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*You & I*

The Stories We Tell Ourselves: Turning Trauma into  
Narrative in Anne Enright's *The Gathering*, Niall Williams'  
*History of the Rain*, and John Banville's *The Sea*

Florence Vincent

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## Signed Declaration

This thesis has been composed by me, and the work is entirely my own.

The work has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

Signed,

Florence Vincent

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Martha and David, for their financial and emotional support, and for bolstering a lifelong interest in writing and the creative arts; to my husband Ian, for his love, encouragement and understanding, particularly during the final months of my PhD; and to my supervisor Allyson, who edited my work with kindness, clarity and honesty.

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## Abstracts

### Novel: *You & I*

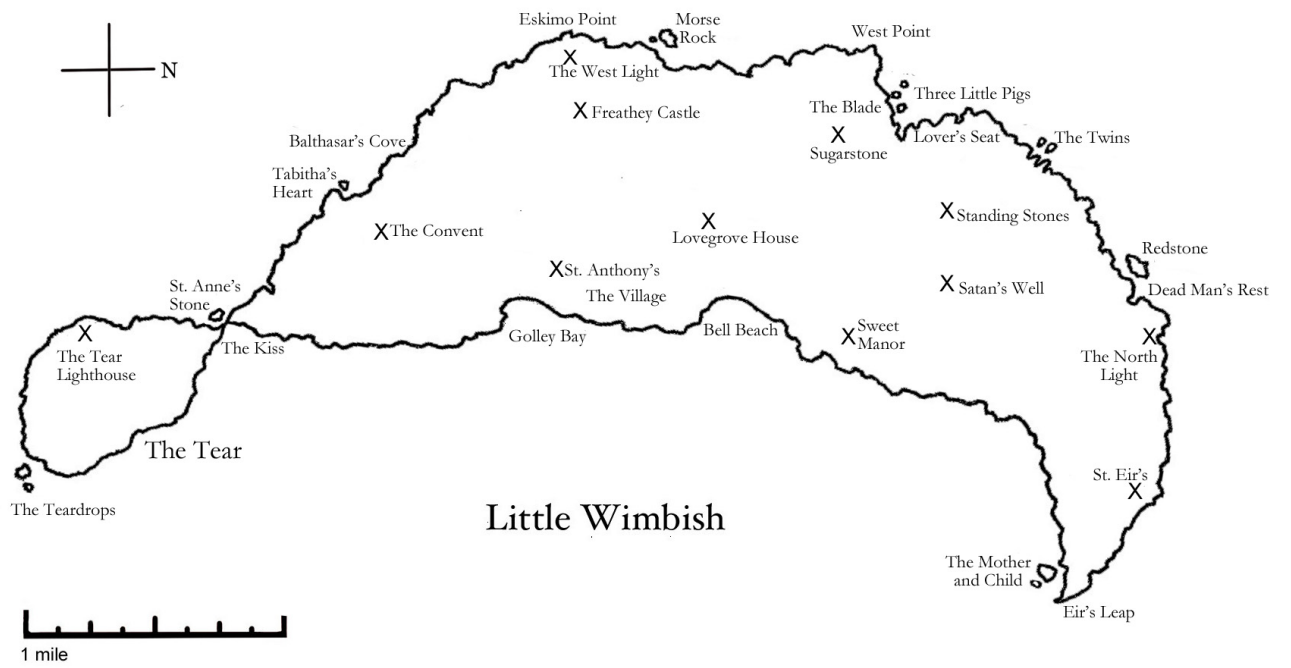
*You & I* is a coming-of-age tale tied up in the themes of trauma, memory and storytelling. It follows sixteen-year-old Esther, who is sent to live on the fictional Cornish island of Little Wimbish following the disappearance of her bipolar mother. Once on the island where her mother grew up, the damaged and reclusive Esther finds herself caught up in the lives, history and folklore of the Wimbish community – not to mention the mystery of her father’s identity. As the story progresses and Esther becomes more invested in the fairy tale escapes promised by the island she now calls home, the voice switches back and forth between the second and first person – and we begin to suspect that our narrator may have inherited her mother’s illness. This is a novel concerned with how we tell stories – about ourselves, our histories, and the places we live – and why.

### Essay: The Stories We Tell Ourselves: Turning Trauma into Narrative in Anne Enright’s *The Gathering*, Niall Williams’ *History of the Rain*, and John Banville’s *The Sea*

How do we recover from trauma, and what role can storytelling play in the recovery process? This essay investigates the notion that in Anne Enright’s *The Gathering*, Niall Williams’ *History of the Rain* and John Banville’s *The Sea*, each narrator carries out an attempt at recovery, enacted through a written recollection of their past traumas. Taking inspiration from various trauma theorists and psychologists, along with writer and trauma survivor Edward St Aubyn, this essay lays out the necessary steps which must be taken in order to

integrate trauma into one's life story. By writing down their trauma, constructing a narrative which allows for a certain amount of invention, facing up to the dirtier and more difficult aspects of their experiences, and finally, sharing the finished narrative with another person, the trauma survivor may facilitate the beginnings of a recovery.

# You & I



*Where did you begin?*

When you look back it seems like you began, everything began, that night out in the garden in the rain.

It's not so much that things became clear in that moment. It's more that that vision of her – dark hair, white nightgown soaked through and clinging – has become an emblem for everything that's happened since. Even now that night remains preserved perfectly in your memory. Your bare feet arching against wet grass, the clean smell of mud. The points of her breasts through her dirty nightgown, the sound of the rain.

That's where you began. In that moment, with that woman. A woman wet to the bones but smiling, the long hair across her face. A woman in white in a cold, dark garden.

## Chapter One Shingle Cottage

*The building of this charming cottage was commissioned in 1968 by the mystery writer William Evans. Notable features include a silver birch sapling and a granite fireplace, crafted from stone sourced on the western coast of the island. The latter may be viewed with polite request from respectful visitors.*

Something about running your finger around the outline of the island settles your stomach. It's soothing, the focus of pressing your index finger onto the damp paper, moving it slowly around all those crags and inlets. The boat bumps but your fingertip continues its journey, belly quieting.

Little Wimbish. An island in the shape of a slim crescent with a teardrop of land at its end point. She'd always said it was shaped like a backwards question mark but when you turn the map on end it looks more like a fish-tailed woman. A blank-faced mermaid staring out to sea.

*Balthasar's Cove. Sugarstone. Dead Man's Rest. Freathey Castle. Three Little Pigs. St. Eir's.* They sound made up. Places you'd explore in the storybook version of your life, where you're wearing a red coat and hunting for buried treasure. *A Swallows & Amazons* story but with just one character.

A gust of wind catches the map and the corner snags. Stuff it back in your bag. Close your eyes. Turn your face out to sea and feel the salt spray on your cheeks. You're thinking of the police station again. The PC with a gap in his front teeth, acne scars. *Don't worry, Esther, we're gonna sort this all out.* You pretended to cry when he said that, leaning over the desk, knocking your

lukewarm tea into his lap. That was clever, but you've been stupid. More times than you can count. The argument over the piano. The day you went to the beach. The night in the garden. You should've never called the police. She would've come back eventually. Trailing in wearing the same rumpled clothes, stinking of wine and sex. That dull, alien look in her eyes. Like something's switched off back there.

The boat bumps and tips. Feel unsteady, like you're running over a bouncy castle. Like your legs might disconnect. There's another deep heave and you picture a giant stomach, turning over, swilling food. Familiar oily fingers stretch across your belly. Warmth spreads up your chest. *No.*

Swallow, press your eyes shut, lie back. Check for the sick bag they handed you, just in case. Think back to what you've eaten today, what you ate yesterday, go down the list slowly.

*three cans Diet Coke*

*one Mars Bar*

*one packet salt & vinegar crisps*

*1/2 tuna sandwich*

*three chocolate chip cookies*

*one hot chocolate sachet, eaten dry*

Go through the list again, then once more for luck. It's enough for you to open your eyes, cast a look behind you, scan the faces. Twenty or thirty tourists in expensive raincoats. Day bags and well-dressed children, thousand quid cameras, picnic hampers. They all get to go home after this. Two rows back you spot the woman in the green coat, the one who knocked into you in the queue

earlier, looked at you like it was your fault. She's leaning on her knees and the man next to her, her husband must be, is rubbing her back. Hope she pukes her fucking guts out.

Turn away again, pull out the Nokia. No texts, no calls. You would've expected something by now. Get a little lowdown ache thinking of him. Remembering being in bed next to him. School skirt hiked around your thighs, sun coming in the window. Ice cream van chiming a few streets away. *London Bridge is falling down, falling down, falling down.* The way he sat up, pulling his arm away, looking at you and talking soft. Like he might cry. Remember how all you could do was focus on the diamond stud in his ear? Remember how you wanted to tear it out, bite at it and tear it away with your teeth just to make him stop? *You went like a stone*, he was saying. *You was all cold. You went like a stone.*

The boat rears up, slaps the water, cement hard. Twine fingers around the railing as people laugh and shriek around you. Someone coughs and retches, Green Coat maybe, and a second later there's the dull spatter of vomit hitting paper.

"Hold on tight, folks," comes a voice over the tannoy. "Not long now."

Teeth start to set, feel that familiar undercoat of saliva fill your mouth.

*Not now. Not in front of people.*

Press palm against your forehead. Clear your mind. Picture your whites. Blank sheet of A4 paper. Bed with fresh sheets, duvet pulled taut. Fridge-cold milk, condensation on the glass. Untrodden morning snow. A sharpened white pencil. A slim white bone, sun-bleached. *No.* The bone is from the arm and it is poking through the skin and there is blood there. *No.* There are more bones,

piles of bones, under the earth, wrapped with ragged grey flesh, and the worms are coming for them.

Dig the heel of your left foot hard into the toes of the right. Put fingers to your wrist and push the nails in. Don't let your mind go there. Sheets and milk and snow. Crane your head over the side of the boat and the island's there suddenly, so close you can see the windows in the buildings. It's almost here and you're almost there. Three days ago, you stood at the top of Jean's stairs. Found your fingers holding onto the end of an old scarf, wound round the bannister. Strands of long brown, almost black, hair looped through it, the sharp citrus perfume on the fabric. Feel it on your fingers now if you close your eyes tight enough and suddenly your nostrils are filling with a lemon tang. Move your head out of the wind, breathe in. You're not imagining it.

"That better?" Green Coat is sucking on a piece of lemon. Hunched over and whimpering, her husband rubbing her back firmly. "That better?" he says, again, stupidly.

One of the crew shouts out something and the boat slows, undulations deepening. Lemon spikes at the back of your throat. Double over, press your hand to your nose, grind your heel into your toes. But the smell cuts straight through, dropping to the bottom of your belly like a stone through water.

"Just a reminder that the shops'll be closing at two, today..." comes the voice over the tannoy, "...on account of the funeral."

Mouth slick, skin prickle, damp at the back of your neck. Someone behind you laughs. "Thank goodness," they say as the boat moves in to dock. Fold head hard into knee, clamp palm to mouth and feel it fill.

“Welcome to Little Wimbish,” someone says.

And suddenly everything is coming up.

\*

The jetty stretches back over slabs of craggy brown rock to a sharp cliff face. Eyes follow the line of the path up to the top of the island. It starts at the small wood-slatted building at the end of the jetty and curves steeply up the high, dark grey rock face. To your right, the island curls away, tumbling down to sea in green-brown slopes. There’s a short pebbly beach lined with wooden dinghies, and another hut, leaning up against the rock drunkenly. Passengers are trailing slowly up to the top of the island. Spot Green Coat, her husband’s hand at the small of her back. As they move further away, your stomach begins to settle, and the good feeling comes down.

Sit cross-legged at the end of the jetty, move the sick bag from one hand to the other, flex your fingers. It didn’t happen how you wanted, but you’ll run with the feeling while it lasts. Before you, a slab of rock rears out of the sea, scarred and swollen like the head of a giant. Stare and try to conjure up a memory. Seabirds flit around it, settling in one moment and flicking off in the next, sharp white wings angling on hard currents of wind. Spot some with a flash of red in the tail like a splash of blood. Move your eyes away, toss the bag into the sea. Watch it bob, take on water, sink.

If you concentrate, you can hang on. Preserve this clean bliss feeling, the one that comes after everything’s out. Usually it fades after a few minutes but sometimes you can make it last longer. There was a good time, a few weeks ago. Ate noodles from the Chinese takeaway and brought them up quick. Lay on your

bed for half an hour, window open, eyes closed. Imagined yourself floating in a warm pool. Like the one at Pam's house on a summer day, but without all the people, the roar of the traffic on the motorway.

Something wet hits your hand. Seagull shit? No, rain. On the giant's face the birds cluster and disperse, exploding out like confetti. Make your way down the jetty as the rain starts. From the door of the wood-slatted building hangs a sign, paint peeling: *Welcome to Little Wimbish, home of the red-tailed gannet. Population 54.* Open the door thinking of a baby (unlucky number fifty five) being tossed into the sea while an official in a yellow jacket crosses its name off a clipboard.

"Shouldn't let a door slam." Voice comes from the corner. "Bad luck."

"Sorry." The response is knee-jerk.

He peels away from the wall just enough to rearrange his legs and arms. Battered red coat, stark white hair, blue eyes. "You're Sue's girl." Lifts something to his mouth from the jumble of clothes and limbs.

"Susan Evans?"

"Sue Penlerick, she's known here." He holds a match to his pipe. "After her husband."

Move your weight from one foot to the other, floorboards creaking.

"Penlerick, sorry."

"No need t'apologise." The door swings open as he is speaking. "Names don't mean as much as folk like to think. Ah." He smiles, blue smoke fogging from his mouth. "Here she is now."

Go still, looking, not looking, at the woman in the doorway shaking rain off herself. She peels back her hood and long dark hair tumbles out, fixed in a messy plait.

“Esther?”

Nod vaguely in her direction and she’s coming towards you, but you’re not looking at her, you’re looking at her hair. Hand clutches your shoulder, eyes seek you out. Focus on her eyebrows and smile, or at least move your mouth.

“My goodness look at you, so big.” She pulls away like you’re hot to the touch. “Hello there, Haddon. Ferry come in on time?”

“Aye. Rough crossing though.” He nods at you. “Don’t worry, you’ll get yer sea legs quick out here.”

“Well,” says Susan pointlessly. Her body’s big and soft, covered in a heavy blue raincoat that makes her look like a battered sofa cushion. Face is a bloated, sweat-glazed version of the one you know and you find yourself thinking of a carving knife going through fat pink slices of ham. Run your eyes over her, notice her left arm is in a sling. The sight catches you sharp. Is this a joke? Do they know everything? Is Susan about to peel off her mask, revealing your mother? Blare of trumpets, confetti cannon to the stomach. *Surprise Esther! You can wake up now!*

“Ready to go then?” Her eyes are a light brown, not hazel like your mother’s. Though, now you think about it, they weren’t exactly hazel. The exact shade you can’t picture at all.

You nod, glance back at the old man before stepping outside and he catches you looking. “You’re very welcome here,” he whispers, with a smile, blue

eyes glinting through the gloom. And then the door clacks shut and you're outside in the rain, wondering why he said it like that. Like he didn't want Susan to hear.

She pulls her hood up against the downpour and heads forward up the trail. She's taller than your mother. Bigger. Their faces are alike and not alike, and if it weren't for the hair you wouldn't know they were related. You used to sit behind your mother at her dressing table and watch the brush going through it. A glossy, shimmering sheet. A brown silk scarf moving in the wind.

The path narrows as you go, lined here and there by scraggy trees dotted with yellow flowers. Gorse, you remember, not broom, because of the thorns. The path curves sharply to the left and into a pebbled track, flanked by two low stone walls. Susan stops, heaving and red-faced and you catch up slowly, deliberately dragging your feet just because you can. Before you, Little Wimbish stretches out in rolls of rain-dulled green.

"Well, this is it," says Susan, laughing faintly. "Look familiar?"

To the left, the island stretches away from you towards the Tear, just visible through misty rain. To the right, a cluster of low grey buildings sits bedded into the earth like half-buried stones. You've been to this place before but you wouldn't know it. It feels like nowhere.

"This way," says Susan. "We're a little way beyond the village."

You were nine when you came here last. There was the baby. The pretty girl's birthday party. You, standing outside a house you can't picture now, looking through the window and watching your aunt and mother scream at each other.

“St Anthony’s. Funeral today.”

Look up at the church she’s pointing to. Heavy, hard grey stones. A flag flying at half-mast, snapping in the wind. Red cross against white, the outline of a bird in the bottom right corner. A teenage boy is leaning against the wall, just out of the rain. Tall with a mop of light brown hair, wearing a faded suit two sizes too big for him.

“Who died?”

“Arnold Maddock. We lost him Sunday gone.” When you ask how he died, she gives you this look, a little flicker of disapproval. “He had a fall. He was in his eighties. Sad for his family, of course, but...these things happen.”

“People die.”

She is staring at over your shoulder. At the sea, maybe. “Yes,” she says softly. “People die.”

Coming into the village the rain softens into a drizzle. “There’s Scadden’s, that’s the food shop and post office,” says Susan as you pass. “They’re a nice family. Been here since the Sixties. They have a girl about your age.”

Yes, the pretty girl who had the birthday party. Jeans with glitter down the front and butterfly clips in her hair that winked under the lights. You found one on the floor and put it in your pocket.

“The pub’s a nice little place,” says Susan. The sign reads *Eir’s Tavern*. “The Lovegroves bought it off the Bevans back in the fifties, after they sold all their land back to the Sweets. Course, they got a lot of it back in the end. Claudia Sweet had to sell up after her husband died.”

The pub is open, blue door propped ajar by a lump of rock and you peer into its dark insides. Remember sitting inside with your mother, eating fat yellow chips so hot they took the skin from the roof of your mouth. There was a tall man with a rust-coloured face shouting at the woman behind the bar. Your mother stood up and said something to him and everything went quiet. A sea of faces turned towards the two of you. "How did he die?"

"Hm?" She is pointing at a house, set slightly away from the other buildings. "Thad Garrick married Alice Noon. The Noons farm over on the Tear. Them and the Maddocks. The Tear has always been farmed by those two families. Noons and Maddocks, ever since I can remember." Then she walks on. "How did who die?"

"Claudia Sweet's husband."

She clears her throat, waits a moment to speak. "Well if you can believe it, he was struck by lightning."

You asked even though you've heard this story before. Your mother told it to you in a hotel room in Paris that she couldn't afford, wrapped in a white dressing gown, slicking red across her toenails. She'd let you bring an ice cream in, and it melted across your hand as you listened. He was the poor Sweet boy who went away and made his fortune in America. When he came back he bought his family's ancestral land, married, had kids. One night he disappeared and the next morning his son went looking for him. Found him sizzled in a field, arms and legs flung wide, gold crucifix burnt into the white flesh of his neck. When your mother had finished you had to lick the melted trail of forgotten ice cream off your arm. There was a smell of vanilla, and sun lotion, and the

chemical sting of the nail polish, and for a long time afterwards, any combination of those smells would make you think of it. That giddy, delighted fear you felt, sat in that plush white hotel room. The sense that something dangerous was smouldering at the edges of your world, waiting to combust.

