

At Sea

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1

The Work of a Lifetime

I was driving by one of our old haunts the other day,
when suddenly, for no real reason (well maybe something
in the roundness of the brake-lights ahead or the particular yellow
of the Speed Limit 30 sign that used to be 45 . . .) I remembered

this thing we used to do. Not what it was exactly,
which wasn't the important part, but how we did it.
Religiously, I guess you'd say, not in the sense that it meant
much to us, but we were that regular about it.

And remember when we actually were religious?
We practiced a little known faith, full of abstruse ritual
and cryptic teachings, but also great kindness and warmth.
I remember little of the concentric cosmology, the four levels

of existence, or the tripartite hermeneutic system, but I confess
a disconnected verse does drift back to me now and again
and I'm filled with the rich aroma of cedar and incense,
the room of us all bowed to the same ardor, the work of a lifetime,

the donut holes and coffee of the fellowship hall,
an easy intimacy you could slip into or out of at will.
And so we did, eventually, for one reason or another,
and I suppose there's no going back now.

I waved solemnly to our old haunt as it passed into the side-view
becoming concentric versions of itself, as each of the four
levels of existence will pass, if only into each other.
I allowed myself a moment for all of it, then returned to the work.

To Begin with

In the beginning there was salt and pepper
and from the salt sprang all things cubed and homogenous,
while pepper progenated, I guess you'd say,
the spice (zip, speckle, bite) of life, though not everyone
could handle it as well, or at least not as much,
but so it was seen to, and that was that.

Next of course sugar and cream were required
to variously temper (each according to each's temper) the dark
mornings of the universe, to smooth or sweeten, pinch
or thicken, the bitter but vivifying void, through which it was written
(wasn't it?) each tongue must daily plunge anew.
And so it came out, and that was something.

So now things were really underway and the place started
filling up: from the salt of the earth rose the earth and its plainer
but hearty varieties (potatoes, Quaker oats, Quakers, three-legged
stools, wool pants, long underwear, grandparents, Japanese
mid-size sedans); from the salt of the void, the voluminous seas, swirled
with their bounty of seals, seahorses, squid, mer-people, and fish
sticks; from the sugar of the void, juice; from the sugar of the earth,
baked goods, social goods and graces (good school districts,
"Good morning"s, good eggs, apples, fences, neighbors, Samaritans,
health, luck, and wishes), good intentions, goody-goodies, and the occasional good
for nothing; from the cream of the earth and void – well, here conclusions
become somewhat subjective, varying with tastes, times, and personal
social views . . . but meanwhile pepper continued to catch
in throats and tickle noses. So . . . there it was,
and it was becoming quite a bit.

Here rest was suggested but largely (though there remain advocates)
ignored. Instead, the proceedings proceeded along two primary trajectories:
Things became newer, cheaper (or more exclusive), faster, more efficient, orderly,
and abundant. Juice became concentrated. Eggs became bigger, then smaller
but organic. Mer-people became movie stars, fish became frequent fliers.
Water started running and strengthening teeth, good health became
better. Stools, cars, pants, and long underwear lasted longer (as did grandparents),
pontoons, seaplanes, scooters, subways, Segways, and sprinters all sped up, seas
(and space) became navigable, postage predictable, toasters adjustable, and risks
calculable. Leftovers became landfills but soon were recyclable, things looked like
continuing. Other things became left out or behind to different degrees, including
several species (some severely) and human majorities much of the time. Hunger,
death, disease, discounting, and distancing became concentrated (though not altogether
exclusive).

The two trajectories seemed related, though shifting everything up to the first always polled well. New plans were often produced and sometimes tried, the right recipe remained elusive, but things looked like continuing.

vanishing point up ahead? Or better yet
you go South with the geese, and I'll swoop down after, reckless
at first, then more
modest with each step.

The Broom

The broom was made in a factory
though brooms aren't hard to make by hand,
the man thought. A straight sapling, sanded

a handful of stiff bristles trimmed to size
and twined tightly at the base. A simple job,
though he knew no one who'd done it.

He swept and tucked the broom behind
his coats. At first the broom remembered
little of the time before the man and coats.

The silence reminded him it had been loud
a crowd of voices that whirred and rumbled
wholly unlike the man's soft sputter and cough.

A language of brooms, though he'd lost the thread.
There had been heat, the cold closet confirmed,
at the fiery start of things, a furnace churning

and a red pulse that thrummed in reply. Each thing
was a piece, each piece had a place and a part.
The process proceeded and no one asked why.

Back in his strange grip, the broom felt like a secret
the man had invented and had no way to solve.

Ornithology

Then it wasn't so much that there was a songbird on every branch as every branch had a place for one and a definite set of criteria for occupancy. That was something even people could learn. And, while not literally songs, the birds' warm throatings seemed not unagreeable to analogy.

This provided common ground, and if the birds took little notice still it was some comfort to us, and rather neighborly of them, so we gladly fed them in return. Meanwhile, they flirted in our binoculars – though here we should admit mutuality is harder to establish.

