.

Do you have memories like this? Everything is held together in perfect tension, in perfect composition. All other permutations of this moment (a quantum multiverse full of them) are excluded by this room, these people, these three words.

He turns from the blinds to us.

‘He is dead.’

I am surprised by the natural logic of my sister’s young, loud tears. My brother and mother and me are mute. My grandfather sweeps his eyes away; my grandmother raises one hand to her mouth and her weddingring is dull gold: ‘My God.’

We burn in the crucible: a magnesium ribbon: ethereal white and transcendent. The oxygen of events transforms us completely.

‘He is dead.’

You might think that time would distend in this moment: that the ache would stall the clocktick and there would be a general respite in the galaxy’s motion. No cessation, no deceleration. Only the punctuating clocktick.

Impertinently, a car drives by outside. My sister is still crying, quieter now; my mother turns to her and comforts her as best as anyone could hope to do. Her father, my stepfather: ‘He is dead.’ I am staring at the arm of the settee and I notice the density of the magnolia fibres and stare, and stare, and stare.

‘How did he die?’

My sister’s words and face are wet with tears.

My grandfather sweeps left-right along the couch to where she is sat: her shorts and tshirt make her look even smaller than her spindled frame might and the naïve curls of her hair are spoiled by sweat. An early summer tan is now a pall; there is a halfdried brackish delta spread across her tiny cheeks.

‘In a car accident.’

This is a lie, I think: our car is outside.

My mother is mute.

Rising, my grandmother busies the creases from her linen trousers; she moves to her daughter and granddaughter pooled at the opposite end of the settee and their heads and bodies brace together. My sister is encompassed and her tears are stilled, wrung out.

My mother and grandmother are crying now: their tears silent and darkly pursued by mascara down cheeks.

My grandfather stands halfpropped by the wall looking over the black and white squares of the crossword; my brother sits in dazed silence; I am beyond words. We three look apart.

My mother and grandmother are scooping my sister from the settee, promising to buy her something from Woolworths. Slowly, they stand and move away from the cloistering room and into the hall and crack the frontdoor open.

I look at my grandfather.

‘How did he die?’

He blinks; his gaze sweeps over across the sunlit blinds and over the armchair and across the jutting darkwood coffee table and looks at me and my brother and me, again. Pearling hints of glaucoma are laminated by his eyes’ wetness.

‘He committed suicide.’

The memory pivots here.

Inexorably my grandfather’s head falls, and with it his gaze to the ground. The crease of his grey trousers looks especially sharp.

The words hang in the room; they are conspicuous between us. I am startled by their simplicity and look again at the blinds. I do not cry; my brother is propped by the settee as he slopes backwards and looks down.

We are pillared where we are in the still clocktickquiet.

The lock of the front door snaps close.

My grandmother breaks the room’s threshold. She is stood. Her hand is perched on the doorknob.

‘Would anybody like some lemonade?’

*

The day moves darkly before we go home. My sister returns with a doll; the lemonade is flat and listless.

*

As we are driving along the terraced road to our house the windows peer out. The car slows and I peek between the front seats ahead. Squatting in the middle of the road trammelled by parked cars is an ambulance. It is silent and static.

Two paramedics descend the three steps from our frontdoor and poised between them is a gurney bearing a black and loaded bag. It is sufficiently rigid to hide the exact lines of its contents.

People have clattered on their steps, on the pavement and the cessation of their muttering is marked by the apparition of the stolid black bag suspended by two strangers; two anonymous and preparatory pallbearers.

I feel the papered warmth of the chippy dinner cradled in my hands.

The paramedics lift the gurney into the ambulance and into place; one climbs in and thumps the doors shut; the other glances around and looks at our car, passively tired; he loads himself into the driver's seat and rolls off along the road.

Partially obscured by the paramedics, our arrival maintains the neighbours' silence. The road feels hotter and closer and more densely peopled than I might remember it. The air is suffused with warming vinegar. Ensnared by the car, we exploit its blindspots.

My mother is the first to perforate the silence.

'C'mon.'

Her door opening splits the quiet on its uncoiled hinge; my grandmother is next out of the passenger door into the street; my mother collects my sister and her doll from the backseat; my brother and I follow.

The street is wholly stilled. Half the windows catch the day's hot drying light. Our exit from the street endures the edifice of neighbored staring that will not stir until we are out of sight.

The key is slowly loud in the lock; the tongue is heavy in the groove; the door cleaves open. I follow my family in and the door sounds heavily shut. A babbling rivers over the street outside; some of the doors puncture the colloquy sounding itself and its way after the quiet ebbs.

In the kitchen my grandmother heaves plates out of the rack and they clatter over themselves and the table. I begin unfurling the chips from their paper and my brother gropes out portions for each of us; my mother works the fish apart and plates it. I look down at its oleaginous sheen and attempt a chip.

None of us is hungry; none of us speaks.

I stand up and move out of the kitchen and into the hall and up the stairs for the toilet. We have just had the stairs recarpeted; the pile is close and dark cream and

observes a square pattern. The stairs turn tightly right at the top in front of the bathroom.

Stop.

Just left of the bathroom door there is a stain in the carpet.

It looks like someone has spilt Ribena.

The vermillion is thickly congealed. It has insinuated itself into the dense texture of the new carpet and is clear and real. I cannot but look. The clot of memory is in this singular and irrevocable mark. It is a stain in the texture of the carpet, in the fabric of the house, in the spool of time, in the fibres of memory, in the constellations of consciousness, and in me.

*

The daub on the carpet led me into the contours of an imagined past that is latent; this singular mark softened and bruised time. The causes of his action become superfluous. I move from the now of this stain to the multiplying possibilities of those last moments, of this final option, and I can tentatively feel out the vague curves of another's acute and saturating pain; I might fabricate descending into that darkening deepness. Every one of these things, and more, is in that purpled carpet. It is the release from the clarity of a memory that proffers no absolution. At the centre of this memory is a molten self-concealing core of the absolutely inconceivable around which everything coheres and orbits.

In the morning, the carpet has been scrubbed clean.

*

I can never leave that blind ticking room.

I did try.

My grandfather and brother are welded by the lucidity of the heat and the day to the precipices of the room. My mother and sister and grandmother are next to the woodsplitting sound of the opening frontdoor. I hear the crush of the fibrous carpet beneath my feet as I stand and move around the darkwood coffee table and between my grandfather and brother and out into the hall and pass my grandmother's look beyond incomprehension through the frontdoor and between the car and the deep red of the Suzuki and on to the road.

I look right and then left.

My mother is walking away in purple along the straightened road faintly sounding the sole slap of flipflops.

I turn toward the house.

As my mother and sister move out of sight at the end of the road their hands interlace. Her left hand stretches out towards my sister's right, half-pulled and half-lifting. My mother's arm descends and my sister's aspires.

Buckling together, their hands will interfuse an unspeakable and boundless love.