“Alright?” Susan is looking at you, hands on her hips, head cocked to the side. Hadn’t realised you’d stopped walking, that you’d planted your feet in the grass and cast your eyes out to the green fields beyond the village. “Sorry,” you hear yourself say.

She takes you out towards the edge of the island, and the land gets rougher as you go. Feet are starting to hurt in your canvas trainers and you wonder, for the first time, if you should’ve taken longer to pack. There was a pair of your mother’s unworn walking boots that might’ve fit.

“Gets a bit steep here,” says Susan, and turns down a steep trail. Follow her down, trainers slipping in the mud, and around the corner. Shingle Cottage sits tucked away into a green dip, land rising around it like swelling on a wound. Grey stone, white shutters, mullioned windows, paint peeling from the front door. In front grows one of those tall, slender white trees with cracks in the bark and delicate yellow-green leaves. You wonder how it’s survived out here, all this time.

“Come on then,” says Susan, holding open the front door. “Looks like rain again.”

\*

The house is familiar and strange. Like someone took the place from your memory and rebuilt it, getting the proportions wrong, the colours confused.

This room is the one you remember most, but it's not right. Too small, too grey. The rusting stove full of cold ashes you'd remembered as an open fireplace. The texture of the squashy yellow sofas seems wrong. Your uncle Greg's piano isn't right either. Realise, going closer, that you've never seen it closed. It always stayed open, sheet music jostling for room on the stand.

Run a hand over it. The marbled brown wood is glossy like it's been recently varnished. There's a clean white muslin cloth lying over it and the piano bench, red velvet seat sagging like a fat cat's belly, is tucked neatly away underneath. Makes you think of Jean's piano. The melodic twang of the yellowing keys. The dull click of the brass pedals as her feet worked them up and down. That piano is gone for good now. Wonder, for the hundredth time, how much your mother got for it. Get the urge to yank open the lid of this one and smash it back down again, once, twice, three times.

"Everything alright?" Susan stands in the doorway. She's combed and replaited her hair and is looking at you funny. "How about a cup of tea?"

The kitchen smells bad. Sweet, like dying flowers. Sour, like Susan's warm fleece. Look around at the dingy green wallpaper, the wonky cupboards. Susan stands at the counter and pours water into a teapot. "Was she high or low?" she says, out of nowhere. "When she took off?"

You'd thought she'd put this off longer. "She was high."

"That's something."

What she really means is: *she probably hasn't killed herself then*. What she doesn't know is that *high* doesn't describe it. Watch Susan bring the pot over, sit

it on the table, and see your mother, crouched over those old books, muttering to herself.

You were in your room when she started. After days of quietness, she'd started thundering up and down the stairs. Found her in the living room, crouched on the floor like a tensed cat. She'd shoved the coffee table and armchair into the corner, spread the books out in a neat arc in front of her. Yellowing, thumbed-through copies of *The Sister Cornelia Mysteries*. Garish illustrations of shadowy cloisters, blood-soaked habits. Nuns holding torches, their faces distorted in fear. Watched as she picked one up and flicked through, noting something down. Frantic, urgent, intent, the way you'd seen her before. The wrong, uncanny version of your mother that had been keeping you awake at night since you were five years old.

"What are you doing?"

She turned, twisting her neck to look up at you. "Nothing you need to worry about," she said, voice sounding like someone else's. Then she shouldered you out of the room and closed the door.

Susan is fussing with the teapot. She's taken the lid off and is trying to put it back, only she can't find the hole where the lip slips in. "Fucking thing." She takes out a cigarette and lights it carefully. "You don't mind do you? I normally do this outside, but..." *But needs must*. Her hands seem delicate as she handles it and you watch for the moment of release as she inhales. Want to ask her for one, but don't want something of hers.

"Got a phone?"

Pull out the Nokia and she reels off a list of phone numbers, watches you enter them. The doctor, the school where she works, the island warden.

“No smartphone?” She’s watching you carefully. “I thought Londoners couldn’t live without their smartphones.”

“I did have one. I don’t anymore.”

“Reception is crap out here anyway. Better on the Tear, but I don’t suppose you’ll be spending too much time over there.” She raises an eyebrow.

“Unless you take up with young Lewis, of course.”

Look out the window. Think of your smashed iPhone, the one Jordan’s brother got you, left carefully in the middle of your bed. Cracks splaying out from a central point, where something heavy must have hit it, hard.

“Now, house rules. You will not stay out past ten pm. You will help with chores. Cooking, cleaning, minding the kids. I don’t know if you remember but we keep a couple of beehives. Sell the honey at Scadden’s. You can help me with that. You will not drink in this house without my permission. You will respect that this is my home and will do as I say. Understand?”

“Yes.”

“We have electricity from five am to one am. Same across the whole island. If you need to be up when it’s off, you can borrow a torch. We conserve water, so only flush for number two. And, if you can believe it, we don’t have internet or Facebook or anything like that.” She lifts an eyebrow. “I know, living in the Stone Age. If you absolutely have to get on the web, there’s a computer in my office at school. Understand?”

“Yes.”

“Good,” she says. “Then I’m sure we’ll get along just fine.”

And then there is silence, and you just watch her for a while. Smoking must be the only thing she does with any elegance. Dark plait draped over one shoulder, cheeks a little pink, cigarette in hand. A clod of silvery ash releases onto the saucer, smoke floats from her lips. She’s avoiding eye contact and it’s so obvious you want to throw something at her.

“The kids are very excited to meet you.” She reaches for the pot. Watch her pour, streamers of steam rising from the cups. “Em’s eight. Kit’s five. No. Six. God...six years?”

“I’ve met them before.”

Susan looks up at you quickly, caught in the memory. “Yes, of course.” She stands and takes the teapot over to the sink, swivelling her left shoulder as she does so.

“What did you do to your arm?”

“Didn’t she ever tell you about that?” She comes back over to the table. “I thought she loved to tell a story.” She pauses to light another cigarette and roll her shoulder. “I’d just turned nine. Julia had gone off to big school and I was desperate to play with her and her friends. Andrea Fry and Tom Bevan and Phil Scadden. We’d been allowed to play together the summer before but not anymore. Not after Julia said so. I was still a *baby*.” She says this tapping the cigarette hard on the saucer. “So I said to her, I’ll prove to you I’m not. What do you want me to do?” She’s holding your gaze. “Stick your hand into the rocks at Sugarstone. And leave it there for one whole minute, she says. *Then* you can play with us.

“All the kids say it’s haunted. And you get scared easy about those things when you’re little. Course, Julia and Phil and the others had all done it together.” She takes a drag and blows a stream of smoke in your direction, maybe on purpose. “When it came down to it, I didn’t want to do it. So Julia takes my arm and shoves it in there and what d’you know? I couldn’t get it out again. I was crying, begging her to help me. Eventually, she went off home to get dad.” She stubs the cigarette out, half done, and leans forward on her elbows into a puddle of cold tea. “Twenty or so minute walk back here from the Blade. But she never came back.”

You almost laugh. Bite your bottom lip to stop yourself.

“It got darker and colder and eventually I got too scared.” She looks at you, dead on, accusing. Seeing your mother, not you. “Know how difficult it is to dislocate your own shoulder?” She’s rolling it back and forth again as she speaks, and you wonder if that’s to relieve the pain or make it worse.

“Anyway...” She shakes her head, seems embarrassed all of a sudden. “It flares up every once in a while. Doctors say there’s physically nothing wrong but...” She flexes her left hand in the sling. “Pain is pain.”

When you’ve finished your tea, Susan takes you upstairs to a room at the front of the house. “This is the study,” she says, tossing your bag down carelessly. “I brought in some drawers for your things.” There’s a metal camp bed underneath the window, a chest of drawers. The rest of the room is taken up by a large wooden desk and bookcase. “Bed isn’t up to much but I put an extra blanket down. Besides, you’re a teenager, you can sleep anywhere can’t you?”

On the desk there's a black and white framed photograph, pint glass filled with pens and pencils, pot of ink, heavy brass lamp. "This was my dad's study. This is where he wrote." She moves the pint glass slightly, so the emblem – *Eir's Tavern, Little Wimbish* – is facing outwards. "He loved it in here. Wonderful view." She's hovering nervously, like she wants to tell you not to touch anything.

"I won't make a mess."

"Oh no, I wasn't..." She runs a hand lightly along the top of the desk and then smiles. "I'll leave you to it."

Once she's left the room you try the drawers. All empty. Pick up the photograph. The frame is heavy and silver-plated, the faded picture inside shows your grandparents, Bill Evans and Peggy Latimer, on their wedding day. Peggy's hair is short, dark. She is wearing pale lipstick and shy smile. Bill's face is harder to read. Wonder how long it was after this that they moved to Little Wimbish, into this pokey little house. The thought that they never left makes your skin itch.

Turn your attention to the bookcase, scan the titles. One catches your eye. *The Picnicker's Guide to Little Wimbish* by M.B. Church. It's a slim, faded hardback, fronted with a birds-eye photo of the island. The dedication at the front reads: *To Mother, who made the world*. You flick to the index, find the passage you want.

The seven-foot-high tower of rocks clustered at the eastern tip of the Blade is known as Sugarstone. To fully understand the significance of this name, one must first be

introduced to the history of the Sweet family and their dealings with Balthasar Gloyne.

In the early 1700s, Little Wimbish lay deserted, making it easy prey for the bands of smugglers who prowled the coastlines of the British Isles. One such smuggler was the notorious Balthasar Gloyne, who was born in the Cornish town of Perranporth around 1685.

In 1721, Gloyne and his men began using Little Wimbish as a base, smuggling tobacco, spirits and sugar into the southern counties (we can date their arrival by a stone inscription, written by Gloyne, at the base of Freathey Castle, see page 22). Five years later, William Sweet purchased the island.

After a year of conflict, Sweet managed to successfully drive Gloyne and his men off the island, only for Gloyne to return alone, thirsty for revenge. On the night of September 18<sup>th</sup> 1727, Gloyne broke into the newly finished Sweet Manor and snatched William's youngest daughter Tabitha, then just fourteen years old. Upon waking the next morning, William found Tabitha gone and a note which read: *Dear Sir – You will find I have made away with your lovely Tabitha! As you are to have my island, I shall have your daughter. Tabitha is mine now, Sir. And O! she is Sweet, my girl, Sweet as Sugar! Your faithful servant, Balthasar Gloyne.*

One year later, with hope of her recovery all but gone, Tabitha miraculously reappeared on the island. Mute but seemingly unharmed, Tabitha was welcomed back, only for familial relief to turn to suspicion when rumours started that Tabitha had been bewitched by her captor and was working on his behalf. Many began to call Tabitha, still only fifteen, “Sugar Sweet”, in reference to Gloyne's letter. It proved to be a name not easily shaken.

In 1728, a terrible storm raged across the island, and almost a hundred sheep were lost. In their misery, the islanders pointed the finger at Tabitha, Gloyne's "witch". Many claimed that they had seen Tabitha dancing widdershins around St Eir's; others insisted that she bore witch marks upon her arms and legs (more likely relics from the abuse she suffered at Gloyne's wretched hands). But the final straw was to come with the sudden death of young Lawrence Sweet, the son of Tabitha's brother Walter. The infant's demise, the islanders said, was the work of a witch.

On the night of the 23<sup>rd</sup> April 1728, Tabitha was roused from her bed and pursued across the island by a frenzied mob, seeking to try her for the crime of witchcraft. Reaching the Blade, Tabitha sought refuge in the rocks, but was dragged from her hiding place. The mob asked Tabitha to renounce Gloyne and as she tearfully protested her innocence, they began to lay stones upon her body, slowly crushing her to death. The story goes that the last stone was placed by William Sweet himself.

As with any bloody and unnatural death, ghost stories blossomed in the wake of Tabitha Sweet's murder. Some say she can be seen walking the halls of Sweet Manor, others claim they have heard her singing to her lost love Gloyne. No story has proved quite so persistent, though, as that which tells us Tabitha's spirit remains trapped in the stones at the Blade, forever imprisoned by the very rocks that took her life. (Since the erection of Sugarstone, it has become a childhood pastime to stick one's hand into the gaps as an act of pig-headed courage.)

Sugarstone stands now as a memorial to a girl whose short life was marked by terror and tragedy. Saddest of all is that this beautiful place, providing excellent views of the North Light is now forever associated with such an abomination.

For those undeterred and keen to picnic on these rocks, you would be wise to sit with your back to the tower, as on windy days the westerly gales can be quite strong.

Flick through the rest of the pages, decide it could be useful and toss it onto the bed. On a higher shelf sit a row of familiar books. You reach for one. *The Devil is a Gentleman: A Sister Cornelia Mystery* by Peggy Latimer. There's a rough white line running down the middle of the spine, like it's been read once, broken open by rough fingers and then returned to its resting place. The dedication on the first page reads *For my girls, who I hope grow up to solve mysteries of their own*. You flick to the publishing date. 1983. That year, your mother would have been twelve and Susan ten. Bill, their father, would have been almost forty. And their mother Peggy, the shy but smiling bride in that photograph, would have been dead for ten years. Your grandfather had started putting her name on his books a year after she died.

You count the titles on the bookcase. Enough to keep you going, for eleven days anyway. You can get through eleven days. Despite Susan, the sheep shit, the lack of internet, the smelly kitchen. Sit on the bed, pull out the Nokia and draft another text to Jordan (*we still on for 26? I can get money for the train*) that doesn't send. Lie down and stare at the ceiling, feeling a knot in your stomach. Throwing up has made you hungry but the faint nausea hasn't gone away. What you could eat now is something hard and crunchy and salty. Like Jean's roast potatoes. Could eat a plate full of them. Seven or eight, heavily salted and swimming in dark brown gravy. Want a bagel too. Halved, toasted,

spread generously with butter and peanut butter, so much butter that it leaves hardening yellow circles on the plate. Want a bagel and a glass of cloudy lemonade, with four or five ice cubes. Want noodles. The kind from the Chinese down the road. Red sticky sauce that burns the back of your throat, slimy lumps of chicken. Sweet and salt, slipping down your throat. You want to drink so much Coke it makes your teeth stick together. Then you want to bend over the toilet, wetting the end of your toothbrush and running it back and forth over the ridges on the roof of your mouth. Want to feel that cleansing rush of acid up your throat. Want to watch as it all disappears in a swell of clean water.

“Wipe your feet, Kit.” The front door’s opened. Voices, feet. Cousins home from school. Feel that knot twist tighter in your stomach and roll onto your side to face the wall, so you can pretend you’re asleep if Susan comes in. You can hear everything through the thin walls. The chattering, the taking off of coats. Find yourself picturing their faces, wondering what they look like. Before you can stop yourself, dig nails into your wrist, your mind goes to Halloween six years ago.

Your mother and Susan, her belly vast, face puffed and pink-cheeked, lit candles around the house, helped you cut bats and spiders out of black sugar paper. There weren’t any pumpkins on the island, so you drew faces onto old oranges with black markers. You were disappointed but your mother and Susan said it was fine. It was your uncle Greg who wouldn’t have it. It was him who promised to get a real one. Him who went out into the dark to take the boat over to the mainland.

That visit, you and your mother slept in a bedroom at the back of the house. You woke in the middle of the night and came downstairs, hanging bats still visible in the gloom. Found Susan pacing, ghostlike in her white nightie and your mother gone, having run through the darkness to Joshua Penlerick's house to ask if he'd heard from his brother.

He was an uncle you barely knew. He was hardly ever in the house and when he was he didn't pay you much attention. To you, Greg Penlerick was just another stranger, a tall man with curling hair and a quiet voice who spent his days out on the water. The only time he seemed real was when he played the piano, when he picked up Emblyn and twirled her around like she was weightless. You remember watching him do that once and afterwards, how you ran into the living room, took a porcelain cat figurine from the shelf, the one you knew Emblyn liked, and tipped it onto the floor.

The night it happened, you watched people come and go with torches and raincoats and hushed voices, thinking this all seemed fair. Because if you couldn't have a daddy, why should she? A week later you watched Kitto slipping quietly into the world on the living room floor. Wrapped your arms round Emblyn, bit down on your tongue and wished you could take the feeling back.

"Esther?" Susan calls up the stairs. "Em and Kit are home from school if you want to come and say hello."

*Not now. You can't do this now.* Get on your feet, quick. Hands against the wall. You've done this before and you can do it again. Take short, shallow breaths. Twenty of them. Crouch, hold your breath for ten, jump up. And again. And again. Head starts to go. Short breath, short breath, short breath. Crouch,

jump up. Crouch, jump up. Hear her coming up the stairs. Feet heavy as falling stones. Feel the hot slinking feeling coming over you. Pits of brightness come into your eyes, lights bouncing off the pretty girl's hair clips. Crouch, jump up. Butterfly wings flutter overhead, the wall feels soft, your legs go thick. Find yourself turning out to the window as the black comes in. You're sliding away now. Sliding under. You're on a boat, going down, holding a hand out to a man with sandy curls, both of you dissolving into the water like you never even existed.

## Chapter Two St Anthony's

*As with all rural Anglican churches, Saint Anthony's is possessed of its own curiosities, most notably an upside-down carving of the Lovegrove family crest beneath the reredos, and a tiled Latin motto above the entranceway, which roughly translates to, Let that which is lost be found within these walls.*

Four days in. Three nights on that camp bed. Two dinners in that dim kitchen. One trip to Eir's Tavern for greasy fish and chips that you pushed around your plate until you told Susan you felt light-headed and had to go home. Still no message from Jordan. Tried calling him, standing outside Scadden's in a patch of signal. Tried texting him and got nothing back.

You've kept busy reading your grandfather's books, sneaking out at night with a torch. Been out into the garden and watched the bees going in, out, in, out of the hives. Taken the photograph of Susan, Emblyn and Kitto off the wall in the living room and slipped it behind the sofa. Gone into her bedroom and stolen a pair of silver earrings from her chest of drawers. Started to chew off half-moons of fingernail and deposit them round the house. Breadcrumb trails leading nowhere, like your mother used to do. You'd find snot-stiff tissues and used plasters, folded carefully in half and cast on the nearest surface. Long strands of her thick black hair looping on the upholstery and clogging plug holes, hugging your clothes. Her skin, when it was bad, left sprinkles of white powder on her clothes and the sofa. Remember looking up at her back in the heavy green

winter coat, the dusting of skin flakes that covered her shoulders. How it looked like snow on a dark green mountain.