But unquestionably they ate. That, however, as they (not the birds) say was then. What precisely happened is hard to pinpoint, though certainly the business with the Passenger Pigeons didn't help, their extinction and its causal connection to certain human hunting patterns.

And without attempting to resolve those sticky questions, mirrorish vs. interventionist vs. creationist vs. autonomous vs. semi-autonomous, semi-mirror/intervention/creationist, definitively, it seems probable that *The Birds* (Hitchcock 1963) put a few people on edge re: our fowly neighbors

(who perhaps themselves took less than kindly to a representation that in their eyes could scarcely be blamed for smacking of slander). In any event, sustaining our benign assumptions was getting harder. And how can one build a community with a population that won't talk?

(Particularly one that nonetheless vocalizes so much – many even with our literal (though of course not) words which on some level can't help but sound like a taunt or rebuke however hard we strive to read their stubbornly unintelligible antics generously.) All of which leaves things

strangely similar to where we began. Feeders are fed their thistle, sunflower, gluey-suet, cracked-corn, peanuts, popcorn, and nectar as regularly as before. In the bird house the shades are now drawn and solicitors go unanswered, but the food has yet to be refused.

Personal Day

My toaster oven is a silver throated
starling. Its heating coil thrums
like wing beats, glows
like the molten throat of song, as it
heats up my pizza rolls. Gosh, I think,
I could stare at this all day.
Then I do stare at it all day,
making bag after bag of pizza rolls.
My boss calls, wanting to know
where I am (I've been on thin ice
at work for a while now). I tell him
I'm sorry, but my toaster oven
is too beautiful to leave.
When I'm out of pizza rolls,
I run it empty. It sings
like ringing crystal.

The Knock of Destiny

So there I was, minding my own business
 as much as one can in our digital age
 when the message appeared:
 “Norton VandeGroot would like to add you to his professional network”
 like a door swinging open exactly halfway
 so that only the crystal light reflected on the adjacent wall
 could be seen by the dazzled traveler
 the song of cocktails and ski lifts lilting over him from beyond
 the threshold . . .

Well, St. Mildred’s is closer but Aberforth’s
 has a great Chinese scuba immersion program.
 No, freshwater Orca steaks; they fly them in from the Yangtze
 but they’re more sustainable. Gortex outer,
 the liner is Himalayan heirloom lambs’ wool.
 We winter there. Perhaps you’d care to sample the air on the veranda?
 Viennese? Upper Arctic, if I’m not mistaken.
 You have, if I may say, an exquisite nose-palate.
Enchantée.

Moi non plus.

Nonplussed?

Erm . . . the *s* is silent.

Well, that’s very decent of you to say.

No, I don’t imagine we shall be staying long, after all,
 no doubt the walk needs shoveling, and I’ve only rented
 the tux and carriage till midnight; already they’re starting to turn
 orange at the edges. But please take this loafer
 with my fondest regrets.

2

The Day We Met

for Sarah (for once)

I remember it like it was Christmas,
that blustery November day at a trading post
in the northeastern Sahara, you with your albino camel and perfect
Arabic, me bleary and sun-dazzled after a midnight border-crossing.
You spotted the spelling errors in my forged papers
immediately of course (ever the editor) but complimented
my maps. (In those days of cynical alliances and deceit, when everyone
seemed expendable, that kind of encouragement meant a lot.)
I was headed north for a used-book store in Alexandria,
you were off to interview an outlaw Berber poet in the South – so we split
the difference and headed west. All day the sand
sang through our hair and softened our shoes,
the scorpions parted tenderly before us, the sun stole past
with great tact. You played me the sad music of the moon and stars,
the ruffled seas, uprooted cherry trees in blossom; I told you of an ancient
footnote I had read about and one day hoped to find.
When night came, I laid out a picnic blanket with the wine and cheeses
of home. You lit a fire to keep the jackals at bay and told me a story
about two college students in the upper Midwest who met one night
carpooling into town. They laughed together and asked many of the same questions,
they met more and more often. They liked some of the same movies
and music, talking and walking together. Later
they were sometimes anxious or frayed or hurt together too,
as the world always rattles and quakes itself, sweetens and sours,
but they were lucky ones; she made him very happy and she – he thought –
might just have been happy too.

The Tin Soldier

After many years
the tin soldier returned from the war.
His bright red coat had faded
and most of the buttons were gone.

She no longer danced
but he still called her his ballerina
though most days he found
little else to say.

To make ends meet
she mended shirts and jackets
through the night, then typed
eight hours at a downtown firm.

She imagined each
report and memo was a letter
she was writing in a language
only he could read.

Many of his friends
hadn't come home.
Sometimes he saw the ones
he didn't save calling

as the current swept
his little boat away.
But there were closer faces
fixed in pain, his rifle's length

between them, how
he'd thought he had to
cut through them
to get back to her.

After she knots
the night's last stitch, she climbs
into the silent bed beside him.
She touches his face

cold and soft as tin.