You've kept busy learning things too. Watched your cousins play, seen them collect shells, sea glass, stones and animal bones. Worked out that when Kitto is nervous he cups his hand and rubs it forwards and backwards over the top of his ear. You've learned that honey straight from the hive tastes different to honey from a jar. That it changes with the weather, stiffening or melting on the plate with the sun. You've learned that Susan can't look you in the eye for longer than a few seconds. Grown accustomed to the smell and texture of sheep shit on your shoes and the constancy of the wind and the strangeness of the open sky. You've learned that days are longer out here, and that nights pass even slower. That if you go outside at two in the morning you can see the Milky Way. An explosion of white powder across black.

You were woken this morning by the kids going up and down the stairs. Went into the kitchen and ate half a slice of burnt toast and drank cold tea. When the moment was right, turned to Susan and told her, in your best voice, that you needed to check your emails. You told your friend you'd call her when you arrived. Didn't want her to worry.

"You're welcome to use the house phone," she said, pressing another slice of stale bread into the slot with her thumb.

Told her you didn't know her number, and she sort of half nodded. Brushed her hands against her hips. "It won't kill you to have a little bit of distance from Facebook and all that," she said. "If they find out anything about your mum, they'll be calling not sending a Tweet."

When you didn't say anything she asked about the fainting. If it had happened again. If you needed to go to the doctor.

"No," you said quickly, belly knotting at the thought of a blood pressure cuff constricting around your arm. "I feel much better."

"Well, excellent." She smiled and you saw you'd been caught. "Then you can join us at church this morning can't you?"

In the end you came to a compromise: you would go to church and on the way home, you would stop at the school for five minutes and she would let you use the computer. So you pulled on some clothes and walked up, two by two, Susan going ahead with Emblyn, Kitto trotting along beside you silently.

Services only happen every second Sunday of the month, the vicar being too old and too prone to seasickness to manage the journey more often. As you approach you see a stream of other islanders heading in. Recognise some of them. A tall old lady pushing a small old lady in a wheelchair. A woman with dark hair and wide shoulders, freckles going up and down her arms. Stop to brush the mud off your feet as you file inside and your shoulder catches on someone. "Oh excuse me," she says and flicks her blonde hair back, sending a waft of perfume into your face.

Susan takes you to a pew at the back, Kitto nestling into the wall, making himself small. Emblyn sits beside you and keeps looking up, so you grab the hymnal and thumb through it. Stop on Morning Has Broken and picture Jean singing along to her Cat Stevens album as she peels mangoes. She's separating the tough green skins with smooth confident strokes, her delicate thumb curling back like a cashew as the knife comes to meet it. Jordan is somehow in the

memory too, sitting with his knees slung wide, PE kit on, which means it must have been after school. He's looking out at the sunlit garden, looking too young, looking like he could be her grandson, and that makes you hate him.

"What's your favourite hymn?" Emblyn says brightly. "My favourite is Shine, Jesus, Shine, but my second favourite is the Colours of Day."

Nod, searching for something small to say to make her stop talking. Feel relieved as a tall, rangy hunchbacked woman in a body warmer comes up to the front of the church. She sneezes, dabs at her nose with a handkerchief. "Bit of housekeeping before I hand over to Rev," she says, and the congregation quiets. "Obviously we said goodbye to our dear Arnold this week. Anyone who wasn't at the funeral, we're putting together a fund for a bench in his memory. It'll be up by the West Light, which Mary tells us was always his favourite spot for a picnic. When he wasn't chasing after a lost sheep in his undies of course." There's a gentle murmur of laughter, and seeing her smile this big, lopsided grin you remember who she is. Flora Penlerick, Emblyn and Kitto's aunt. The woman who took you to the party two weeks after your uncle disappeared, a week after Kitto was born. She held your hand as you walked over to the village, the skin on her palms chapped and warm, Emblyn tucked neatly onto her hipbone. Tugged you along with a sort of no-nonsense roughness that made it obvious she knew exactly what she was doing. To test it, you detached your hand and ran off randomly the way you had just walked. Flora came after you and grabbed your elbow, giving you a flat, painless slap on the forearm. It made you cry, instantly, but not for the reason she thought.

Flora nods in the direction of a straight-backed old woman, her hair white and crisply curling on the top of her head. "If you want to donate, we'll be sending round a bucket after the service. I know it would mean a lot to Mary." Then she sits and the vicar rises. Face grey-white, eyes bulbous through thick spectacles. Everyone stands for the first hymn and you mime along, casting your eyes around the crowd. Need to memorise new faces, look for familiar ones, tot up the list of names in your head. A few rows in front a girl looks back over her shoulder and smiles. Look down quickly, back at the hymn, then behind. Find who she was looking at. A teenage boy, his jaw jutting out sulkily. When you look back she's still smiling. Reddish hair and pink cheeks, thin line of pink sunburn along her forehead. She lifts her hand and sort of shrugs her shoulders and flutters her fingers in a half-wave and you know now, for sure, that it's meant for you. So you concentrate on the hymn, staring into the page, not seeing the words. It's only when you feel a tug on your elbow that you realise it's finished, that everyone has sat down but you.

The vicar leads a prayer. Talks about death and calls it *moving on*. Talks about understanding, and community, how God's love holds us up when we can't hold ourselves up. Keep your eyes down, on the pew in front. The smiling girl is sitting next to the woman with the short red hair from the shop. The bitchy one who caught you trying to text Jordan, accused you of loitering. The girl must be a Scadden, which means she must be Scarlett Scadden. The girl who had the birthday party. Butterfly clips and sparkly jeans and a sweet little smile you can see straight through.

At the end of the service, the bucket comes round. Run your eyes across the money quickly counting about thirty-five quid (not enough, not nearly enough) then get up and try and push your way out of the church first. See the girl coming over with her mum and a man who must be her dad, hear him call out Susan's name. To your surprise, Susan comes out quickly too, zipping up her jacket and heading off, not hearing, or maybe ignoring Scarlett's dad.

"We're still stopping at the school, right?"

"Oh," she shakes her head. "That'll have to be another time. I forgot the keys." And she walks off ahead of you like it wasn't a lie.

\*

"Timothy says that Arnold Maddock got impaled." Emblyn is sitting opposite you at the kitchen table, twisting a curl of hair in her fingers.

"Timothy Lovegrove will say anything to get an audience." Susan is dishing reheated shepherd's pie onto your plate. The fat, dirt smell, the rumbling of the washing machine, which is slowly edging its way out of its cubbyhole, are making your back teeth set. You'd like to scoop up a handful of the pie and slowly mash it into Susan's lying face.

"He was so old his brain went funny," Emblyn says, pushing her luck. "He went out in his barn at night and fell and —"

"Emblyn," Susan says sharply. "That's enough."

Push a chunk of pie around your plate, watch its oily path on the white china. Cast a sideways look at Kitto who is looking down at his food, methodically cutting it into squares. There is a sharp knock at the door. Susan gets up and Emblyn immediately leans across the table. You only half listen to

her telling you about Arnold Maddock being impaled on a pitchfork because you're trying to hear the voice of the person at the door. When Susan comes back in someone follows and your stomach clenches. Glossy auburn ponytail, pink cheeks, sweet smile.

"Hi Scarlett," says Emblyn.

"Alright, Em?"

"Esther, this is Scarlett," says Susan.

Scarlett grins at you, freckled nose crinkling. "Saw you in church before. You came to my tenth birthday party." She leans up against the kitchen counter. "I've got a really good memory for that shit," she says, adding a pre-emptive *sorry* as Susan shoots her a look.

"What brings you here then?" Susan, going over to the washing machine and bashing it back into place with her hip. "Pillaging from our tree again?"

Scarlett laughs this natural, light laugh that has to be fake because it's so perfect. "Just passing. Thought I'd pop in." She sticks her tongue out at Kitto, who giggles and slaps his hands over his eyes dramatically like he's a different kid.

"You want something to eat?"

Scarlett shakes her head and you look her up and down discreetly. Note the spot on her chin, stupid pink plastic earrings, small pouch of belly flab poking from her under her t-shirt. Gaze lifts back to her face and she's looking right at you. Caught out.

"My dad wants to meet you," she says and hearing that Susan does something odd. Feel her on the other side of the room snap into this still pose,

stiffen like a dog hearing something out the window. Then she recovers, comes over and sits down again.

“I imagine he’ll be wanting to talk to Esther about her mother,” she says, grinding more pepper onto her food.

Scarlett’s eyes brighten. “She still missing?”

“She is, yes,” says Susan, when you don’t speak.

“That’s shit,” she says adding again, “Sorry. I know, I know.”

Scarlett’s party was at her house in the village. Remember her father, the man you saw in church. His pink cheeks and blonde hair. How he gave you a cup of warm orange squash as you walked through the door. There were a lot of adults, too many for it to seem like a proper party. There was a dog running about. A crying baby and helium balloons and a table groaning with food. And at the centre of it all Scarlett, twirling and laughing in her sparkly jeans. You remember a tall silent boy in the corner and another one who tipped a whole plate of sandwiches on the floor and trod them into the carpet. He had a pair of those trainers with red flashing lights in the heels. Watched them blink as he jumped up and down on the spot until his mother yanked him away by the arm so hard he screamed. Later, Scarlett pulled you into the middle of the floor to dance. Held your hands and spun until you felt dizzy.

“Esther,” says Scarlett suddenly. “Why don’t you come to the shop wi’ me?”

“That’s a good idea.” Susan’s looking at you. They both are. Should’ve gotten out of this kitchen ten minutes ago. But then you think, Scarlett’s an only child. Spoilt. She probably has a phone, a laptop, wifi.

“Can I come?” says Emblyn.

“You can get some more milk while you’re there,” says Susan, ignoring her daughter. “And some rice for tea. I’ll get my purse.”

Before you can say anything, Susan has left the room and Scarlett is grinning at you. “Well, that’s that,” she says, with a wink. “Stuck wi’ me now.”

The day has grown hot but there’s still a breeze, and the sky is streaked with fast-moving clouds. When you come out of the house, Scarlett heads straight to the birch tree and picks something up, slipping whatever it is into her pocket. You don’t ask, just follow her up that steep slope leading towards the village, reading the details of her body. The spill of creamy flesh over the tops of her low-slung jeans. The rough grey-pink skin on the backs of her heels. A bobbly brown mole at the base of her neck, like a Coco Pop. She’s not pretty, but she’s the kind of girl boys like. Big boobs. Thick hair. Smiling all the time. You’ve met and hated so many girls like her.

“Where d’you wanna go then?” she says, stopping and squinting at you through the sun.

“I thought we were going to the shop?”

She laughs. “I just thought you’d want a break from Susan.”

Think of Jordan. Checking Facebook. “We could go to your house.”

She shrugs. “I guess.” Then she walks on, starts to chatter. “So d’you like it here? I like it mostly. But it’s dead boring sometimes. I mean, there’s like a bit of gossip at the moment, but I dunno how much it’d mean to you because you don’t really know anyone yet...” You half-listen, taking in odd details. She tells you about the Lovegroves, the ones who live in the big glass house west of the

village, buying a new sculpture that's costing fifty grand. Lester Maddock getting drunk in Eir's Tavern and making a scene. She talks about someone called Con, and someone else called Lewis and the names make a connection somewhere at the back of your brain.

She stops and turns back and you notice that in the sunlight her skin looks bad. "You know Lewis? He was at my party. Con, Conall, was there too," she says, "My boyfriend." Know, without her saying, two things. That Conall was the boy with the flashing trainers, jumping up and down on the sandwiches, and that he was in church today, sat behind you, refusing to sing.

"Me and Con, we're not *exclusive* or anything." Almost as an afterthought, she adds: "We've done it, you know. It doesn't even hurt that much." She's blinking at you. Suddenly seems very young. "Have you done it?"

Navigate a lone pile of sheep shit. Tuck your chin back and catch the neck of your T-shirt in your teeth, the way Jean always hated. *Have you done it?* Think of that night on his mum's white leather sofa, passing back and forth a bottle of Bailey's. In one moment you were watching something on the TV, laughing. In the next Jordan's hand was in your knickers, his voice in your ear. *You're so fucking sexy. I want you. I love you.* You let him poke around, breathe heavily into your ear, press his crotch against your leg as you stared at the ceiling. When you went back to him two weeks later, the day she sold the piano, you pulled him towards you, and he pushed you away. Because you were *strange* and *cold*. Because you were *like a stone*.

"Yeah, I've done it," you say, lying, because it's easier.

“You’re dead shy aren’t you?” She’s smiling at you, her nose crinkling up. “I wish I was more shy. I just say what comes into my head as soon as I think it.” She rolls her eyes and laughs that laugh again. Then, because you still don’t say anything, she starts talking again. Tells you she’s going over to the mainland tomorrow to meet her friends. They’re going to the big shopping centre, where she’ll buy a bra and some new trainers and this makeup palette she’s seen on YouTube. Then they’ll go see a film and eat pizza. “I haven’t seen them in ages, it’s gonna be so fun,” she says. “If you want me to get you anything, like, just let me know.”

You come into the village, pass the big grey Carrick house, the school, The Red Gannet, Eir’s Tavern in silence. Come to Scadden’s where Scarlett suddenly stops.

“What the fuck...” She disappears inside quickly. You follow, on autopilot. There’s a smell of onions and paint hanging in the air. Wooden shelves stacked with tins of beans, soup, ketchup, teabags. Wilting cabbages, tomatoes, rows of small freckled eggs. At the back, three people stand by the counter. Behind it Scarlett’s mum, in front a teenage boy in a baggy T-shirt and a pregnant woman, who’s North Indian or Pakistani maybe. Let your eyes settle on her, because it’s strange to see a face here that isn’t white.

“Leslie,” she says. “Can I just hear what Conall has to say before we hang, draw and quarter him?”

“What’s going on?”

“Scarlett, this is for me and Conall to sort out. Go outside.”

“You’re a fucking liar!” he spits. Haunches up like the dog Jean’s neighbours owned, the bow-legged Staffy that stalked up and down the back garden all day. “I didn’t take anything!”

Leslie sighs. “You would’ve if I hadn’t caught you.”

“Fuck this,” says Conall spinning away to leave just as Scarlett grabs his arm, a look on her face so pathetic you want to laugh. “Con,” she says, pleading. “What’s going on?”

“I’ve caught him trying to steal from us for the last time,” responds Leslie calmly. “That’s the end of it. You hear that Sandhya? He comes in here again, I’m within my rights to give him the boot.”

Sandhya sighs, leans heavily on the counter. “Conall, were you trying to steal something?” She has a faint northern accent. An outsider just like you.

“Why the fuck would I want anything from this poxy shop?” He yanks his arm from Scarlett’s grip and then - and this actually surprises you - hocks up a glob of yellowy saliva onto the counter, narrowly missing Leslie’s hand.

“Alright, that’s enough!” says Sandhya, but Conall is already storming past you and disappearing into the sunlit day, Scarlett following behind.

“He’s not welcome at our house!” says Leslie. “I won’t be opening our door to him again!”

Sandhya fishes a tissue from her pocket and wipes up the spit. “Not very polite, that.” Then she looks over at you. “Sorry about that, love.” She’s pretty. Thick shiny hair. Wide mouth full of large white teeth that would look too big in someone else’s face. “You a day-tripper?”

“She’s Julia Evans’ girl.”

“I remember Julia,” says Sandhya. “Sue’s sister, right? Long dark hair, very pretty?” She looks to Leslie who moves her shoulders in a slight shrug. You hate her, you think. “Oh,” says Sandhya, slapping a hand to her forehead. “She’s missing isn’t she?”

Divert your eyes to the food in front of you, grab a bag of rice and take it over the counter.

“You’re Esther, then? I’m Sandy.” She picks three packs of peppermint chewing gum from the rack on the counter and presses money into Leslie’s hand. “D’you know where she might have gone?”

Shake your head. Sandy is nice, but stupid in the way most people are.

“Well, I’m island warden, if you need anything.” She pops out two pieces of gum, offering one to you. “I’ll cross my fingers that she turns up safe and sound.”

Stupid, but nice. You take the gum and head out.

Everything is too much today. Too much sun, too much sea wind, too many people talking to you. You cross over to Eir’s, finding shade. Sit at an empty picnic table next to a family of tourists eating fish and chips. Two little boys in striped jumpers. Thin, blonde mother in large sunglasses. Posh rugby dad, quizzing his sons in a loud voice about the names of the English counties.

“Lancashire, Lincolnshire...” The little boy trails off.

“And? I know you know this.”

Turn your back to them and pop Sandy’s gum in your mouth to fend off the smell of vinegar. You don’t have to go back to Shingle Cottage yet. Could wait for Scarlett, ask to use her computer. Could go wandering. Walk one way out of

the village and you'd head in the direction of Golley Bay, boats back to the real world. Turn the other way and the island opens up. Sweet Manor, Lovegrove House, the standing stones, the Blade and Sugarstone, Satan's Well, St Eir's. You could go to any of those places. But the thought of walking in this heat, over that boggy ground, puts you off. Dig in your pocket for change, wondering if you have enough for a drink in the pub, wondering whether they'll serve you. Twenty, thirty, fifty pence. One pound. One pound six. Maybe you could work a hand into Rugby Tosser's jacket pocket without him noticing. But then he gets up, they all get up, and as you turn to watch them go you see Scarlett heading towards you.

The next second you're on your feet and inside the entrance of the pub. Press against the wall, blink to acclimatise your eyes. The ceiling is low, beamed with strips of dark wood. Old maps, browning photographs line the walls. Across from where you stand stretches the deserted bar. Looking around you find the whole place deserted. Not a soul in sight. A sunny Saturday in July and no one's at the pub.

Cast a look over your shoulder, move to the bar quickly. If she was coming in here she would've by now. You're safe. Behind the bar, you go straight for the vodka, try to pull the bottle free. It won't budge. Instead take a clean glass from under the bar and fill it up, put it to your lips, down it in one. It hits the back of your throat like warm petrol. Fill the glass again, down another inch. Something spirals in your brain. Fill it, down another inch. Hot tendrils ripple over your skull. Press your tongue to the back of your mouth to stop yourself from retching.

“I’d say you were too young to be doing that.”

Set down the glass. Turn around. Make your way quickly from behind the bar, careful not to look up.

He steps in front of you. Large brown walking boots, scuffed and muddied. Khaki trousers. Stiff, waxed jacket. “Nothing to say for yourself?”

Suddenly your chin is in his rough hand. He’s forcing you to look at him. His face is wide and rust-coloured. Features raw and rough like the giant’s head in Golley Bay. Hair, sandy, grey here and there, receding from his large forehead in thinning strands. A streak of mauve sunburn stretches across the top of his head. Imagine digging your fingernails into it. He puts his face close to yours, stares into your eyes, and something odd happens. His own widen, his mouth grows slack.