Lincoln Memorial

As a kid I couldn't tell you whether they called him Abe or Abraham, but there he is, after a long day of mowing grass or plucking chickens or something, and probably no more than half a cup of boiled corn for dinner, hunched at the kitchen table in the sputtery, one candle's worth of light, reading. Reading! And yes, there are only half a dozen books in the county. And yes, this one cost a ten mile walk and three hours threshing and a solemn promise to have it back by Tuesday next. But no price is too great for little Abe – or Abraham – who wraps his gangly form almost into a pretzel, sitting at the small table and bending his neck like a greedy giraffe into the watering hole of fluttery candlelight to drink in each delicious word. And yes, maybe it's partially the dizziness induced by this rather awkward position. And yes, maybe too – just a little – the cumulative effect of meal after meal of corn-scented water while all the while his adolescent body insists on its explosive trajectory of growth, calories be damned, so that now he is stretched past mere thin-as-a-rail or twig-like, past skeletal even, to the very edge of translucency. And yes, maybe also – could well be – the absence of anyone he could really talk to, any boy or girl approximating his own age for miles in any direction – and the stony faces of his father and mother, petrified from years of enduring, of scrimping and scraping an existence from the heartless soil, hardly the most welcoming for a boy's disclosures, questions, knock-knock jokes, or just plain chatter. So yes, maybe it is, to some degree, a combination of all these factors of deprivation and hardship – and yes, yes, no video games or internet or even school dances to be had – Maybe all this, but here, at this moment, hours after he should have collapsed in sleep, neck craning downward to those ecstatic words, nose almost touching the page, so that his face – on the very edge of translucency – gleams in the candle sputter radiance like a star in birth or death, young Abe seems to have glimpsed the face of God or heaven or grace or something like or totally unlike these things. Outside of course nothing has changed. A jack rabbit gnaws nervously at a dwarfish cornstalk, the Big Dipper winks its cryptic promises, and that crying is only the motherless wind rushing through the Indiana night.

Waking

Rain in Giza
City of tomb and pharaoh

What fog clutch
What gray light

City of wax
and waning

Want and wanton
work What

worm work
Dry and not dry

Hour by hour
Grain by

Day
waking to find

Not a kingdom
crumbling

City of damp
growth

Climbing

The Investigation

The hoof prints led to a first story
window with a broken latch. The lipstick

on the asparagus spear was a certain red
available only in the upper Andes. The ink

was Indian, the handwriting unmistakable
(though the message had yet to be deciphered)

The hand, mouth, and hoof, couldn't be far behind . . .
Meanwhile, the money led West: Ostrich ranching rights

outside Silver City, credit defaults swapped
for Portland oyster futures, under-the-table

Pacific fish interests, unnumbered
Swiss Bank accountants. The scent was fresh,

the fingerprints unidentified but warm.
Somewhere a motive coughed, an alibi fidgeted.

Slowly, the suspects materialized,
sturdily built to fit the physical demands

with the appropriate gait and pedigree,
steady hands and desperate jaw lines, eyes like

microwave doors, wired into the right networks.
The shape of events was solidifying, the receipts matched

the ticket stubs, the pattern matched the profile. True,
no victim was yet in evidence, the exact

crime remained elusive, but the structure
was established; the facts were indisputable

and the reports immaculate. The rest would follow.

The Nature of Things

It started with an obvious lie: everything is the same. People, planets, plants, planters, peanuts (Planters), pork chops, pork rinds, orange rinds, orange-ade, Band-Aids, razor blades, grass, horses, hoses, head-nets – the same. The next step was to make the lie practically true. This required interchangeable parts. A gear became a gear. Screws came in ten sizes, feet came in twelve. Watchmakers, cobblers, carpenters, cart-makers, bread-bakers, blacksmiths, tailors, clock-winders, wool-spinners, paint-stirrers, paper-pulpers, and other crafters all became unemployed, which was a good start. Inevitably in turn this provoked the unemployed's spirited admiration for the system that had so swiftly outstripped them. Many set about making screws, grinding gears, and measuring feet. This led of course to a certain leveling effect, a smoothing of edges, and a definite shift in perspectives. At the same time there wasn't room in the factories for everyone, so some had to become owners, bankers, derivative traders, contract lawyers, chairs-people, presidents, Pulitzer prize winners, college students, collectors, benefactors, nostalgics, nurses, and no-shows. Meanwhile the parts begot combinations, which only redoubled the differing. What was needed was greater precision: everything is the same in different ways. That seemed to do it. The parts did their spectacular best to surprise, while promising at bottom a stable foundation. Each clock clicked, glided, or glowed in glorious unison (after the appropriate adjustments), every word would translate.

Zoology

A bird in the hand gathers no moss, domesticated
as he is out of all pursuits – collection, construction, the very
will from which we build our idiosyncrasies –
what separates us from the animals, we bragged,
separating them from the natures
we were building for them – the northern ear-tufted lynx
ranges wide and solitary in the boreal forest
of country, country, and country – two caged
lynxy eyes tragi-confirm the truth:
noble beast, you were not meant for the zoo, the zoo
teaches each visitor, and each devisits some measure sadder,
wiser to the daily human world, itself wiser, more
human for the secrets we were learning to extract: a rat,
for instance, remembers the kinds of tricks researchers like,
but three days sleepless will forget to keep his balance
(again and again), a chimp can learn to sign, tool, and smoke,
a dog can survive in space (a while) – each invites
comparison, contrast, clipboards, graphs, and pie charts, calls for
further tests, more not-human samples, to move, twitch, surprise, and
die in fascinating ways, and each scalpel (we cannot help but feel)
probes toward some larger project, as yet unimagined
but we'll keep trying.