“Oh...” he says softly, and you catch the tarry tang of whisky on his breath. “My Julia?”

Before you can do anything his thick arms are round your body, his face at your ear. Tar breath, the overwhelming mustiness of his jacket. Try to push him off, but he holds you tight, tighter, hands hot against your ribs. Deep panic stirs in your gut, and something kicks in. You do the only thing you can. Bring your foot down hard on his toes, grind until you feel the bones. He starts back suddenly, and before he can say anything else you’re outside walking, then running. Fast as your legs can carry you.

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Peer into the toilet bowl, sniff. Clean. Only a swirl of saliva on the surface of the water left to tell the story of the past five minutes. Hold your toothbrush under

the hot tap, tilting the mirrored door of the medicine cabinet away at an angle so you won't catch your reflection. Calm drapes over you like a warm blanket. All there's left to do is rinse your mouth. Gargle mouthwash. Dab toothpaste on your tongue.

When you came in you went straight upstairs, pulled one of the Sister Cornelia books from the shelf. Sat on the bed, back pressed against the wall, reading. Told Susan you didn't feel well, let Emblyn bring you a plate of dinner (sausages, peas, rice) and had to push it under the bed after half an hour, the sight making you sick. It's dark now and they are all in bed and you can breathe again.

Close the toilet and sit down. That pleasant weak feeling rattles in your knees. Rub the toothpaste into the roof of your mouth with your tongue rhythmically. Picture your whites. Sheets on a bed, midnight snow, ice cubes in a glass. Feel your heartbeat slowing. If you just sat here for the next hour, eyes closed, your whole body might switch off. Might forget the smell of that man's breath, the feel of his hands on you. But you're tired. You need your bed. Get up and flush the toilet again, looking at the sign hanging over it (*If it's yellow, let it mellow!*) and then hold your hands under the hot tap, taking comfort in the pain.

Outside, the landing is dark. Pull the Nokia out, see with faint surprise that it's almost one am. The big brass lamp on your grandfather's desk will click off in seven minutes. You move back to the study and a floorboard creaks behind you. In the dim stream of light from your room, you make out a white shape at the top of the stairs. Something cold drops through you. Then you

realise what you're looking at. Susan in a white nightie. The flush must have woken her.

"Sorry," you say softly. She doesn't reply.

Push the door of the study open, let the lamp light stream onto the landing. She's rooted at the top of the stairs. Thin fabric of her nightgown shifting around her ankles. Dark head dipped like she's looking at something at the bottom of the stairs.

"Susan?" Move to the wooden railing. "Susan." Raise your voice this time but still nothing. Realise with a shiver that she's asleep. Vague thoughts run through your head. Flash of you standing behind her, giving her a gentle push at the backs of the knees. Another image, a snippet of a film or TV show with somebody saying *you can't wake a sleepwalking person*. Is that true or just an urban legend? You look to the study for inspiration, and when you turn back she's staring directly up at you. Face round and white in the dark hallway. Even in the dim light you can see that her eyes are glassy, not quite seeing.

"I'm not going to do it anymore," she says, her voice barely louder than a whisper.

"Not going to do what?"

Her eyebrows rumple slightly. "I won't lie anymore. Not for you."

Then she walks slowly down the stairs and out of sight.

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## The Stories We Tell Ourselves: Turning Trauma into Narrative in Anne Enright's *The Gathering*, Niall Williams' *History of the Rain*, and John Banville's *The Sea*

I began this research with an idea of exploring memory – namely its unreliability, and what that means, and how it shapes our lives and identities. The theme of memory has always played a pivotal role in my creative writing, and in undertaking this project it was apparent early on that memory would rest at the heart of both my essay and my novel. As I read and wrote more, my focus began to narrow and my research moved in the direction of traumatic memory. I began work on a novel in which the life of the central character, Esther, has been shaped irrevocably by traumatic experiences, most notably the death of a beloved maternal figure and the subsequent actions of Esther's manic-depressive mother. It was the decision to position this event at the heart of my novel that ultimately informed the writing of this critical essay.

When it came to selecting the novels with which this essay is concerned (Anne Enright's *The Gathering*, Niall Williams' *History of the Rain*, and John Banville's *The Sea*) I opted for three texts that explore how the memory of a traumatic event is revisited in its aftermath. In the early days of my research, the broadness of this topic had me drawn in many different directions. An early draft was concerned with my three texts' Irish provenance, and led me to examine Ireland's historic traumas, beginning with the Great Famine and the Irish Folklore Commission of 1945 that sought to gather stories on this period. I explored the idea that retellings of trauma to facilitate understanding and recovery are an Irish tradition, something evidenced in the tales collected for

the IFC.<sup>1</sup> Later, I became interested in the motif of water and the connection between place, nature and trauma; it is not insignificant that in each of my chosen texts, as well as my own novel, there is a tragic death by water. But though my early research was fascinating, like the “river narrative” manuscript of Williams’ narrator, Ruth Swain, this essay failed for a long time to pick up pace.

In search of a clear structure I continued to read, looking into trauma theory, the neuroscience behind memory, the origins of storytelling, and a series of novels by the author Edward St Aubyn, who revisited his real-life childhood trauma through the figure of a literary alter ego, Patrick Melrose. Perhaps most importantly, I continued to write, exploring the themes of memory and trauma through my own literary invention: the damaged and reclusive Esther. Eventually the banks of my own meandering river narrative burst, and when the waters subsided something different remained.

I had come to see how, in reshaping and sharing one’s story, the traumatised person may be able to take hold of, to reclaim, his or her trauma, turning it into a narrative with a beginning, middle and end. In the case of a writer like St Aubyn, who was repeatedly sexually assaulted by his father Roger as a child, the trauma drove him to a point where he “had a stark choice between telling the truth and killing [himself]” (qtd by Moss). As he has stated in the years since, he “didn’t set out to unburden [himself but to] tell a story”

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<sup>1</sup> David Lloyd has noted that the Irish Folklore Commission is full of references to “the notion that the Irish peasantry...understood the Famine in terms of

and it was this “devotion to telling a story that brought it about, the therapeutic effect” (qtd by McGrath and Aitken).

While it is vital to draw a distinction between a fictional trauma sufferer and an author writing of real life trauma (the two must not be conflated) there is no question that St Aubyn’s works have played a key role in this project, both in terms of my approach to my critical essay, and as inspiration for my creative work. In reading the Patrick Melrose novels and the interviews St Aubyn has given since he began to write of his experiences, I came to understand that this writer’s trauma narrative began with the impulse to *tell a story*. It was during the process of telling that story that he took steps towards a closer understanding of his trauma, essentially by discovering “the dramatic truth of the situations [he] was in” (qtd by Moss). In writing his Patrick Melrose novels, St Aubyn carried out the dual process of telling a story and recovering from trauma; in the following essay, I will investigate how the narrators of Enright’s *The Gathering*, Williams’ *History of the Rain*, and Banville’s *The Sea* do the same.

As the three narrators of my chosen novels demonstrate, the first step in their recovery process is to sit down and engage with the physical act of writing. The second is to construct a meaningful narrative around the traumatic incident, in which some degree of invention helps to flesh out gaps in knowledge and make sense of the events surrounding the tragedy. The third step is, to some extent, to go back on oneself by relinquishing total control; in a process called “dirty writing” we will see how our narrators benefit from moving away from the need to always make sense. We will also see how, in being unflinching about sharing the dirtier and more difficult aspects of trauma,

deeper understanding is made possible. The fourth and final step in the construction of the trauma narrative is to share the traumatic experience with another person; or, at least, to be in a position where this seems possible. It is this step, more so than any of the others, that plays a pivotal role in my creative work. After speaking to her aunt about the death that has left her traumatised, Esther takes steps towards emotional rehabilitation, indicated in part by a switch from the distanced second to the engaged first person voice. For the purposes of this essay, I will argue that my chosen narrators carry out a more specific recovery process, which is initiated – as described above – by the act of writing.

In the following chapters I will demonstrate how each of the steps I have laid out is key in achieving what trauma theorists call “integration” – essentially the reconciling of trauma with one’s own life story, an act Bessel van der Kolk has described as “*association*: integrating the cut-off elements of the trauma into the ongoing narrative of life, so that the brain can recognize that ‘that was then, and this is now’” (*The Body Keeps the Score* 181). Supporting my argument is a critical framework that has been constructed largely from the work of trauma theorists. On the topic of beginning to write one’s trauma down, I have looked into the work of Bessel van der Kolk and Dominick LaCapra, who has argued for the importance of writing as a tool for “acting out, working over, and to some extent working through in analyzing and ‘giving voice’ to the past” (186). On the topic of integration, I have drawn on the work of Pierre Janet, Sigmund Freud, and Cathy Caruth, the last of whom has argued that trauma causes “a break in the mind’s experience of time” (*Trauma and Self* 32) preventing the sufferer

from fully comprehending what has occurred. In combination with Judith Herman's argument that some reconstruction of the memories surrounding trauma is required, these theories have led me to explore the notion that recovery is bound up in bridging that gap in understanding. On the topic of sharing unpleasant truths, I have drawn upon Sophie Tamas' notion of "dirty writing". Lastly, on the topic of sharing one's trauma with another person, I have looked into the work of Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, whose extensive study of Holocaust survivors has illustrated the importance of being able to communicate the traumatic experience to, what Laub calls, an "addressable other" (*Testimony* 68).

The extent to which my chosen narrators achieve these steps and move towards recovery will be shown to be tied up in their ability to accept what has happened to them, and, ultimately, their willingness to recover.

## **Sitting Down to Write**

In Anne Enright's *The Gathering*, Niall Williams' *History of the Rain*, and John Banville's *The Sea*, each narrator is each pushed to confront a traumatic incident from their past because of an event in the present day. The trigger for Enright's Veronica is the suicide of her brother Liam, whom she witnessed being sexually abused when she was a child; Veronica's narrative begins shortly after her brother's body is found, the adult Liam having walked into the sea at Brighton. For Banville's Max, the death of his wife Anna brings back memories of a childhood summer in which his friend Chloe and her brother Myles drowned in the sea at the (fictional) Irish seaside resort of Ballyless. In the case of Williams' Ruth, worsening ill health leads her to revisit two painful events from her past: the deaths of her brother Aeney and her father Virgil. We understand implicitly that the loss of her father and brother are connected to her sickness, which first manifests itself in a feeling of abstract fear: "Once I returned from university I had this dread pressing in on my chest. If I got to the front door my legs stopped working" (89). The events of the present day push each narrator not only to return to their unpleasant memories but, for the first time, to take action.

As with real-life trauma sufferer Edward St Aubyn, who has spoken of his need to begin writing after the death of his father and a suicide attempt – "I would either die or I would write" (qtd by Parker) – each of our narrators is driven into the physical act of picking up the pen and getting their thoughts down on paper. This is immediately apparent in Williams' novel, where we learn on page four that narrator Ruth is writing her father's story "to find him".

The text we are reading is Ruth's own manuscript, which is in the process of being written and passed over to an editor, Ruth's former teacher Mrs Quinty. Enright's narrator Veronica opens her story in a similar fashion, declaring "I would like to write down what happened in my grandmother's house the summer I was eight or nine" (1). Later she tells us "This is how I live my life since Liam died. I stay up all night. I write, or I don't write. I walk the house" (36) and that "mostly [she writes] about Ada and Nugent in the Belvedere, endlessly, over and again" (38) – a reference to Veronica's fictionalisation of the meeting between her grandmother Ada and the man who abused Liam. More subtle is Banville's presentation of Max, who is "supposed to be engaged in...a monograph on Bonnard" (40), but whom we suspect is spending his time recording his childhood memories. Towards the end of the novel, Max tells us that the old man living with him in the boarding house, Colonel Blunden, has "produced a going-away present, a fountain pen, a Swan, it is as old as he is, I should think. ...*I am gravng these words with it*" (262, emphasis my own); our suspicions that Max has been writing this entire time are confirmed.

In committing their thoughts and memories to paper, our narrators appear vividly in the present moment and engaged with their text, and yet constantly interrupted, not only by old memories floating to the surface but by distractions in the physical world. We imagine them, over and over, lifting their pen from paper to engage for a moment with the world again: "As I write, I look out the window and check with the corpse I have sitting in the Saab at the front gate" (*The Gathering* 132); "There goes the Colonel, creeping back to his room"

(*The Sea* 23); “ ‘Rain today, Ruthie!’ Nan shouts up through my floor from her place by the hearth downstairs” (*History of the Rain* 40).

We know, then, that our narrators are writing as they go, and therefore very much in the “first draft” stage. The question we must now ask is *why now?* Why is it at *this* point in their lives that they feel they must commit themselves to revisiting and writing down their trauma? We might begin by considering the significance of the present-day trauma, and how it connects back to the traumatic incident from their past. Dori Laub has observed that, for Holocaust survivors, tragic life events that came after their experiences in the concentration camps would be experienced “not as mere catastrophes, but rather as a second Holocaust, the ultimate victory of their cruel fate, which they have failed to turn around, and the final corroboration of the defeat of their powers to survive and rebuild” (*Testimony* 65). He gives the example of a man named Martin Gray who, after losing his family in a fire during the war, watched his new house burn down and his family perish: “Once again everything was taken away from me. ...I speak, I try to comprehend. Their death has reopened all the graves. In those graves...my people, my family, died in them a second death” (qtd by Laub 66). In the case of our narrators, later tragedies and present-day traumas seem to have had this effect of “reopening graves”, dredging up the experience of the past trauma in a painful fashion. What appears to be particularly significant, however, is that these wounds, reopened years later, were first created in childhood.

Ruth’s initial trauma occurred with the tragic drowning of her twin brother Aeneas (nicknamed Aeney throughout the novel), which occurred on

the “Last Day, the end of Primary” (296), indicating that both were eleven at the time. In the adult Ruth’s mind, this loss is bound up in the death of her father Virgil (which occurred more recently) but also the trauma surrounding her own ill health – Ruth is “confined to bed with an unidentified, debilitating blood disorder” (Taylor) and her condition seems to worsen throughout.<sup>2</sup> Enright’s Veronica experienced her traumatic incident at the age of eight or nine, when she witnessed her brother Liam being sexually abused by an adult; the secondary trauma occurs with Liam’s suicide when both are in their late thirties, an event which leads Veronica to obsess over the idea that his death was caused by the earlier abuse. Similarly, Banville’s Max was “ten, eleven?” (30) when his friends Chloe and Myles drowned; for him, the second trauma comes with the death of his wife from cancer in what we suppose to be his fifties or sixties. In this case, the link between Chloe and Max’s wife Anna seems to relate to complicated feelings of love and guilt towards the deceased, never resolved in either case.

In considering the impact of this childhood trauma, and why it made the second trauma so overwhelming and difficult to process, we might look to the manner in which that initial trauma was experienced. As we have discussed, it’s significant that each initial trauma suffered by our narrators occurred in childhood; Roy Lubit has noted that “children are less resilient than adults to

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<sup>2</sup> “In describing posttraumatic stress disorder the fourth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (American Psychiatric Association, 1994) emphasizes the significance of unexpected, life-threatening, or seriously harmful experiences for an individual or for family members of other persons close to that individual. The diagnosis of a life-threatening illness is specifically mentioned, as well as the fact that typical responses include fear, helplessness, or horror” (Marcus and Bernard 189)

the impact of traumatic events...making them more likely to become overwhelmed and traumatized” (3). Lubit expands: “While adults’ personalities are relatively formed and stable, those of children are still forming and their perceptions of the world and of themselves can be deeply impacted by undergoing a traumatic event” (3). Lenore C. Terr, a theorist who has written extensively on childhood trauma, assigns certain characteristics to what she calls “single-blow” type I trauma i.e. a one-off, shocking incident. One of the main characteristics of the type I trauma is “full, detailed, etched-in memories” (14), which – when we look at our narrators’ descriptions of their traumatic incidents – seems apt.

Ruth describes in close detail the circumstances of Aeney’s death; she remembers “standing at the window [eating] a piece of brown bread” (299), “the noise of a tractor” (300), and later – at the moment she realises he has gone into the river – her brother’s dog Huck as “a white gleam, sitting on the very edge of the bank” (301). Max’s account is similarly vivid. Remembering Chloe and Myles going under the water, he recalls “a large red-faced man with close-clipped grey hair” (245) shouting for help, and declares “I am sure...of the glove that he wore on his right hand, the hand that held the golf stick; it was light brown, fingerless, and the back of it was punched with holes” (245). Veronica’s recollection is also clear, to the point that she remembers her – incorrect – first impression of the scene:

It was as if Mr Nugent’s penis, which was sticking straight out of his flies, had grown strangely, and flowered at the tip to produce the large and unwieldy shape of a boy, that boy being my brother Liam, who, I finally saw, was not an extension of the man’s member...but a shocked (and of course he was shocked, I had opened the door) boy of nine, and the

member not even that, but the boy's bare forearm, that made a bridge of flesh between himself and Mr Nugent. (143-4)

In each case, the clarity of the recollection recalls Terr's theory that "Verbal recollections of single shocks in an otherwise trauma-free childhood are delivered in an amazingly clear and detailed fashion" (14). In Terr's opinion, memories of single-blow traumas "stay alive in a very special way, no matter how much conscious suppression the traumatized child is attempting" (14).<sup>3</sup>

The clear impact of these early traumas relates to a theory first pioneered by Sigmund Freud, and later developed by Cathy Caruth. In his 1920 essay *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud argues (with reference to an incident in which the person in question comes close to death), that "the common traumatic neurosis [occurs] as a consequence of an extensive breach being made in the protective shield against stimuli. ...It is caused by lack of preparedness to anxiety" (25). Caruth elaborates on this, arguing that "The shock of the mind's relation to the threat of death is...not the direct experience of the threat, but precisely the *missing* of this experience, the fact...it has not yet been fully known" (*Trauma and Self* 33). In Caruth's opinion, "What causes trauma...is a shock that appears to work very much like a bodily threat, but is in fact a break in the mind's experience of time" (*Trauma and Self* 32).

While none of our narrators were traumatised by the threat of bodily harm or death to themselves, we might observe that the nature of their trauma – sudden and shocking and involving the abuse or death of a loved one – seems

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<sup>3</sup> By contrast, Terr argues that type II, or recurring, trauma is characterised by modes of denial, repression and dissociation – she states that "Memories of prolonged or variably repeated childhood abuses...appear to be retained in spots, rather than as clear, complete wholes" (14).

to cause the kind of rift Caruth describes. As Caruth writes elsewhere, “the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it” (*Unclaimed Experience* 94). In the moment of one’s trauma, in other words, a schism occurs between the experiencing of the trauma and the understanding of it – as a result, the full implications of the event cannot be, as Caruth phrases it, “fully known” (*Unclaimed Experience* 6). We might consider this theory at odds with Terr’s notion of the detailed “flashback” recollection of the trauma – as evidenced by our three narrators – however, Caruth is clear to distinguish between the *recollection* of the event and the *experience* of it. She writes:

The literal registration of an event—the capacity to continually, in the flashback, reproduce it in exact detail—appears to be connected, in traumatic experience, precisely with the way it escapes full consciousness as it occurs. Modern neurobiologists have in fact suggested that the unerring “engraving” on the mind, the “etching into the brain” of an event in trauma may be associated with its elision of its normal encoding in memory. (*Explorations in Memory* 152-3)

For our three narrators, then, the mere fact that they recall their childhood trauma in such clear detail indicates that it has not been fully known. The traumatic incident – so clearly recalled in fine detail each case – has eluded what Caruth and others call “integration” despite occurring many years in the past. As Bessel van der Kolk has noted, “Normal memory integrates the elements of each experience into the continuous flow of self-experience” while “reenactments” of traumatic memories are “frozen in time, unchanging” (180). These memories, in other words, sit outside of time and have failed to slot into the life story of the survivor; it is for this reason that the storytelling impulse we discussed earlier becomes so important. Irene Kacandes has noted that “Because [post-traumatic stress disorder] appears to be caused by an inability

of the individual to integrate atrocities into consciousness” – a point discussed by Caruth and others – “some kind of transformation of the initial imprinting of the experience has to take place” (616) to enable the trauma survivor to heal and move on. Thus, the fact that the trauma was so shocking, so inherently unknowable, is the reason it has never been fully integrated; this in turn has allowed for the traumatic incident that occurs later on – Laub’s “second Holocaust” – to devastate so completely. As Laub has noted, “the trauma of the second holocaust bears witness not just to a history that has not ended, but specifically, to the historical occurrence of an event that, in effect, *does not end*” (*Testimony* 67).

It is clear, then, that our narrators’ primary trauma – which in the moment it occurred eluded understanding – has gone unintegrated over the years, not truly made sense of, and that the arrival of the secondary trauma has triggered an unavoidable return to the initial trauma. It is for this reason that each chooses to begin writing at this point; as with St Aubyn, driven to write by the death of his father and his own suicidal impulses, each has reached a breaking point. Evidence of this may be found in the behaviour of one of our narrators, Max Morden, who repeatedly draws connections between his dead wife Anna and his dead childhood friend Chloe. Early on, we learn that Max felt compelled to return to the Cedars by a dream. Following the death of Anna, he dreamt that he was walking along a country road:

As well as being the age I am now I was a boy as well...and on my way home, it must have been home, or somewhere that had been home, once, and that I would recognise again, when I got there. I had hours of walking to do but I did not mind that, for this was a journey of surpassing but inexplicable importance, one that I must make and was bound to

complete. ...*There was something the matter with my foot, the left one, I must have injured it, but long ago, for it was not painful, though at every step I had to throw it out awkwardly in a sort of half-circle, and this hindered me, not seriously but seriously enough.* ...The journey did not end, I arrived nowhere, and nothing happened. I was just walking there, bereft and stalwart, endlessly trudging through the snow and the wintry gloaming. But I woke...with the conviction that something had been achieved, or at least initiated. Immediately then, and for the first time in I do not know how long, I thought of Ballyless and the house there on Station Road, and the Graces, and Chloe Grace. ...It endured only a minute, less than a minute, that happy lightsomeness, but it told me what to do, and where I must go.

(24-6, my emphasis)

Though the meaning of the dream is not wholly clear to Max, this entire passage can be read as extended metaphor for Max's journey into the past, his need to return to the traumatic moment of Chloe's death. Here, the detail of his wounded foot "injured...long ago" stands in for the long-lasting effects of the initial trauma; the limping foot is the wound that never quite healed because it was never integrated, and which is still holding him back.

Later on, Max muses on death, declaring "We carry the dead with us only until we die too, and then it is we who are borne along for a little while, and then our bearers in their turn drop, and so on into the unimaginable generations" (119), and considers Chloe's sudden death, wondering to himself "How could she be with me one moment and the next not? How could she be elsewhere, absolutely? That was what I could not understand, could not be reconciled to, cannot still" (140) – a question which in turn triggers a memory of a dying Anna: "*Patient,*' Anna said to me one day towards the end, 'that is an odd word. I must say, I don't feel patient at all.'" (140).

Max has evidently not forgotten Chloe's death but, in having never fully processed the trauma of her drowning, he struggles to this day to understand

and accept what happened. In losing Anna, he finds himself losing Chloe all over again, the grief of the later death framing the grief of the former in sharp new detail. As a means of coping with Anna's death, Max chooses to reoccupy his childhood self, replaying the events through adult eyes in an attempt to find out some truth about himself, in a ritual which recalls Freud's notion of "deferred action,"<sup>4</sup> described by Jean Laplanche as "retroactive interpretation" and a "[reversal of] time's arrow": "He simply puts himself back there: 'If only I'd known!'" (239).

We know, then, why our characters choose to sit down and begin writing at this point in time, but now we might wonder why is it that they choose to *write*, and not simply *speak* their trauma to another person. On the subject of writing down his own trauma, St Aubyn has explained:

Something being hidden is a necessity before I can start writing. If I have something to say, it's much easier for me to just meet up with a friend and say it. *If there's something that I really don't want to say...or something that I don't know how to say...or something that I don't even know what it is, that's what makes me submit to the horrible process of writing a novel.* It is very unpleasant. After I've written a novel, I feel a little bit clearer and freer than I did before, but while I'm writing it, it's horrible, it's intensely upsetting. But for some reason I feel obliged to go on doing it. It's the only thing I can do. (qtd by Moss, my emphasis)

St Aubyn's feelings about the unique power of writing echo much trauma theory. As Dominick LaCapra has phrased it: "writing trauma...involves processes of acting out, working over, and to some extent working through in analyzing and 'giving voice' to the past" (186). Others believe in the power of

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<sup>4</sup> "A young man...who became a great admirer of womanly beauty, once when the conversation turned upon a beautiful wet nurse who had nourished him as a child, expressed himself to the effect that he was sorry he had not taken better advantage of his opportunity at the time." (*Interpretation of Dreams* 155)

writing to, not simply “work through” old traumas, but to uncover truths not previously known or understood. Bessel van der Kolk writes:

If you ask your editor to leave you alone for a while, things will come out that you had no idea were there. You are free to go into a sort of a trance state in which your pen (or keyboard) seems to channel whatever bubbles up from inside. You can connect with those self-observing and narrative parts of your brain without worrying about the reception you’ll get. (*The Body Keeps the Score* 238)

Van der Kolk also describes patients bringing in “fragments of writing...about memories that they may not yet be ready to discuss” and that the reading aloud of this content would “probably overwhelm them” (239). As with St Aubyn approaching the writing of his novels, and van der Kolk’s traumatised patients, Veronica, Max and Ruth are not yet ready to *speak* their trauma yet – not just because they are still, as LaCapra phrases it “working through” their feelings, but because to some extent they are not sure what they want or need to say.

In the quest for understanding of the traumatic event, and to prevent the devastation of future traumas, our narrators must take on the task not just of physically writing, but constructing a narrative, shaping those tragic events into a story with meaning.

## Constructing the Trauma Narrative

We have seen how trauma, in the moment it occurs, can break itself off from understanding, can fail to be fully experienced; this, in turn, makes the reconstruction of the memory necessary. Reconstruction is a practice widely embraced by trauma theorists and therapists, and one which initially started life with the psychologist and psychotherapist Pierre Janet, who – in his 1919 work *Psychological Healing: A Historical and Clinical Study* – writes the following:

A situation has not been satisfactorily liquidated, has not been fully assimilated, until we have achieved, not merely an outward reaction through our movements, but also an inward reaction through the words we address to ourselves, *through the organisation of the recital of the event to others and to ourselves, and through the putting of this recital in its place as one of the chapters in our personal history.* (662, my emphasis)

Janet and the trauma therapists who have come after him believe that in order to transform one's trauma into "one of the chapters in our personal history," one must begin with the knowledge that traumatic memory and narrative memory are two separate things: "'traumatic memory' ...merely and unconsciously *repeats* the past, and 'narrative memory' ...*narrates the past as past*" (Leys 105). Thus, the traumatic memory – that which is remembered in sharp, detailed fragments – must somehow go through an active transformation into a narrative memory. As Bessel van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart have explained: "Traumatic memories are the unassimilated scraps of overwhelming experiences, which need to be integrated with existing mental schemes, and be transformed into narrative language" (*The Intrusive Past* 176).

This process, otherwise known as integration, has been influential to the work of trauma theorists and therapists such as van der Kolk and Judith

Herman. Herman has argued that integration comes as part of the second stage of recovery from trauma, during which time “the survivor tells [to their therapist] the story of the trauma...in depth and in detail” (143). What’s important here, however, is that the survivor doesn’t simply recount their experiences as they have been remembered; instead, they carry out a “work of reconstruction [that] actually transforms the traumatic memory, so that it can be integrated into the survivor’s life story” (143). Other trauma theorists have suggested that this transformation comes at the cost of the traumatic memory’s precision, hinting that some degree of fabrication is at work in the process of reconstruction. Cathy Caruth writes:

The transformation of the trauma into a narrative memory that allows the story to be verbalized and communicated, to be integrated into one’s own, and others’, knowledge of the past, *may lose both the precision and the force that characterizes traumatic recall.*

*(Explorations in Memory 153, my emphasis)*

To transform a traumatic memory into a narrative memory, then, the trauma sufferer constructs a narrative around that memory. But how does one begin to tackle such a task?

We saw earlier how Edward St Aubyn’s approach to his trauma narrative was that of a storyteller; he spoke of his “devotion to telling a story” above all else and how it was this storytelling impulse that facilitated the writing of his Patrick Melrose novels. This is important because in each of our narrators we see a similar impulse to tell a story, to entertain even. Ruth Swain is a bedbound bookworm with only her father’s books for company. Veronica has worked as a professional writer, and Max is an art historian. As Carol Dell’Amico has noted, “we are inclined to extend [Veronica] the narrative license of the fabulist once

we learn that she is an aspiring writer” (62), and the same instinct could be applied to all three.

Taking for granted, then, the fact that Ruth, Veronica and Max are all artistically inclined we can begin to see how this is reflected in the texts they produce. Any reader is aware that a traditional narrative follows a set structure: beginning, middle and end. Thus, we would naturally expect an attempt by these narrators to shape their experiences into this kind of structure. And yet, as van der Kolk has noted, “Trauma is not stored as a narrative with an orderly beginning, middle, and end” (*The Body Keeps the Score* 135); a sentiment echoed in *History of the Rain* when Ruth despairs that life is “harder than anything you could imagine and on top of that It Makes No Sense” (103). Faced with this problem, how might our narrators to begin?

Turning to the opening pages of their manuscripts, we see that Veronica and Max both allude to the traumatic incident from their childhood but without revealing the details; Veronica declares “I would like to write down what happened in my grandmother’s house the summer I was eight or nine, but I am not sure if it really did happen. I need to bear witness to an uncertain event” (1), while Max chooses to describe the sea, on the day of the “strange tide” (making reference to the day that Chloe and Myles drowned): “I would not swim again, after that day” (3). Ruth, meanwhile, concentrates on her father Virgil: “The longer my father lived in this world the more he knew there was another to come” (3). In each case, we feel that the narrator is tentative about committing to their story; they seem to talk themselves around the edges of the traumatic event. From these opening pages, each narrator then turns to a new mode of

storytelling, taking a deep dive into the past and, at the same time, shifting into the present tense.

Veronica's first journey into the past involves an account of the first meeting between her grandmother Ada and her friend and future landlord Lambert Nugent, a scene we have already discussed her returning to time and time again: "At thirteen minutes past seven desire breathes on the young lips of Lamb Nugent – hush! He feels its awful proximity. He stands his ground while, across the room, Ada's stillness becomes triumphant" (17). Note here the use of the present tense, which is also engaged early on by Ruth when she describes her grandfather Abraham's experiences in the war: "He tosses his ciggy, shouts out, and into the air already streaming with German gunfire he leaps" (31). Max, too, returns to memories early on in the present tense: "When she runs her skirt billows behind her and I cannot take my eyes off the tight black bulge at the upside-down apex of her lap. She jumps, grasping air and giving breathless cries and laughing. Her breasts bounce" (32).

To illustrate the significance of the present tense, and thus shed light upon this peculiar tendency amongst our three narrators, we may turn to the work of Suzanne Fleischman, who has drawn attention to a study in which people with eidetic (i.e. photographic) memories were shown images; upon the images being taken away, they were reported to describe the scene in the present tense, provided they were still visualising it mentally (38-9). Fleischman writes: "Individuals with this capacity thus seem to make a clear distinction, documented linguistically, between what they are still seeing 'in their mind's eye' and what they recall from memory" (39). Our narrators may

not have eidetic memories, but this theory helps us understand what is going on during these moments of present tense writing; Veronica, Ruth and Max are actively *visualising* the scenes they are describing, letting them play out as though they were a film on a television screen. This feels particularly significant with Max's approach to his memories; he often behaves as though he has been transported into the scene and is casting his eyes around, searching for details to jog his memory. At one point he remembers an excursion with the Graces, recalls the presence of Rose, and questions: "But how did she get here? She had not been in the car with us. A bicycle, yes, *I see a bicycle asprawl in abandon among the ferns*, handlebars turned sideways and its front wheel jutting up at a somehow unseemly angle" (113, my emphasis).

The full significance of these present tense scenes becomes more apparent when we refer back to the nature of the childhood trauma suffered. We can see how these scenes – conjured with the immediacy of detail that suggests they are being visualised in the present moment – have been thrown up as potential "beginnings". What each of our narrators is seeking, it is revealed, is a starting point: the moment of inception that led to the later tragedy, an anchoring point around which the rest of the trauma narrative can be shaped. After all, as each of these characters is only too aware, without a beginning it is impossible to reach an ending.

Earlier, we discussed how Lenore Terr categorises sudden, shocking childhood trauma as type I, pointing at "full, detailed, etched-in memories" as one of its key characteristics. Another feature of Terr's type I trauma, however, is the phenomenon of "omens":

During and after single-blow shocks, children tend frequently to ask themselves “Why?” and “Why me?” In this way they attempt to gain retrospective mastery over the randomness...of the trauma that they endured. When children traumatized by a single event belatedly develop a reason why everything happened, a purpose to the entire affair, or a way that the disaster could have been averted, considerable mental energy goes into these reworkings of the past. (15)

Working from Terr’s “omens” theory, it is understandable that the narrativisation of the traumatic incident would lead the survivor to trace back their trauma to the moment of its inception. Judith Herman, in discussing how trauma survivors approach their trauma testimonies, echoes Terr’s view, writing: “Survivors...come to a point in their testimony where all questions are reduced to one, spoken more in bewilderment than in outrage: Why?” (145). Thus, the search for a beginning not only satisfies the demands of the narrative structure, but offers answers to the questions surrounding the trauma. In Veronica’s case, Carol Dell’Amico has noted that her “accounting of Liam’s death must necessarily begin as an exploration of the relationship between Ada and Lambert” (62). And so, as we have seen, Veronica’s chosen moment of inception is the first meeting between her grandmother Ada and Lambert Nugent. It is this meeting, after all, that ultimately leads to the abuse of Liam at Nugent’s hands, precipitating the scene observed by Veronica, and potentially his later death by suicide.

Veronica alludes to this meeting for the first time early on in the novel, introducing the scene with the words: “The seeds of my brother’s death were sown many years ago. ...So if I want to tell Liam’s story, then I have to start long before he was born” (13). Following this declaration she writes: “Lambert Nugent first saw my grandmother Ada Merriman in a hotel foyer in 1925. *This is*

*the moment I choose*" (13, my emphasis). We find her returning to it over and over again, pulling her prose into the present tense, and – as Fleischmann has described – focusing on the scene in detail, seemingly visualising the scene as though it were playing out in front of her. We see this happen on page 31, when describing her grandfather Charlie driving up to the same hotel to meet Ada; on page 85, recalling Ada's funeral; and on page 93, when musing on whether or not Ada was a prostitute.

In Ruth's case, a beginning point which might explain the traumas she has suffered over the years is less easily traced. What is clear, however, is that the multiple moments which Ruth focuses on are all connected to the River Shannon, the body of water in which Aeney eventually drowns, and into which Virgil tosses his poetry before succumbing to a brain tumour days later. The first potential beginning comes when Ruth tells the story of Virgil's fourteenth birthday, a day when her grandfather Abraham took his son down to the river to fish for the first time. As the moment gathers significance, the prose slides elegantly into the present tense; Ruth observes "In some ways my father's whole life is in this moment. In this are all the years ahead, all the poems, all the rapture and the yearning and the grief too" (101). Later, Ruth stumbles upon another beginning: Aeney being taken fishing by Virgil for the first time. When Ruth arrives at this moment she highlights it with the words "In families it's hard to trace the story. If you're in it the Plot Points aren't clearly marked" (136) and marks out its importance as "the day...Aeney fell in love with the river (137).

Perhaps Ruth's most convincing beginning, though, is a moment which occurs on the banks of the Shannon between her parents. Ruth reveals that she muses on this episode fairly often, asking her mother on multiple occasions how she met her father. In Ruth's eyes this story of their first encounter – in which Ruth's mother Mary walks up and down the riverbank waiting for Virgil to notice her (176-9) – is a story of “Not Meeting, of Passing by [in which] God was giving them every chance not to meet” (180). It's a moment, in hindsight, which could have allowed their stories to “run parallel and never do a Flannery O'Connor. Never converge” (180). Had Virgil not encountered Mary while he fished on the banks of the Shannon, then Aeney – and indeed Ruth also – may never have been born. Ruth recognises that the failure of these moments to arise would have saved her from her various traumas, not simply by averting the tragedy of Aeney's death, but by crossing out her existence altogether. Though Ruth never addresses this admittedly nihilistic train of thought head on, we are aware that it has occurred to her; describing her parents' awkward first interaction, and Virgil's vague promise to depart the river when initially confronted by Mary with the words “I'll go” (186), Ruth notes “But he doesn't go. He uses the future not the present tense, and *between those two is our life and history*” (186, my emphasis).

For John Banville's Max, the search for a beginning is not initially clear. It is only towards the close of his narrative, when Max describes overhearing a conversation between Rose – the young Miss Vavasour – and Mrs Grace that we begin to piece together his motivation. In this scene we learn that Max discovered that Rose was in love with Mr Grace (231) and that he told Chloe

what he had heard (232). Rose's awareness of this subsequently led to a change in her relationship with Chloe: "The governess's eye had a new and steelier light when it fell on the girl now, and the girl...appeared cowed under that look as she had never been before" (235). As an adult, this has led Max to consider Chloe's death in a new light: "When I think of them like that...I cannot but speculate that what happened on the day of the strange tide was in some way a consequence of the uncovering of Rose's secret passion" (235). He does not say it directly, but the implication here is that, by telling Chloe, Max indirectly contributed to her death.