Birds I Invented for My Job

Twirl footed swamp strider
(flightless but graceful).
Subsists mainly on minnows
and the wetlands' more annoying frogs.
Friend of the restless camper.

Trumpeter wren: distant cousin of both
the like-named swan and the regular
wren. Believed to evidence that once
there was no division. Splits
its time between water and forest.

To your left, the snipe billed inland albatross.
So named for its short, knifey beak
and the shrill call it emits. Wing span
somewhat shorter than its marine relative,
albeit still significant.

That rapid drumming you hear
is the cave bellied oakpecker.
A species which eats the bark of a rare oak,
indigenous only within this park. The oakpeckers'
storied persistence has nearly succeeded
in wiping them out.

Sharp as the needle gazed falcons',
my boss's eyes met mine. I understood
like the crested wave troller in winter,
my time had come to migrate.

Regretfully

When I put down the crossword
I found you'd gone

though your place setting remained.

Where to?
Out into the world presumably

to see what all the fuss had been about
all this time

I'd kept you to myself unfairly

and when your leaves became spotted
your coat pallid and limp

I was hard at work

on something
Could you hold this spanner a tick?

and forgot to ask

after your Uncle Ned
your relations in Calgary or Deer Harbor

was it?
It was a lot of things I guess

the gnomes in the bureau
rain on the receiver

days with no change in conditions

every book for me a trap door
to a musty cellar

filled with books
all I would talk about

on my return

the time scuttling like lobsters
through the crack in the cupboard

till one day you followed them

your exoskeleton gleaming
like I hadn't seen in years

back into the coral forests of words
with my blessing always.

New New New Millennium

When the millennial clock struck two many people felt it had gotten very very late to the point even of an end.

And indeed one witnessed a veritable pileup of planes, trains, and automated vacuum cleaners, tangles of telephone-, power-, and airlines that vined their way over the shrinking globe as it ballooned with staggering numbers of new people and peoples living and dead, waking, sleeping, walking, bussing, training to build a better mousetrap (others meanwhile engineering better mice) so that, in short, the whole concatenation seemed headed to a boiling, melting, flash, or otherwise terminal, point.

But to begin our investigation with a beginning,

A divisive but more or less peaceful man had made a large enough stir in a corner of a corner of the Roman Emperor's area to be put to a particularly gruesome, though hardly out of the ordinary entirely, death. For a variety of reasons, social, political, personal, spiritual, religious, socio-political, politico-spiritual, persono-social, etc. – which for want of space we cannot catalogue here in full – this had a large effect on what happened next. So large that (after a nontrivial interval) a new millennial clock was made. Like all clocks it wasn't exactly right (fast to the tune of a few years) but not bad.

(At the same time, plenty of other people were born, many of them very nice, some not, and many other things happened as well, such as: marriages, new businesses, first words, last words, people killed – some in the same way – people killing people and other animals, cows brought to market, pressures brought to bear, shiftings and solidifications, taxes, apologies, exemptions, arguments, lunches, farmers farming, crafters crafting, fishermen taking a breather, new loaves taken out of the oven fresh – though none of these things were why the clock was started then (later)).

So the clock started its ticking, tocking off trends that developed into developments or withered fadward to the periphery of its dominion, to shuffle like curiosities in the alleyways of the quaint. But away from these violent and leisurely byways the clock clicked on, for there was much to be measured and tidied (more actually all the time), and so the clock busied itself piling events into eras, eras into epochs and in no time at all apparently the clock struck one.

From this point it was more or less the same but faster: the clock began begetting new clocks which begat clockspring of their own: telescopes, microscopes, compasses (both kinds), longitude, latitude, lawn-mowers, hedge-trimmers (electric

and gas), telephones, telephone books (books!), double-entry bookkeeping, the Dewey Decimal System, the regular decimal system, fixed interest rates, variable interest rates, credit, dynamite, bulldozers, construction cranes, wrecking balls, particle colliders, the plum pudding model, model trains, real trains, coal mines, solar panels, hydro-plants, the U.S. Postal Service (other postal services), zip codes, postcards, ex post facto, common law, civil law, martial law, marital law, maritime law, torts, sliced bread, canned tuna.

In short everything became more connected and divided, or at least in more ways.

Meanwhile, people had not been lost in the shuffle but were likewise sifted, sorted, labeled, stacked, and reassigned. Many kings became divine, then obsolete, then retro. Some subjects became citizens (others stayed women, poor, or otherwise out of favor for a while). Some farmers became factory workers, some workers became automated. Some islanders became English. Some English became French. Some Danes became Germans, then Danes, then Germans again. Many other people became natives many of whom became slaves. Some people became confused. Wars became bigger and also confused (though few people remembered them being small or making sense). Some people developed explanations. Many people wanted explanations. Some people were satisfied. The main rule seemed to be that everyone had to participate (there were probably exceptions).