Now, consider this moment thrown into the present tense by Max, in which he watches Mrs Grace wash Rose's hair:

Rose stands bent forward from the waist with her hands on her knees, her hair hanging down from her face in a long black shining wedge dripping with soap suds. ...I have a clear glimpse of her pendant breasts, small and spiked, like the business ends of two spinning-tops. Mrs Grace wears a blue satin dressing gown and delicate blue slippers, bringing an incongruous breath of the boudoir into the out-of-doors. (221-2)

Max describes the scene as a "tableau," and muses on its apparent insignificance: "Strange, is it not, the way they lodge in the mind, the seemingly inconsidered things?" (220). Of course, the scene is not "inconsidered"; it is revealed to be crucial to his understanding of how things went wrong. As we learn from the elderly Rose in the present day, it was Mrs and not Mr Grace with whom Rose was in love: "It's her I miss. ...It was never him, with me. ...You didn't think that did you?" (263). Could it be that Max transforms this moment, Rose having her hair washed by Mrs Grace, into a tableau because he is now

aware that, had he recognised its significance in the moment, things may have turned out differently?

On the topic of remorse, Rüdiger Imhof suggests that Max “may be plagued by guilt because of his not having made a real effort to know Anna more thoroughly” (177), while Hedda Friberg wonders “With regard to Chloe, [Max] seems to ask himself, had he acted too passively? Could he have run for help more swiftly?” (259). A more convincing argument centres on Max’s indirect involvement in the tragedy, not simply his decision to tell Chloe about Rose’s crush on Mr Grace (which led to the tension between her and Rose, causing her to walk into the sea), but the fact that he was, in the first place, completely misinformed. Considering the charged intimacy of the hair-washing moment in light of Miss Vavasour’s later revelation (with its mentions of Rose’s “pendant breasts” and Mrs Grace’s “incongruous breath of the boudoir”), we can see that the truth of the situation – the sexual connection between the two women – was essentially revealed to Max long before he was truly able to understand it. It has lodged in his memory, perhaps, because he has always been aware of its significance, and how it played into the later tragedy of Chloe’s death. It is, in other words, the beginning he has been searching for – but perhaps one he is not yet ready to acknowledge.

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As we have seen, the search for a “beginning” is important to each of our narrators, but another key tool in the construction of their trauma narratives is fabrication. Bessel van der Kolk has spoken of “the extraordinary power of the imagination to transform the inner narratives that drive and confine our

functioning in the world” (305), and, as we will see, invention can be a handy tool for our three narrators.

In the case of Veronica, there are several occasions on which she not only imagines interactions between Ada and Lambert Nugent, but elaborates on the scene with the most minute and personal of details, ones which surely could not have been known to her – “[Ada] looks at her bracelet: a narrow chain in rose gold, with a T at the clasp, like the fob of a watch. She fingers this small anomaly – a male thing on her girl’s wrist – and feels Nugent’s disbelief weigh against her” (16).

Ruth engages in something similar when imagining episodes in the lives of her grandfather, father and mother. In most cases, we are told that these stories have been passed down to her by the person involved, but again the level of detail implies fabrication on Ruth’s part, such as when she describes the meeting between her grandfather Abraham and the mother of the medic who saved his life during the war: “She lays the letter before him. Freed of it, her hands catch each other in mid-air and pull themselves down on to her lap into a moment’s peace” (38). In this case, Ruth’s fabrication is supplemented by her extensive knowledge of literary characters – here, Mrs Cissley, the bereaved mother, is likened to Dickens’ Mrs Rouncewell.

This kind of behaviour recalls Dori Laub’s notion of “absences”: “the inability to cognitively and emotionally grasp what is really happening” (*Traumatic Shutdown* 313) during a traumatic event. Laub queries, “How are we to understand these ‘absences,’ these ‘blanks’ in our experience...?” and concludes that “To come to know something is to process new information, to

assimilate and integrate an experience into one's own inner world representation. It is essentially to build a new construct inside ourselves" (*Traumatic Shutdown* 313). Veronica and Ruth's "absences" may not relate directly to their experience of trauma, but they do seem to serve a purpose, posing answers to unanswerable questions, and fleshing out the details of the trauma narrative. This ritual carried out by Veronica and Ruth, where they step into the mind of one of their "characters", is also significant because it is reminiscent of the approach taken by St Aubyn.

In the first of the Patrick Melrose novels, *Never Mind*, we get insights into the behaviour of St Aubyn's/Melrose's abusive father Roger/David. In the passage leading up to David's first rape of Patrick, which occurs entirely from Patrick's perspective, we get the following passage of free indirect speech from David:

Children were weak and ignorant miniature adults who should be given every incentive to correct their weakness and their ignorance. Like King Chaka, the great Zulu warrior...he was determined to harden the calluses of disappointment and develop the skill of detachment in his son. After all, what else did he have to offer him? (92)

Coupled with an earlier scene in which Eleanor recalls the cruelty of her father-in-law – "General Melrose did not find it difficult to treat his son coldly" (8) – we might read the former passage with a modicum of sympathy, sensing in David the self-awareness that he cannot help but treat his son cruelly. Whether or not such thoughts passed through his father's head is not important here – in St Aubyn's own words, "I made my father into a fictional character and sent him downstream" (qtd by McGrath and Aitken) – but we note St Aubyn's attempts to *understand* his father's behaviour, and thus humanise him to some extent.

Veronica exercises poetic licence to do the same with her portrayal of her brother's abuser, Lambert Nugent. She constructs several imagined scenarios positioning him at the centre, with one in particular standing out. In this scene he says his night prayers, self-flagellating with a shirt and thinking of a younger sister who died in puberty (35). The significance here lies in the conclusion that Veronica comes to: that Nugent had an incestuous relationship with his sister as a boy ("in those days, people used to be mixed up together in the most disgusting ways") and that in adulthood he would think of her while he whipped himself and "[held] his penis". Veronica is toying with the idea that Nugent was introduced to – and made ashamed of – inappropriate sexual conduct from a young age, just as St Aubyn alludes to the notion that David's cruelty was learned from his own father. Again, it doesn't matter whether or not Nugent had a sexual relationship with his (real or imagined) sister – but Veronica senses what St Aubyn calls "dramatic truth" in this invention, and this both helps her to empathise with her brother's abuser and to construct a narrative which can answer her many questions.

It's not difficult to imagine the therapeutic value attached to climbing inside the mind of someone who hurt you to conjure up an understanding of their behaviour. As Herman and Terr have both argued, survivors reflect on their trauma with the questions "Why?" and "Why me?", and empathising with the person who can be blamed for that trauma can be seen as a means of trying to answer one or both of those questions. Indeed, this practice has been adopted by trauma therapists and their patients; survivors of abuse often reenact childhood traumas in therapy sessions, bringing in the therapist to assume a

role within the scene. As James Chu has explained, there are “four major roles that are recapitulated in the therapy of abuse survivors: abuser, victim of abuse, indifferent or neglectful bystander, and hoped-for rescuer. Patients repeatedly take on and reenact these roles” (166). We may see how Veronica, as with St Aubyn, voluntarily takes on the role of the abuser in her own narrative.

Certain trauma therapy techniques go even further by asking the trauma survivor to actively invent or rewrite scenes. One technique which utilises invention in this manner is PBSP (Pesso Boyden System Psychomotor) therapy, which van der Kolk describes here:

[Albert] Pesso created tableaux – or as he called them, “structures” – of the protagonists’ past. As the narratives unfolded, group participants were asked to play the roles of significant people in the protagonists’ lives, such as parents and other family members, so that their inner world began to take form in three-dimensional space. Group members were also enlisted to play the ideal, wished-for parents who would provide the support, love, and protection that had been lacking at critical moments. *Protagonists became the directors of their own plays, creating around them the past they never had, and they clearly experienced profound physical and mental relief after these imaginary scenarios.*  
(*The Body Keeps the Score* 298, my emphasis)

This practice was likely inspired by Janet, who was known to encourage the transformation, or even total erasure, of traumatic memories. As related by van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart, Janet on one occasion helped a patient reimagine, and ultimately forget, her trauma:

[Janet’s] case example concerns a thirty-one-year-old woman who had lost her two infants in close succession. She was in constant despair and suffered gastrointestinal cramps and vomiting. She was...regularly hallucinating realistic scenes of their deaths. ...Using hypnotic suggestion, [Janet] substituted her traumatic death images with those of flowers. He then made them fade away altogether. ...At one-year follow-up, she was working again and was considered to be cured. (179)

As we have seen, Veronica and Ruth invent – or at least elaborate on – purportedly real scenes with imagined details, but the level of fabrication described here is closer to what we see from Max Morden, whose own memories are subject to frequent reshaping. Max, as a narrator, is known to us to be flexible with the truth; at one point he declares “The past, I mean the real past, matters less than we pretend” (157). It’s unsurprising, then, that he indulges in fabrication when he returns to his memories. The most notable example of this occurs when he describes his return to the Cedars after the drowning of the twins; here the adult Max recalls “I found Mrs Grace in the living room. ...Then Carlo Grace came in, saying, ‘*Damned thing, it seems to be...*’ and he stopped too, and so we stood in stillness, we three, at the end” (247, my emphasis). Consider now a scene early on in Max’s manuscript, when he describes seeing Carlo Grace for the first time: “He went back inside then, already talking before he was through the door. ‘*Damned thing,*’ he said, ‘*seems to be...*’ and was gone” (7, my emphasis). Rudiger Imhof flags this repetition as one of “a relatively small number of clear parallels between Parts I and II which would seem to be aimed at a kind of circular closure” (172). But this doubling might also be seen as evidence of the adult Max’s tendency for invention, a “filling in of the gaps” as described by Laub.

When we look closely we find that Max’s most detailed reshapings relate to his relationship with Chloe, whom he admits is “all [his] own work” (224); time and again he revisits scenes and seems to invent or elaborate on details, seemingly with the ultimate goal of recasting his relationship with Chloe in a more romantic and meaningful light. On one occasion he recalls in great detail

sitting “in the Strand Café, with Chloe, after the pictures” (160). He remembers it vividly because of its associations with another memory, their first kiss, which he insists happened earlier that same day. Musing on this scene, Max writes: “Remarkable the clarity with which, when I concentrate, I can see us there” (160). And indeed, he goes on to recall it with a style of linguistic expression that already begins to hint at adult invention:

We drank through paper straws, avoiding each other’s eye in a new access of shyness. I had a sense of a general, large, soft settling, as of a sheet unfurling and falling on a bed, or a tent collapsing into the cushion of its own air. The fact of that kiss in the dark of the picture-house...sat like an amazement between us, unignorably huge. (161)

In the midst of this dreamy recollection, Max stumbles: “But wait, this is wrong. This cannot have been the day of the kiss” (162). He has realised that he is mistaken, that the kiss and the episode in the Strand Café happened on two separate days. At this point, Max declares “Really, Madam Memory, I take back all my praise, if it is Memory herself who is at work here and not some other, more fanciful muse” (163) and yet he quickly returns to the scene, dwelling on Chloe’s hands – which he felt reminded him of her mother’s – and his associated feelings of guilt: “what would Mrs Grace feel, what would she say, if she were to spy me here...ogling the mauve shading in the hollow of her daughter’s cheek...?” (163).

Max, it seems, is not deterred from his return to this romantic scene by the notion that it may not have happened in that manner. He seems unconcerned by the fact that, even after remembering that the kiss in the cinema took place on another day, he mistakenly positioned it as the event which shaped the atmosphere between him and Chloe in that particular

moment. It must also be noted the gaze Max directs at Chloe feels closer to that of a middle-aged art historian than an eleven-year-old boy; his pointedly artistic description, for instance, of the “mauve shading” in Chloe’s cheek leads us to believe that this scene has been heavily reconstructed by the adult Max – a man who, after all, is in the habit of likening the people around him to figures from famous paintings.

As we have seen, Albert Pesso’s patients enact imaginary scenarios around their trauma to experience relief and comfort, and we could argue that Max is doing the same. It’s possible that Max, for whom “the loss of Chloe connects to the loss of his wife Anna” (Friberg 255), believes that validating his relationship with Chloe will somehow validate his relationship with Anna. But while invention, in certain circumstances, can be beneficial to the trauma survivor, there is the risk that too much imagination, too much elision and reshaping, can be detrimental to the ultimate goal of recovery. Herman has taken issue with some of Janet’s techniques, in particular his attempts “to erase traumatic memories or even to alter their content with the aid of hypnosis”, arguing that while “it is understandable for both patient and therapist to wish for a magic transformation...the goal of recounting the trauma story is integration, not exorcism” (147).

In truth, each of our narrators is guilty, to a certain extent, of this kind of erasure and exorcism. From the opening pages of her manuscript, Ruth casts herself as “The Narrator” thus distancing herself from the action of her novel. This becomes significant when we consider that Ruth is not only grieving for her brother and her father but is also suffering from a life-threatening condition

that is rarely addressed explicitly in the novel. Time and again, we see Ruth distance herself from the knowledge that she may be dying by referring to herself at a remove: at one point, she tells us “We pause here because The Narrator has to go to Dublin” – to visit, as we soon discover, “The Consultant” (89). On another occasion she addresses her reluctance more head on when she writes: “I don’t want medical language. I don’t want a venous access device in here, or Interferon therapy or acetaminophen or arsenic trioxide or all-trans retinoic acid. I don’t want them in my pages” (347).

In her most self-revealing moment, Ruth discusses the aftermath of her grandfather Abraham’s death and writes of her grandmother’s drinking, saying “There was still a large wine cellar, and Grandmother began on the oldest bottles, reasoning, *like your narrator*, that she could be dead before she reached the present” (143 emphasis my own). Ruth aligns her grandmother’s wine vintage journey from the past into the present with her own narrative, which delves as far back as a vision of her pole-vaulting grandfather at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The reference to death here highlights something key: Ruth is aware that she may not be long for this world, and instead of facing that knowledge head on, she has retreated into the past, or more accurately, the version of the past she has conjured for the purposes of her story. As with Veronica and Max, Ruth’s story world is, like a bottle of vintage wine, an effective numbing agent. But, as we will see, trauma survivors often require the very opposite.

## The Messy Truth

We have seen that, in establishing an effective trauma narrative, there must be a certain amount of reconstruction and invention involved; gaps must be filled in and questions answered. And yet, one's trauma also has to be faced head on, with the messier and more difficult aspects finding their own place within the narrative. Ultimately, this is an issue of telling the truth, something that has been stressed by Judith Herman: "Remembering and telling the truth about terrible events are prerequisites both for the restoration of the social order and for the healing of individual victims" (11). And yet, we know that telling the truth can be tricky – Herman notes "The conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud is the central dialectic of psychological trauma" (11).

Writer and trauma survivor Sophie Tamas has written of the difficulty that trauma survivors face in telling the truth because of their need to make sense. In her essay 'Biting the Tongue that Speaks You' she writes "I would like my life story to be linear, directional, cumulative and coherent, the past to explain the present" (432). But this approach, this desire to make sense and to build a "sensible world" (433) is problematic; "Maintaining its appearance of stability requires a lot of selective perception, erasing experiences that don't fit" (433). Tamas argues that trauma survivors feel compelled to repress "unassimilable otherness" (433), to "[erase] outliers" (435), when telling their story in order to "make sense", and that this obligation "leads us to read morals into stories, simplifying characters into evil villains and entirely innocent

victims, and re-casting survivors in culturally familiar tropes of ennobling suffering” (433). Tamas fears that this style of comprehension “becomes a containment strategy, erasing the felt reality of the experiences we purport to describe. Rather than trying to consciously bear the burdens placed on us, we are trying to make them go away” (434). Ultimately, she arrives at the notion that making sense is not the be-all and end-all when it comes to the integration of traumatic events: “Rather than making sense, writing trauma should make you look harder, and wonder” (438).

There’s no denying that each of our narrators is, to some extent, driven by a desire to make sense. Each – whether consciously or not – goes in search of a beginning by rifling through “snapshots” from their memory and imagining interactions between the people they view as the agents of their trauma. We have witnessed each in turn try to pinpoint a beginning and answer the question, “Why?”. Our narrators’ “selective perception” is also evident in other ways: Ruth’s distancing of herself from her sickness, Max’s distortions of his memories of Chloe, and – perhaps most vividly – Veronica’s efforts to cast her brother’s alleged abuser, Lambert Nugent, in the role of “Evil Villain”. Bessel van der Kolk has noted that “Stories can...provide people with a target to blame” and that “Blaming is a universal human trait that helps people feel good while feeling bad” (*The Body Keeps the Score* 237), and so he would not be surprised to see Veronica conjuring Nugent with the language of a child fearing the monster under their bed: “I turn the handle of the door and Nugent is a slick of horror on the landing. He moves like a smell through the house” (215).

Despite this impulse to categorise Nugent as a monster, Veronica does take steps towards humanising him. In the previous chapter, we discussed the manner in which Veronica conjures (what we interpret as) a totally imagined scene of Lambert self-flagellating, and explores the notion that he was sexually involved with his young sister. This moment is significant not because we necessarily believe it to be true, but because it is emblematic of Veronica's attempts to understand and humanise Nugent, thereby muddying his clean characterisation as the evil villain. It would be easier to paint Nugent as the enemy, to "pin" everything on him, but Veronica's acceptance of the messy reality indicates that she doesn't need everything to make sense for her to be able to tell her story. Thus, Veronica's imagined scenes between Ada and Nugent – those which she meditates on in the search for someone to blame – ultimately remain "inconclusive" (Dell'Amico 74).

Veronica's feelings about Lambert Nugent, that push-pull between wanting to make sense and wanting to tell the truth, can be pinpointed in Ruth as well. Despite her search for a beginning, despite her frustration at her life's lack of "Plot Points" (136), she ultimately admits the truth: "Your brother drowning by chance is sad, but to tell it sheds no light and lends no meaning. What happened is what happened. Things were consequent only in the sense that they followed" (343). This acceptance relates to what Tamas calls "dirty writing". This is a phrase coined by Alison Pullen and Carl Rhodes that was in turn born out of the messy text, a concept invented by the American anthropologist George Marcus as a solution to questions surrounding expression in the postcolonial era. The search for how to depict and refer to

global human groups led to Marcus's development of the messy text, described here:

[Messy texts are] texts that are aware of their own narrative apparatuses, that are sensitive to how reality is socially constructed, and that understanding that writing is a way of "framing" reality. Messy texts are many sited, intertextual, always open ended, and resistant to theoretical holism, but always committed to cultural criticism.  
(Denzin 224)

Pullen and Rhodes have drawn deeply on, and developed, this concept, describing the messy text as "open-ended, incomplete and uncertain" and highlighting the notion that "the messy text is no genre awaiting institutionalization as a new norm, but rather a symptom of a struggle with analytical modes of writing" (243) – the messy text, in other words, is not strictly a format of in writing itself, but rather a rejection of existing formats. By extension, the messy text is a "dirty" one, because it "defies the utopian pursuit of conceptual clarity, linear argument and knock-down conclusions. It adds rough texture to its woven bits and pieces such that the conclusions are not so neat, so that the knowledge is not so total" (243-4).