Many people began again to wonder where it was all headed (many people assumed it was all headed somewhere). An end was a perennial suggestion.

3

History Lesson

It started with my shower head
babbling something in my ear about ancient Rome.

It was far too early for that kind of talk.
I skipped the conditioner.

Then the mirror would only show me deserts,
long lines of slaves hauling sandstone.

Meanwhile the light bulb was abuzz with Edison and General Electric.
I decided I could manage in the dark.

My tooth brush whispered fervently, but I kept my mouth shut
and hummed.

All I wanted from my cell phone was the time,
but of course it had to chime in:

“I am become death, destroyer—”

At this point, I'd had enough. I whirled and faced
these traitorous contrivances.

“My water comes from just up the street!” I bellowed.
“This mirror's for shaving and composing

my features. And my phone keeps immaculate
time because I pay my bills on time.”

I sputtered to a halt. The mirror faithfully reflected
fire-shot eyes and a goblin face.

Linear B: A Fiction

Discovered at the turn of the twentieth century on ancient clay tablets, the script known as Linear B remained undeciphered until 1952, when self-trained classicist Michael Ventris determined it to be a form of early Greek, now called Mycenaean after the powerful city-state described in Homer's epics.

“The work he did lives, and his name will be remembered so long as the ancient Greek language and civilization are studied.”

- John Chadwick, Ventris' collaborator and friend

Prologue

The system was springing up, the system had sprung
its networks across the waters and fields
yoking farmers to acres, acres to output,
islands to armies, to kings.

The system was stalling a little though
it didn't know how to be so successful,
its memory was short and there was much to account for.
It needed accountants; they needed accounts.

Introduction

This is the story of Michael Ventris,
Blackpool bicycle mechanic and onetime
wartime code-cracker.

Amateur ancient linguist
(though young) who broke (in peacetime) a code
unsolved for millennia, a script baked by accident
on clay tablets,
a series of marks.

This is the story
of Michael Ventris, swift-eyed, sure-fingered,
who fixed bikes and saw the structures underneath,
the system clicking.

Who died racing.

Timeline

The story is told often effectively in snapshots:

1. 1900, Crete: Sir Arthur C. Evans hunches on to some tablets of unknown writing. He putters with foundational work for several decades, much of it mistaken.
2. 1933, Fieldtrip to British Museum (Ventriss, fourteen): Ventriss to Evans: "Did you say the tablets have not, as yet, been deciphered, Sir?" [Possibly prefaced with "Excuse me," likely followed by clearance of throat.] Their eyes may or may not meet.
3. 1939-1945, Interlude, World War II: England expects, Ventriss exceeds.
4. 1946-1951: Ventriss degreases chains, cleans bearings, trues wheels. The puzzle lingers, experts spin increasingly elaborate guesses. Ventriss stays each night in the museum till closing.
5. February 1952: The grids shift, the system opens. [Alice Kober and Emmett Bennett are acknowledged for providing clues.]
6. 1 July 1952: Ventriss tells the world on BBC. Some resistance from the outdone, but accolades soon follow. Even regular people are excited.
7. 1952-1956: John Chadwick, early Greek scholar and BBC admirer, helps Ventriss dot and polish the finishing bits.
8. 6 September 1956: Michael's book is at the publishers. His family sleeps. John sleeps. Michael's car slams into a parked truck on a strange street. His hand falls from the wheel.

Plate 1

Exterior: Velodrome, 6:00 a.m.

Ventris hunches over his bicycle in the half-light.
To his right the track slants upward into fog. Ahead, fog.

The writings are fragmentary and largely without context.
No parallel sources exist; a silence of centuries falls after.

He slides the rear wheel into place, zips chain to gear teeth.
Lifts up the wheel and tests the pedal with his hand.

Who were they? They've left only their accounting,
names, places, payments received, owed, forgiven.

We can parse some of the names: a shepherd has the common
"Lover" or "Beloved"; a smith is called "Mindful-of-his-work."

Ventris eyes the spinning wheel, spots a wobble;
he tightens a spoke, skips one, tightens; lets spin again.

On the assumption they were expecting the attack that followed
we can read references into the tablets, see the dark outline

take shape in the distance, the spears and chariots assembling,
the watchers and rowers preparing to meet the flame.

Ventris pushes off, arcing his back leg over the wheel,
his foot finding the pedal's downward swing,

he presses his outline to the bike, and glides into the fog.

The Facts

They spoke Greek.

Society was organized under a central authority (king) who was owed livestock and grain in tribute. He probably owed his subjects something as well.

Other, subordinate leaders are mentioned, though their powers, duties, rank, etc. are obscure.

They had slaves. To what extent and purpose, what rights they had (if any), whether they came from trade or plunder, all remain unknown. They probably didn't volunteer.

They had chariots. For military, domestic, and perhaps ceremonial purposes. The wheels were inventoried separately; hence we can conclude with some certainty the vehicles were stored wheel-less.

No shields are listed, an odd omission. They must have had them; why not just tell us?

Some of them were literate. (Probably not the slaves.)

The Facts

Ventris spoke everything. Between sessions at a conference in Zürich he traded anecdotes in perfect Schweizerdeutsch with the custodians. He always had cigarettes.

His father was an Indian Army officer (British). His mother was half-Polish and artistic. Refusing her assistance, Ventris taught himself Polish at six.

He won a scholarship at Stowe School and “did a bit of Greek.”

He was likable and generous. He was aloof and detached.

Drafted into the R.A.F. he became a navigator, “much more interesting than mere flying.” He horrified his captain by navigating solely by maps he made himself.

After armistice, he put in overtime as a code-breaker.

He never attained a degree in philology or linguistics. He solved puzzles.

A Life

Rattled by the air raids, ringed by death,
Ventris' mother takes a fatal dose of
barbitone in July, 1940.

(We can see the dark outline take shape.)

He tries to give up the puzzle. He tries to
return to his career.

He calls the result "cold and dull" and
resigns the fellowship.

His marriage dwindles to irrelevance. He is
not much involved with his children.

His success cannot be repeated. He has no
real place in the academy.

He was on the Barnet Bypass, north of
London, for no known reason

In 1956 he was awarded the first *Architects'*
Journal Research Fellowship. He might well
have become one of the leading figures in
his profession, but it was not in this way that
he would win fame.

He remained simple and unassuming,
always ready to listen, to help and to
understand.

He received the Order of the British Empire,
honorary research associate at University
College, and an honorary doctorate from
Uppsala. Surely only a foretaste.

He was driving home

Plate 2

In the photograph, Michael holds one of the tablets.
He sits at his drafting table (the bike shop that never was
evaporating around him, the grease on his hands we might imagine
ink, but they're clean as always).

He faces us, eyes turned down to an inscription we can't see.
(Some tax record, or catalogue of local shepherds, perhaps.)
His expression is attentive but light, the look before a smile, a word.

Life in the slight tilt of his head, the careful grip of his fingers.

In a moment – but here the record ends.
This frame, these traces, marks, and remarkings,
(his teacher remembered . . . Chadwick wrote . . .)
sorted and ordered, transmitted like any account,
seized by a story.

The tablets were most likely temporary records
meant to be mashed and recycled.
But the palaces burned and left them behind.

Epilogue

The story needed a hero. The hero needed
a story. The life left its accounts
unsettled. The life left
gaps.

The death hid like a secret.
The tire marks looked like a language.

Stocking the Root Cellar

We'll cross that bridge when we come to it.
We have?

It's jacket weather
just look at those trees.

I suppose when you put it like
Jam or marmalade?

But isn't that just the way with

Your *good* socks, Edward.

It's not as if you didn't
know that. Don't look at me like

last year's lamb, still fine.

Have the trees turned?
Nothing for me please.

Six to one, half

awake slouched over like a sack of turnips.
Aren't you ashamed?

You mean to tell me

that silly grin off your face.
Without so much as a

scrape, but I don't know about "happy."

Just people, that's all.

It costs something, but you get

what's coming to you, I guess.
Or, anyway, so *he* says

No, I'm still here.

Here or
here?

Just somewhere where it's warm.

Long day, that's all
All buttoned up, Ted?

but you're not a day over
not a penny less

Oh come over by the fire then
no use crying over

something to warm you

offer you something
I'd like to

No, no, no [laughing]
forgive us
or – three of us

4

The Conquistadors

The conquistadors arrived a few months before the war,
riding up Main Street in peaked steel helmets and cavernous pantaloons.

That night the Lions' Club hosted a potluck in their honor.
Most of the town showed up with tater-tot hotdish, smokies and meatballs, and taco salad.
The conquistadors mostly kept to themselves. To everyone's surprise, they steered clear of the
taco salad.

As things were winding down, the mayor gave a toast of welcome on behalf of all of us.
He shook hands with the commanders, and posed for a photo-op.

A savage weather system followed them, record heat and thick, heavy air.
Days without the slightest breeze. Nights troubled by thunder but never rain.
The conquistadors joked the desert would be a relief.

One afternoon I saw one in line at Super America.
Standing alone he looked surprisingly small, shifting from one foot to the other
like the only person to show up at a Halloween party in costume.
He bought a pack of Marlboros, half a gallon of milk, and an orange, lisped "grathias" and left.

The next day we were officially at war.
The newspapers devoted a special morning edition to the conflict. The consensus was that we
were in good hands.

In the afternoon the conquistadors paraded up Main Street one last time.
I looked for the small one, but they all towered above us with the same set faces.

The downpour we'd expected never came. We woke one morning and the heat was gone.
The sky had turned a muted grey. Cold winds swept newspaper and the first fallen leaves
through the empty streets.

At night trucks rumble back from the desert, turning off the highway through town and out
toward the river.
Mostly now I hardly notice, just a little extra white noise, like the trains I've heard all my life.

But on bad nights I shift and turn with every jolt and bump.
I never seem to fall asleep, but eventually find myself sitting beside the mayor in the cab of one
of the trucks.