Pullen and Rhodes' essay, 'Dirty Writing,' refers to what we may call, for ease, academic and not creative writing – but the conclusions they draw fit neatly with what we have come to understand about the effect of trauma on the trauma narrative. Discussing the concept of "dirty writing," Pullen and Rhodes argue that "linear texts are related to organized life in a particular way – the text performs the sanitizing ... and the repression. The text produces order ... and unhappiness" (244). By contrast, "the dirty text...rather than (pro)claiming a mimetic relation with organizational reality...invokes a poetic one" (245). This

leads to what Pullen and Rhodes call a “texture” that is “unruly, hysterical, irrational, disintegrated, rhizomatic and creative. Rather than the orderly weave of the smoothed text, we have the rough hew of the textured material” (245). In her own work, Tamas has related this concept back to the narrativisation of trauma:

The otherness we excise from the text is not inherently abject refuse to be discarded or concealed. ...We tidy up in order to make our physical and conceptual worlds feel more safe and easy to inhabit, even though this requires the constant repression of whatever counts as dirt. ...In my view, some things are abjected for good reason; not every monstrous thing ought to be spoken or celebrated. The damage occurs when our calcified codes of cleanliness consistently exclude certain bodies...and experiences, particularly those which reveal our powerlessness, and thus, the impossibility of avoiding dirt. Trauma is rendered unspeakable because it is too dirty and dangerous, a filthy stray ghost dog scavenging on the margins, unfit to let into our house of words. (444)

Thus, dirty writing is not simply that which evades order, linearity and simplistic tropes, but also writing that goes against the notion that the messy, dangerous and more unpleasant aspects of trauma are inherently “abject”. Tamas notes that, for trauma survivors, “being dirty feels scary and bad” and yet “can also lead us to discover knowledge we did not know that we possessed” (445); she likens it to opening her home to strangers when she hasn’t tidied and cleaned, allowing them to see the way she lives “when nobody’s watching”. In reference to her own writing, Tamas defines dirt as: “openly expressed feelings – shame, fear, anger, frustration, depression, love, attachment, confusion, desire, and more – which are not just discussed, but also enacted, mapping the affective realm in which trauma resides” (445); Pullen and Rhodes offer a view of dirty writing as “texts that feel, breathe and touch the lives of others through a gritty

and abrasive passion of the author herself...these are texts of blood, excrement and filth" (244).

These notions about how the dirty text is created, what it represents, and how it can function within a trauma survivor's recovery are important because they help to elucidate certain habits exhibited by our narrators. Of the three, Veronica is the most open with her dirt. We see this most clearly in her preoccupation with sexual imagery, and the violence she can't help but associate it with. Though she has lost interest in sex with her husband, Veronica finds herself obsessing over the erection of a man sitting next to her on a train: "[he] lifts his pelvis slightly, and settles it back down. ...I can sense the blood pooling in his lap; the thick oblong of his penis moving down the leg of his suit" (52). But this moment does not rest in isolation. Her awareness of the man's erection is bound up in the death of her brother; she is, after all, on a train down to Brighton to retrieve his corpse. More importantly, the realisation of the commuter's erection comes after a long passage at the end of the previous chapter, which begins with the memory of Liam urinating through a wire fence as a boy (an implicit reference to his genitalia). This in turn prompts a memory of Veronica getting in trouble for trespassing on a public bus and being challenged by a male authority figure in a way that seems sexually threatening:

He walked this stomach down the aisle at me. ...Then he pushed it at me...I do remember the surprising tautness and bounce of it, as he jabbed at my face with its leading white button: me wriggling under it finally, past his little legs and the ming of his busman's gabardine. (49)

Veronica remembers fleeing from the bus station into a church with Liam and her sister Kitty, kneeling at the altar "with the idea of pursuit at our backs" (50),

an event which leads to the bruising of Kitty's arm by an angry priest. It is the memory of this day – the day of the angry busman and the angry priest – that in turn jogs another recollection, this time from adulthood, this time more disturbing and directly threatening:

Though common sense says that these two events should not have happened on the same day, I say that they did, and when a man followed me through the back streets of Venice, many years later, with his erection in his hand, I ducked into a church as though inviting something worse – instead of which, I got nothing. ...I prayed that it would leave me, the choking sense that this was the way I would die, my face jammed in filthy gabardine, or navy or black, a stranger's cock in the back of my throat and what, what, what?

Something turning in my stomach. A knife. No knife.  
It isn't real. (51)

Each of these memories dwells on a transgression in which Veronica is implicated, and in each case the transgression is centred around male power and, more specifically, the penis. When Liam urinates onto the fence and into the lake beyond, he transgresses by way of his penis. When the busman pushes his stomach threateningly at Veronica, the act is suggestive of sexual assault and later echoed by the priest delivering “a lecture on wickedness” (50) to a frightened young Kitty; the busman's penis is suggested, lying concealed beneath his gabardine as Veronica wriggles through his legs. More clearly defined are the penises of the adult Veronica's sexual harasser in Venice, and the commuter's beside her in the present day.

By the time we reach page 144, we can make sense of this fixation. Veronica's childhood trauma fixates on a central image: the “bridge of flesh” (144) between Lambert Nugent and Liam, which we understand to be the man's erect penis, held in the child's hand. In Veronica's mind, the penis as a symbol

has been reframed by the witnessing of her brother's sexual abuse, and his later suicide. For Veronica, this image is now associated with threat, violence, and death. She muses, while observing the erection of the commuter beside her, that due to her grief, she finds "the hydraulics of it more than usually peculiar", adding: "Such small things to have such large consequences" (52). Veronica's words here can be taken to mean two things. First, that small, seemingly insignificant events can echo through one's life, and second, that the penis can wield power and do great harm. Both interpretations find further meaning in her follow-up thought: "I wonder, briefly, if Liam would still be alive if he had been born a woman and not a man" (52). Veronica's thinking here finds a reversal. She has acknowledged the threat of the male sexual organ, and yet has also come to acknowledge that, in Liam's case, possessing one may have been what attracted the attention of the man who abused him. By contrast, Veronica's femininity – the very thing that has made her vulnerable to the busman, the flasher in Venice, the commuter – could be the very thing that saved her from sexual abuse.

The confusions of these thoughts, along with the unpleasant violent and sexual images, fit neatly with Pullen, Rhodes and Tamas' definition of the dirty text – Veronica's contradictory, impressionistic, tricky writing (and, we must remember, she *is* writing this down) "[eschews] the desire for repetition and order...[adding] to itself a *texture* that is unruly, hysterical, irrational, disintegrated, rhizomatic and creative" (Pullen and Rhodes 245). A similar approach is taken by Ruth Swain, in her jumbled and time-hopping "river narrative" (110). But can the same be said for Max Morden?

Of our three texts, Max's is the most ordered, linear and straightforward. It runs along three paralleled timelines – one which follows Max's boyhood summer with the Graces, one which follows Anna's cancer diagnosis and decline, and one which charts his return to Ballyless as a widower. Though prone to similar episodes of time-hopping, the text is notably more structured and linear, to the extent that it calls to mind Pullen and Rhodes' theory that in some texts "the dirt is so repressed it is barely visible": "These texts promise so much order and so much organization and predictability that the dirt hides in them like a ghost – never really seen, but always felt like a haunting presence" (247). For an author whose most famous novel bears the title *Ghosts* this seems only too appropriate, but, placing authorial intent aside, to what extent might we read Max's trauma narrative in this light?

In a passage towards the end of the novel, Max recounts a dinner scene in the Cedars and describes something like an out of body experience:

I had a sudden image of myself as a sort of large dark simian something slumped there at the table, or not a something but a nothing, rather, a hole in the room, a palpable absence, a darkness visible. It was very strange. I saw the scene as if from outside myself. ...I this big dark indistinct shape, like the shape that no one at the séance sees until the daguerreotype is developed. I think I am becoming my own ghost.  
(193-4)

The image here, of Max as an ape-like creature, is recalled in a later memory:

"We took Ma to the Zoo. She laughed at the baboons, nastily, letting us know they reminded her of someone, me, of course" (210). It is during this same passage that we learn that Max is not our narrator's real name ("Why does she keep calling you Max?"), a revelation which suggests a doubling of identity. Two pages later, Max is pulled out of his reverie and finds himself in the present, in

the Cedars sitting room, once again “a great ape, captive, tranquilised and bleary” (212). It is an image this time accompanied by a feeling of impotence and ignorance: “There are times, they occur with increasing frequency nowadays, when I seem to know nothing, when everything I did know seems to have fallen out of my mind like a shower of rain” (212). What we seem to be witnessing here is the breaking down of the Max identity, that which seems to have been adopted for the sake of his life with Anna, and the breakthrough of what we might call the “dirty self”, which, in our narrator’s eyes, resembles an ape, having inspired a comparison to a baboon in a zoo.

The ghost Max has been haunted by, then, could be Pullen and Rhodes’ repressed “dirt”, materialising towards the close of the narrative in the form of a dirtier and more difficult and unpleasant alter ego. Until this point, we have seen glimpses of the repressed, ape-like self, but it is only after that first out-of-body moment, during which Max sees himself as “a large dark simian”, that he reveals something of his true rage and distress when he unleashes the following tirade against his dead wife: “You cunt, you fucking cunt, how could you go and leave me like this... *How could you*” (196). Immediately afterwards, Max clamps shut again, escaping from this furious, profane address into a safely muted memory of some rented rooms he once shared with his mother. We get the sense, as we often do in his narrative, that Max is trying to maintain control at all costs and, as the story moves on, failing to do so.

In the final pages of the novel, Max describes the details of a drinking binge he has been on, during which he gets into a fight in a pub, stumbles out onto the street and down to the sea, drawn by “lights out at sea, a long way from

shore" (253), and at the edge of the water loses his footing and falls, hitting his head. He is rescued by the Colonel and taken back to the Cedars, waking the next morning to find that his daughter has arrived to take him home. In allowing his control to slip, his dirty self to break through, Max has become truly vulnerable, reaching a point at which he will allow himself to be taken away by his daughter. As Miss Vavasour notes, Max is not "a man to be forced into anything" (260), which means we must take his giving in as a significant step. More importantly, this episode, which has brought him to the brink of death, seems to have enabled him to consider what lies ahead instead of behind. Max, a man in whom "the past beats...like a second heart" (13) is for the first time looking forward: "I can go to Paris and paint. Or I might retire into a monastery. ...Oh, yes, life is pregnant with possibilities" (260). And despite the disgust and shame that his simian alter ego has inspired in him, Max perhaps has this other self, this ghost of repressed dirt, to thank for reaching this breakthrough. Tamas has written about how authors facing trauma must "undertake a journey that invites us to rethink everything, and give up (our illusion of) conscious control" (442); as we've seen, when Max does this and lets a little of the dirt through, the effect seems to be restorative.

## Sharing the Narrative

Sitting down to write. Building a narrative. Embracing the messy truth. We have seen how each of these steps is key in constructing a narrative that enables integration of the traumatic experience. And yet, without reaching a point at which the narrative can be shared with another person, it is all for nothing.

We have already discussed the fact that each of our narrators is physically writing down their trauma narrative. But we haven't yet looked at the double significance of this act with relation to the sharing of the trauma narrative. First, the mere fact that these narrators are writing suggests the potential for a reader at some point down the line. Second, the writing of the trauma narrative seems in each case to equip the narrator with the ability *speaking* their trauma out loud. Ruth has a reader in the form of her editor Mrs Quinty, but she also expresses a plan to put her finished book out into the world. For Veronica and Max, the mere fact that they are recording their stories hints that they are may one day be ready to seek out a reader. In the short term, though, the act of writing seems to have enabled them to speak.

In their landmark text *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub delve into the experiences of Holocaust survivors and the way in which their testimonies have been reported, recorded and received following the end of the Second World War. Early on, Felman notes that survivors' interviews are significant because "many of these Holocaust survivors in fact narrate their story *in its entirety* for the first time in their lives" (41). Felman expands on this point, arguing that these survivors have been "awoken to their memories and to their past both by

the public purpose of the enterprise (the collection and the preservation of first-hand, live testimonial evidence about the Holocaust” (41). More important says Felman, though, is the physical presence of the interviewer in these circumstances:

[T]he presence and involvement of the interviewers...enables them for the first time to believe that it is possible, indeed, against all odds and against their past experience, to tell the story and *be heard*, to in fact *address* the significance of their biography—to *address*, that is, the suffering, the truth, and the necessity of this impossible narration—to a hearing “you,” and to a listening community. (41)

Recovery from trauma, in other words, requires the trauma to be heard by another person. This is an idea that St Aubyn has referenced in talking about his desire to write – “Either I write a novel which I finish and get published, and is authentic, or I’ll kill myself” (qtd by Parker). However, the notion of simply *speaking* to another person about what has happened to you is also something St Aubyn explores, this time through his alter ego Patrick Melrose.

In the third of St Aubyn’s Patrick Melrose novels, *Some Hope*, Patrick finally tells another person about the abuse he suffered at the hands of his father. He confides in his friend Johnny, telling him: “When I was five, my father ‘abused’ me” (102), later clarifying “I mean sexually abused” (104). Johnny offers sympathy, understanding, insight; he even echoes the feelings of many trauma survivors – who in the words of Dori Laub “emphasize that they...live in two separate worlds, that of their traumatic memories...and that of the present” (*Traumatic Shutdown* 311) – when he says to Patrick, “It must have split the world in half for you” (105).

In telling Johnny, Patrick senses “a core of inarticulacy that he hadn’t attacked at all” (105); he is surprised at “how easy it had been to tell another person the most shameful and secret truth about his life” and in the same breath expresses dissatisfaction: “the catharsis of his confession eluded him” (106). And yet, something for Patrick has changed. He tells Johnny “presumably there comes a point when you grow bored of telling [the truth], and that point coincides with your ‘freedom.’ ...Narrative fatigue is what I’m going for” (114). Later, he comes to some kind of resolution, deciding “Perhaps he would have to settle for the idea that it must have been even worse being his father than being someone his father had attempted to destroy” (177) – a sentiment close enough to St Aubyn’s heart that he echoed it in his interview with Sarah Lyall: “I was in the downstream of my father’s unhappiness, but it must have been hell to be him.”

Ultimately, as Patrick McGrath has noted, Patrick’s “being able to tell his friend Johnny about what his father did to him seems not entirely satisfactory...and yet it is far from insignificant”. By the time we reach the closing pages of the novel, Patrick has declared himself “on the verge of a great transformation, which may be as simple as becoming interested in other things” (197); here, he tells his friend Anne Eisen “I had a brief hallucination that the world was real...and not just composed of a series of effects” (197), which suggests that this confession to Johnny – though unsatisfying in some respects – has opened up the ability to move on. The last line of the book, “Patrick...headed back to his car with a strange feeling of elation” (209), imbues his story with a little more than *some* hope.

Sharing traumatic memories with another person, then, can open up the potential for transformation, allow for the possibility that the survivor may move on from the tragedies of their life. But it's not as simple as sharing the narrative with anyone who will listen. The person witnessing the trauma testimony must, in a sense, qualify for the job by playing the role of what Dori Laub calls the "addressable other": "an other who can hear the anguish of one's memories and thus affirm and recognize their realness" (*Testimony* 68). We understand instinctively that the listener must be sensitive, supportive, and sympathetic in the manner of Patrick's friend Johnny, but they must also be prepared take on a share of the survivor's pain. Laub writes:

The emergence of the narrative which is being listened to...is the place wherein the cognizance, the "knowing" of the event is given birth to. The listener, therefore, is a party to the creation of knowledge *de novo*. The testimony to the trauma thus includes its hearer, who is, so to speak, the blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed for the first time.

By extension, the listener to trauma comes to be a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic events: through his very listening, he comes to partially experience trauma in himself...comes to feel the bewilderment, injury, confusion, dread and conflicts that the trauma victim feels. (*Testimony* 57)

The listener, therefore, must be equipped to sacrifice something of him or herself to carry the burden of the trauma. The trauma narrative may not be spoken to just anyone.

With this in mind, how do we approach the *written* trauma narrative, that which has been composed in solitude? Earlier we discussed the idea that our narrators are not yet ready to speak their trauma but they are ready to write it, making reference to van der Kolk's theory that, "When we talk with *someone with whom we don't feel completely safe*, our social editor jumps in on

full alert and our guard is up” (238, my emphasis). As we have seen in the case of Holocaust survivors, the presence of an interviewer can facilitate the telling of trauma, but it is crucial that the person listening is someone with whom they feel safe. While Ruth has an addressable other in the form of Mrs Quinty, who becomes a “co-owner” of Ruth’s trauma by reading and editing her manuscript, Max and Veronica seemingly have no one to turn to, no “Johnny figure” who would be equipped to take on such a burden. Max’s relationship with Miss Vavasour is distant, and for the majority of the narrative he fails to refer to her as Rose, thus breaking the connection made via their shared trauma. He does not know the Colonel well, and things are strained between him and his daughter Claire – in an argument, Max reminds her that while “she had been conveniently abroad, pursuing her studies” he was left to look after the dying Anna (66). Veronica seems to be cast in a similar, self-imposed state of isolation. She has stopped having sex with her husband – “my husband is waiting for me to sleep with him again, and I am waiting for things to become clear” (37) – and has strained relationships with her siblings. Most vital, however, is the fact that from childhood she has been taught not to speak to her mother about difficult things: “*Don’t tell Mammy*. It was the mantra of our childhoods, or one of them. *Don’t tell Mammy*” (9). Faced with a lack of potential listeners, people who might genuinely empathise and believe what they have to say, it is understandable that Max and Veronica turn to writing.

For both Veronica and Max, however, we see how writing seems to facilitate the act of telling. Before leaving the Cedars, Max finally engages Miss Vavasour in a conversation about the Graces, and in the closing pages of

Veronica's narrative, she makes promises to herself which recall Patrick Melrose's notion that he is on the verge of a transformation: "I know what I have to do – even though it is too late for the truth, I will tell the truth. I will get hold of Ernest and *tell him* what happened to Liam in Broadstone" (259, my emphasis). It seems that, in the process of writing down their trauma narratives, Veronica and Max have reached a point at which they feel they can finally *speak* – and not just *write* – the truth of what happened. Spending time constructing their versions of events and finding out what they feel has finally positioned them in a place where they can say the words out loud. And yet, both still hesitate about taking that final step. Veronica is clear about who she can afford to tell – her brother Ernest, a former priest, and thus a man used to hearing confession – but ultimately holds back, ending her narrative without having spoken to him. Max, meanwhile, opts not to "confess" his trauma to his daughter, but to attempt a discussion with Miss Vavasour, a woman who already knows the story, which in a sense minimises the potency of the act.