When we get to the riverbank we stop. He leads me around back and we begin to unload the
bodies.
We work quickly, I grab the ankles and he lifts them out by the armpits. All except the small
conquistador
who I carry alone, bundled in my arms. I take care not to see if his eyes are open.

When we've laid them all in the grass, we pin a gold medal on each, to make sure they sink.

The Study

Though there were grimmer bits to the story
 let's believe the grace part anyway,
 that nothing irredeemable has been done,
 that, though the path may fork off in manifold courings,

there was no fatal crossroads where the blackberry brambles
 obscured vital signage indicating the gravity of our choice:
 This way, hard and incremental but ultimately fulfilling labor,
 the satisfactions of jobs well done, accompanied not by flattery,

which the wise person rightly despises, knowing it to be vacuous
 and transient as clouds, but the genuine accolades of colleagues
 tested over decades of common cause, life's true riches,
 and an adequate nest egg, sifted from the modest surplus of a livable wage.

While that way, unbeknownst to us, lay a thickening fog
 to shroud all our best qualities from interviewers and first dates,
 muffle opportunity's every knock on our overpriced studio's door,
 and divert us from the airports of loved ones till their invites dried up.

And since only ripened hindsight will allow us to distinguish
 the character crafting bumps in the former road
 from the interminable and increscent miseries of the latter,
 reflection offers us only a life of anxious retracings

perhaps worse than the wrong turn we fear – But no
 for here's grace now: our kindest uncle calling from his study,
 "Come in my boy, come in!" that's him waving us down
 on his favorite armchair, and "Not a word of it, not one!"

the mug in your hand is warm, every book on the shelf waiting.

Peter's Later Years

The weather's grown cold
on the island, Wendy.

My little cottage shakes and moans
at night and the damp seeps in

though I keep the fire up
and drink tea constantly.

I've been reading a lot lately
and not just adventures but

oceanography, astronomy,
forestry, and detective stories too.

Did you know a single forest
rings the whole subarctic?

There's a snow leopard
almost no one's seen.

And gravity is still a mystery.
It might be a curve

in the surface of things
or a slow vibration.

I'm working on two projects
an annotated history

of the pirate wars
and a plan for a new island.

I hear little from the lost boys
and our old friends.

Tink moved back to Omaha
to be near family.

Write me sometime
so I know you got this.

At Sea

1.

We'd read the adventure stories
and knew the price of zest and triumph
was a series of romantic catastrophes,
loved ones swallowed by quicksand,

ravaged by obscure mosquito-borne illness,
or – just when the pirates swung aboard –
betraying you (How had we never
noticed the suspicious tattoos

or the patch over Jack's eye?)
and when the climax came
standing before the bottomless plank,
gallows, or firing squad, alone with the grave

odds, could we imagine the law of averages
actually falling in our favor?
We knew too the cold truth of celebrity,
had given that book report in Ms. Sissle's class,

stomachs cramped for a week beforehand,
waking in cold sweats in our racecar beds
the dream audience still scornfully unimpressed;
unable to eat even our apple sauce at lunch,

then, the naked lectern, rows of spidery-eyed peers . . .
This was the reality, no swell of strings, huzzahs,
or shoulder rides around the room, our names echoing
to the styrofoam rafters – nothing at all

save our eyes' studied figure-eight
finding here and there a mild welcome,
human ports rising in the arachnid sea,
the brief glow at our fingertips, star-fire

lighting the edge of our eyebrows, when the free fall
yielded to floating just a few inches above the class
our stomach's spindle of words quickening
to release that last smooth stretch and, Yes,

I would recommend this book.

2.

Knowing this, we chose not to set out at all,
 settling for the harbor's happy monotony,
 waves enough to gaze or doze off to
 but nothing to worry the stomach or kettle.

The sun splashed its oils over the portholes,
 and the clouds never ran short of ideas.
 Tuesdays brought book reviews and comics
 (a week old but no worse) always something new

on the coffee table, Saturdays *Chip Dennison:*
Mineral Hunter and *Radio Lab* reruns,
 the crosswords lingered long into the nights,
 and the moonlight cradled our cribbage boards,

loosened our shoulders and shoes, called to the seals
 who obliged with their song till morning's gulls greeted us,
 more than enough, but – wouldn't you know it? –
 we became real anyway, leaving the flowers

unwatered, the coasters unheeded, turning
 away from our small slights of neglect
 till they blossomed in inky petals below decks
 and storms rose up between us, love as we might.

In the Forest

His mother died an ordinary death.
A cough became more than a cough.
Her legs gave up. Her bed became more of a cell.
Bramble and branches barring the window.
The bedposts glowering down like oaks.
All night her hand shook in his, her eyes darted
like caged swallows.

That his father remarried was odd only
in the usual way. A woman to remind the children
they had no mother; to remind their father
she was not the wife he lost. While she
needed no reminder tending the embers
of another woman's hearth.

Food was scarce, but no one was hungry.
His father worked, hacking through the forest
by lantern light. Gretel swept and scrubbed,
tore weeds from her mother's garden.
The silence grew around him
like a stand of pine.

Tonight he sees only her.
She slips again and again from his hand.
He can say nothing.
When she leaves the next time,
he follows her out through the house
to the forest.

It's true that a mother's death
can devour her children,
that you meet few friends in the forest.
But Hansel isn't scared. He walks on
further than he's ever gone before,
marking the path with pebbles to be sure
he never loses her again.

At last, in a small clearing she stops.
He curls up in the moss beside her.
The moonlight steals through the trees
and gathers the pebbles in its glow.
They gleam like a long string of pearls
or tears.

Hansel wakes wrapped in a blanket

being carried home. He looks into the face
of the woman who is not his mother.
She looks down at the small boy
who is not her son. The night is cold
and they have a long way left to walk.

A Fine Go

Of course, one can't go unharried for long,
 it isn't natural or, more importantly, decent
 and so creation in its infinite tact saw fit to include
 fusspots, worry warts, those little yippy dogs, and sunken
 living rooms lest our footfalls should fall
 into a sort of stagnant regularity
 so that one's train of thought, too long unbroken,
 might actually proceed to its logical conclusion
 blinking in the dazed light of the last station
 so startlingly as expected there's little left to do
 but exchange pleasantries and wonder how to hold our hands.

Or perhaps, bereft of all unwanted stimulus
 our thoughts would, on the contrary, never quite find the drive
 to form so much as a stamp club or auto-workers association
 always poised just at the point of beginning –
 or rather, shuffling around it like a book
 one really means to read and places squarely
 on the coffee table, there to haunt
 the center of our periphery through each imperative
 diversion, straightening the tin angels
 on the mantel, greasing the axles of our runner-up
 pinewood two-seater, or rerouting the model train
 to afford its passengers the best available view,
 till one day, glancing up from our paper
 in the dining car, we find a curious sameness
 coats the outside world, as if after all those
 club sandwiches, we had yet to leave the station –
 not too jarring but enough to lose our place
 and have to flip hopefully back to begin again.

In short, I'm glad you're here
 whatever our past squabbles or strains
 how greatly your bovine chewing or talking
 during movies once vexed me, for instance,
 as my incessant "um"ing and clouds of chalk dust
 undoubtedly did you – but now the slate as it were
 is clean and the wind at our backs, a perfect day
 to set out, which is to say not too
 perfect, a little drizzle and bite to resist
 and rally us, the train delayed, the itinerary
 set but rife with errors – what do you say?

From within the Museum

Extracting myself from a particularly abstract piece
 I awoke to find the room empty, save me.
 How long had the dappled pool of shape and hue
 held me in its thrall? How many fellow travelers, slouchy pupils,

or milk-mannered docents had passed in my absence?
 And witherward? To dinner perhaps, with old friends returned
 only lately from assignment abroad, sand still trickling
 from their sleeves as they recounted an especially devious

Persian rug dealer or a fig tree whose fruit rivaled the honey-crisp
 in advancement and consistency of flavor relative to species –
 not that I begrudged the time spent, or rather evaporated,
 like a backpack lifted from my shoulders and I turned

back into the room I had entered as a young man
 to find everything still in its place – wasn't it? –
 the horse and rider rearing at the door, the bowl of pickles
 bathed in moonlight opposite, that same trapeze couple

frozen in their forever approach, every move and posture
 as it was, and myself, unbearded as ever, ears apparently
 no larger, sneakers scuffed no more or less, but all of us
 part of a distinctly new composition – as a Bach counterpoint

blinks and the point is gone. It was right over there . . .
 The routine goes on, lawn bowling on Tuesdays, madeleines at four,
 book club on the fortnight, unaltered, but the life that streams beneath
 has long since shifted course. There were other exhibits

I'd wanted to see, but what were they? Some collection
 of Etruscan flatware perhaps? Those Peruvian funeral capes
 on loan from Dubuque? A pointillist reproduction of the 1976
 bicentennial half dollar, the hulking liberty bell eclipsing the moon?

But no, those were other times, over before we knew them,
 the tour groups dissolved at the exits, back into strangers
 with places to be, and the docents ushered us kindly out,
 each in our turn. The horse snorts and stares uncuriously

ahead in the gathering dusk; the worn reins fall slack
 in my hands. Where have I led us? The spruce trees looming
 obscurely, the path unremarkable, save the faint glint
 of debris. The rider hesitates, as if trying to recall what it was

he'd set out for. Back at the chateau they would be lighting
the candelabras now, decanting the estate's prized sherry,
preparing artisanal cheese and radish hors d'oeuvres
for the evening's repast. The fires stoked, the armchairs plumped . . .

A cold wind rustles the branches. The dinner guests are arriving
with news of the world and fresh triumphs to relate . . .
But it's a fine night, his breeches are warm and stylish,
the horse has miles left in him, and the way is clear.

Notes

“Linear B: A Fiction”: I have drawn heavily from John Chadwick’s *The Decipherment of Linear B* throughout the poem. Quotes from Ventris in the second “The Facts” section were obtained from this source, and the right column of “A Life” consists entirely of direct excerpts from Chadwick (adapted to varying degrees). Much of the left column of “A Life” is taken from umass.edu’s “Gallery of Philologists,” though the same basic narrative appears in other sources.