But what of Ruth Swain? What can her relationship to her reader and editor, her "listener", Mrs Quinty tell us about the significance of sharing one's trauma narrative? Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Ruth's relationship with Mrs Quinty is that she separates her from the reader – whom Ruth addresses directly throughout her manuscript. Early on, Ruth "introduces" the two with the words "Mrs Quinty, meet the Reader" (14). We know, from this, that Ruth sees a life for her manuscript beyond her attic bedroom and Mrs Quinty. The reason for this can be traced back to Ruth's love of books and her appreciation for the role the reader plays in the life of a book; when she

describes visiting a library for the first time, she tells us she “felt *company*, not only the company of the writers, but the readers too, because they had lifted and opened and read these books...I just loved it, the whole strange sense of being aboard a readership” (62). Later, Ruth describes her vision for the future of her book, explaining: “I want mine to breathe, because books are living things, they have spines and smells and length of life, and from living some of them have tears and buckles and some stains” (347). The true revelation comes, however, when we then learn that “Mrs Quinty is the only living person who read *History of the Rain*” (349) – Virgil’s book of poetry – and that she is unable to remember any of the content. This is the moment at which we begin to understand Ruth’s attitude towards her own manuscript.

Towards the end of her narrative, Ruth explains that after the death of Aeney, her father stopped writing. Her mother’s response to this was to secretly compile his poetry into an anthology, and arrange for its publication by a London press. Mrs Quinty was enlisted to type up the poems when Virgil was absent and Ruth’s mother slowly gathered the pages (naming the collection *History of the Rain*), Ruth believing the entire time that “once the book was published things would improve for us, and something would be healed” (319). Ultimately, Mary and Ruth never heard back from the publisher’s, but while awaiting a response, Virgil began writing again, producing “a flood of new work” (335). In the process, he stopped eating and became thin – “His shoulders were sharp and made of the shirt a sail” (337) – and distant. After a fire in the house which Virgil blamed himself for (345), he separated from his family to make

repairs and was discovered one day by Ruth destroying his new poems, the river once again becoming a symbol for death:

My father was down by the place where Aeney drowned. ...I turned to the river and saw the pages. ...They were small, already distant, and sailing west in the swiftness of the current. I didn't believe they were pages and then knew they were the poems, and I knew the answer he was going to give me when I asked why.

"They were no good, Ruth." (344-5)

Not long after this incident, Virgil died. Ruth relays that the official cause was a tumour "curved like a hook in the parietal lobe of his brain" (350), but she is quick to counter such a diagnosis: "The way [the doctor] said it I knew he thought it explained the raptures...that produced the poems. ...The tumour was the whole story. And right then I knew that that was the wrong story and that I would have to write the truth" (350).

What we come to understand is that Ruth believes her father died with his poems, and that she is conscious of avoiding the same fate. In the closing pages of her manuscript, Ruth describes a single page of poetry notes left behind by Virgil addressed to her, and makes the following promises:

If I am dead my pages will be put with his page and pressed inside *The Salmon in Ireland* and Vincent Cunningham will bring them to the River Shannon and throw them in.

If I am alive this is my book, and my father lives now in the afterlife that is a book, a thing not vague or virtual but something you can hold and feel and smell because to my mind heaven like life must be a thing sensual and real. And my book will be a river and have the Salmon literal and metaphoric leaping inside it and be called *History of the Rain*, so that his book did not and does not perish, and you will know my book exists because of him. ...You will know that I found him in his books, in the covers his hands held, the pages they turned, in the paper and the print, but also in the worlds those books contained, where now I have been and you have been too. (353)

Ruth evidently recognises an implicit association between telling your story and staying alive, and – in her promise to live on and allow her father to live on through her book – reveals the impulse to share her story with the world and go on living. Her father Virgil never shared the poetry he created in the aftermath of his son’s death – his own trauma narrative – and by destroying it, he denied himself a single reader. We know this for certain because Ruth is careful to let us know that neither she nor her mother ever read the contents of *History of the Rain* – “She did not read the poems and she didn’t let me read them” (319) – and that the person who typed his poems, Mrs Quinty, cannot remember a word because “the typing not the poems had taken her attention” (349). We also know for certain that, in Ruth’s mind, being denied a reader (i.e. an addressable other) is a serious issue, something made evident in the following passage:

Are you there?

Days like this when I wake and feel more tired than I did when I went to sleep I can’t quite believe in you.

Dear Reader, are you a figment?

It’s hard to live on hope. Living on hope you get thin and tired. Hope pares you away from the inside. (212)

Ultimately, Ruth’s promise that her book will be finished, published, and passed along to her “Reader” in the event that she lives echoes Laub’s notion that Holocaust survivors “did not only need to survive so that they could tell their story; they also needed to tell their story in order to survive” (*Testimony* 69). Ruth’s survival will enable her to publish her manuscript and put it out into the world, but at the same time her recovery from her mystery illness (which, as we have seen, seems tied to her grief) seems bound up in the act of sharing her

manuscript. Like Veronica, Ruth is able to envisage a better life for herself at the close of her manuscript, promising: “I will at last go into Remission and begin to get better...I will return home...I, Ruth, will write this book...Mrs Quinty will type my pages...you will read them” (355). Unlike her father, who allowed himself to slip away into death when he destroyed his poems, Ruth will share her trauma narrative. Even the small detail of getting Mrs Quinty to read and type her pages – thus securing a reader early on – indicates a desire to correct her father’s mistakes.

We come back now to Dori Laub, and his notion of the “addressable other”, whose absence threatens to “annihilate” the narrative (*Testimony* 68). Ruth is aware of the danger of this absence, and it is for this reason that she addresses her reader so frequently and shares her work with Mrs Quinty. Veronica also seems to sense that, in coming to the end of her written manuscript, she must share her trauma narrative – if not, perhaps, the manuscript itself – with her brother Ernest if she is going to make steps towards recovery. But Max’s fate is less clear. Although he does seem to want to engage with Miss Vavasour and talk about what happened, both ultimately fail in their roles: Max as the speaker, and Miss Vavasour as the addressable other. In one of their final exchanges, the following denial occurs:

Miss Vavasour gives me a pitying look. I blench under her glance. She knows the questions I want to ask, the questions I have been burning to put to her since I first came here but never had the nerve. This morning when she saw me silently formulating them yet again she shook her head, not unkindly. “I can’t help you,” she said, smiling. “You must know that.” What does she mean by must? I know so little of anything. (248)

Laub has discussed the “annihilation of the narrative” through the absence of an addressable other, with reference to the Chaim Guri film *The Eighty-first Blow*, in which a Jewish man narrates his suffering in a concentration camp and is disbelieved by his audience. Laub writes: “it is, precisely, this ultimate annihilation of a narrative that, fundamentally, *cannot be heard* and of a story that *cannot be witnessed*, which constitutes the mortal eighty-first blow” (*Testimony* 68).<sup>5</sup> He elaborates on this association between silencing or disbelief of the trauma narrative and death when he explains that, because a traumatic event has “a quality of otherness, a salience, a timelessness and a ubiquity that puts it outside the range of associatively linked experiences”, it must be “re-externalized”: “This re-externalization of the event can occur and take effect only when one can articulate and *transmit* the story, literally transfer it to another outside oneself and then take it back in again” (*Testimony* 69). When Max attempts to speak and is shut down by Miss Vavasour he fails to be witnessed and believed. And, as we have seen with Virgil, the price that can be paid for *not* being heard, understood and believed is high; Laub goes so far as to suggest that “if one talks about the trauma without being truly heard or truly listened to, the telling might itself be lived as a return of the trauma—a *re-experiencing of the event itself*” (*Testimony* 68). It is this fear, perhaps, that prevents Veronica from telling anyone other than Ernest – “I will ask him to break this very old news to the rest of the family (but don’t tell Mammy!) because I can not do it myself”

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<sup>5</sup> As Laub explains here, Jewish tradition dictates that a man may only sustain and survive eighty blows.

(259) – and it is the failure on Max’s part to speak and be heard by the one person he feels he can discuss his trauma with, Miss Vavasour, that may prevent him from healing and moving forward.

What exactly, though, is Max’s reasoning for holding back here? He tells us that he wants to ask Miss Vavasour whether she blames herself for the death of Chloe (261), but perhaps we might consider that this is a question Max wants to ask on his own behalf. As we have explored, he seems to feel an unspoken guilt over the death of Chloe, which relates to his decision to tell her about the supposed affair between Rose and Mr Grace. Read with this in mind, the aforementioned scene between Max and Miss Vavasour reads as an attempt on Max’s behalf to ask for absolution, to confess to his guilt, and unburden himself of his trauma – but Miss Vavasour, as we have seen, cannot do this, perhaps because she does in some small way blame him.

Max’s reluctance to speak, then, may be driven by his inability to face his guilt. But it’s also hardly surprising that he behaves in this way when we consider that he is, to a very real extent, driven by thoughts of suicide and death. In one daydream sequence, he imagines himself transported to some version of a purgatory or afterlife, “some far shore” where he sees a “black ship in the distance, looming imperceptibly nearer at every instant”; in the moment he feels a sense of belonging, saying “I am there. I hear your siren’s song. I am there, almost there” (132). The message is clear: Max finds himself lured towards death by his departed wife (and perhaps also his departed sweetheart Chloe). Later, he discusses drowning, when drunk, reportedly calling it “the gentlest

death" (255) and not long afterwards attempts to wade out to sea. Ultimately, Max seems just as unwilling to help facilitate his recovery as Miss Vavasour. In the end, he simply chooses not to share his trauma narrative.

## Closing Pages

*It was as if I were walking into the sea.*

Max Morden

*I have been falling into my own life, for months. And I am about to hit it now.*

Veronica Hegarty

*At last, unimaginably, implausibly, impossibly, the rain will have stopped.*

Ruth Swain

We began this investigation by examining the act of writing trauma down, looking at the unique importance of the act and how it is often easier, as Bessel van der Kolk has explained, than speaking of difficult things. For each of our narrators, a recent trauma has pushed them to a point at which writing down their trauma, and constructing a narrative around it is their only option for survival.

We have seen too how the construction of the trauma narrative can be a complex, often contradictory act, and explored the notion that each of our narrators attempts to make sense of what has happened to them by seeking out plot points – and in particular, “beginnings”. Another tool we have looked at in the construction of the trauma narrative is invention. Each narrator seems compelled to stretch and elaborate on the truth; again in an attempt to discover why their trauma occurred. This is interesting in the context of certain trauma therapies, which encourage survivors to construct imagined scenarios around their trauma.

At the same time, we have investigated the notion that pursuing sense over truth can be problematic. As Sophie Tamas has argued, a trauma narrative

must not repress information that does not fit with the accepted order of things. It must also try not to shy away from the dirtier and more unpleasant aspects of the trauma. In the case of our narrators, allowing the dirt through, resisting the urge to repress, was shown to be enlightening – it enabled new modes of expression and understanding.

We have ultimately seen how the final stage in the creation of the trauma narrative has been to share it with another person, or at least come to a point where that seems possible. We have seen how the writing of the trauma narrative enables our narrators to speak of it for the first time; we have also seen how being prepared to share the narrative in its entirety is another step towards recovery, and ultimately a sign of hope. But what, ultimately, is the fate of our three narrators? What can we surmise about their futures from how their trauma narratives come to a close?

In the closing lines of my novel, the voice of my troubled protagonist Esther reverts from the second person to the first person. In previous sections, this transition suggested a positive development: the integration of Esther's trauma and newfound emotional openness. But by the time we have reached the story's close, the warmer and more vibrant first-person voice has taken on new meaning – now it is suggestive of a break with reality, and perhaps even the kind of mania that has troubled Esther's mother for so many years.

Seeking out an ending for my traumatised protagonist was not easy, because, as we have seen, trauma is not usually something that can be easily – or even permanently – resolved. As such, my closing lines suggest future hardship, but offer no clear path for Esther. In the case of the novels we have

looked at, the fate of each narrator also remains uncertain as their story draws to a close – although in one case, recovery does seem to be possible.

As we have seen, the reawakening of each narrator's primary trauma can only truly provide closure when the understanding of what went on is shared with an addressable other. For all his delving into the past, Max is ultimately denied that; Veronica's recovery, meanwhile, hinges on whether or not she will go through with her confession to her brother Ernest. We may also consider the notion that – though Veronica seems finally ready to speak her trauma out loud at the close of her manuscript – doubt continues to cloud her memories of her brother's abuse. At one point Veronica recalls a memory, or what appears to be a memory, of being abused by Nugent:

I remembered a picture. I don't know what else to call it. It is a picture in my head of Ada standing at the door of the good room in Broadstone.

I am eight.

Ada's eyes are crawling down my shoulder and my back. Her gaze is livid down one side of me; it is like a light; my skin hardens under it and crinkles like a burn. *And on the other side of me is the welcoming darkness of Lambert Nugent. I am facing into that darkness and falling. I am holding his old penis in my hand.* (221, my emphasis)

Veronica herself acknowledges that the "memory" "comes from a place in [her] head where words and actions are mangled" (221) and that she "can not tell if it is true. Or...can not tell if it is real" (222), but the doubt plagues her. In trying desperately to sort fact from fiction, she writes:

I know that my brother Liam was sexually abused by Lambert Nugent. Or was probably sexually abused by Lambert Nugent.

*These are the things I don't know: that I was touched by Lambert Nugent, that my Uncle Brendan was driven mad by him, that my mother was rendered stupid by him, that my Aunt Rose and my sister Kitty got away.* (224, my emphasis)

A trauma theorist such as Herman might be interested in the idea that Veronica was herself abused, and that this has caused dissociation and repression of the memories. Herman has written of dissociation as a reaction to childhood sexual abuse, noting:

The child victim prefers to believe that the abuse did not occur. In the service of this wish, she tries to keep the abuse a secret from herself. The means she has at her disposal are frank denial, voluntary suppression of thoughts, and a legion of dissociative reactions. ...[Survivors] may learn to ignore severe pain, to hide their memories in complex amnesias, to alter their sense of time, place, or person, and to induce hallucinations or possession states. (88)

We know, from psychologists such as Christiane Sanderson, that “self-harm and self-mutilation are associated with a history of [child sex abuse]” (58), just as we know that as a child, Veronica experimented with a form of self-harm: “I remember a slow afternoon with Ada’s sewing basket, trying acupuncture on my thigh, testing the depth of the needles as they went through fat and meat to the cartilage or the bone” (130). As an adult, Veronica recalls, she also spent a night with a former boyfriend, “hacking away at [her] inner leg, with a biro of all things, and then later, running through the ineffectual blue lines with his kitchen knife” (130). While it is impossible to judge definitively whether or not Veronica was herself abused, the notion that she might have been casts her entire trauma narrative into a new light. The mere fact that she feels doubt, that she has not been able to settle on her own version of events, suggests that she may find no real closure – and that even the act of telling her brother Ernest may not deliver the desired integration of the trauma into her life story.

By contrast we have the character of Ruth who, despite being very unwell and perhaps even close to death, has constructed and shared her

narrative to the extent that closure, and by extension recovery, should be possible. Hence, it is only fitting that her manuscript, that Williams' novel, should end on a note of hope, happiness and love, in an imagined scene that sees Ruth's father reunited with Aeney in a version of their home rendered into an impossible, joyful Paradise: "Impossible...the quicksilver brilliance, the sun-bounce and shine of the River Shannon. Impossible the birds...Impossible the sky, blue and bluer now, with butterflies" (354). At the very end of her trauma narrative, Ruth displays acceptance of her traumas and hope for the future by declaring: "I will at last go into Remission...I, Ruth, will write this book...and I Ruth Swain will know that love is real and forgiveness complete because, at last, unimaginably, implausibly, impossibly, the rain will have stopped" (355).

Veronica's final words offer a different perspective – standing in Gatwick airport, preparing to fly home to Dublin, she thinks about having another baby, a boy "whose name [she] already [knows]" (260) and feels, in the same instant, that, more so than wanting another child, she wants to be "less afraid" (261). In her final words, Veronica muses on her fear of flying, the fact that "you are up so high, in those things, and there is such a long way to fall", followed by the admission: "Then again, I have been falling for months. I have been falling into my own life, for months. And I am about it hit it now" (261). These words are ambiguous; simultaneously they suggest that Veronica is on the verge of a breakthrough (perhaps the recognition that she was abused by Nugent too), and that she is aware, and afraid of, the consequences of revealing Liam's abuse to her family. There is also, undoubtedly, a quality of nihilism in her final

statement, which draws on the deeply suicidal image of falling from a great height.

In the final section of his manuscript, Max returns to the moment of his wife's death, telling us "Anna died before dawn. To tell the truth, I was not there when it happened. I had walked out on to the steps of the nursing home" (263). He recalls that in the moment, he thought of swimming alone in Ballyless – during the same summer that Chloe died – and felt a "smooth rolling swell" that lifted him up and carried him towards the shore (264). Max calls it "a momentous nothing, just another of the great world's shrugs of indifference" (264) and in the next moment describes being fetched by a nurse who has come to tell him of Anna's death. His parting words tell us: "I turned and followed her inside, and it was as if I were walking into the sea" (264).

Max's closing words seem overt in their desire for self-annihilation, even more so than Veronica's. Calling upon earlier scenes in which he has been drawn to the sea, and discussed drowning as a painless death, this final section suggests that something like suicide may be ahead for Max. We must remember, after all, that in the final lines of his manuscript's first section, he imagines himself transported to a far shore and declares "I am there. I hear your siren's song. I am there, almost there" (132). And yet, this apparent death impulse is tempered by what has gone before. When Max finds himself thinking of the wave that carried him when he swam alone as a boy one summer's afternoon, we see how it mirrors the impact of his wife's death (presumably occurring at the same moment that Max experiences the memory). There is, in other words, a kind of numbing going on here, a suppression of feeling that calls to mind

Pullen and Rhodes' notion of repressed dirt. Even if Max is not headed for death, it does not appear that he has managed to fully realise his feelings and integrate his trauma.

We might consider too, that Max ends his narrative in the past – Veronica, by contrast, situates herself very much in the present, while Ruth looks forward. It would be simplistic to suggest that this positioning of our narrators as they come to the ends of their narratives can stand in for their overall attitudes, and yet there is something wholly appropriate about the fact that Max ultimately finds himself “[coming] back to live amidst the rubble of the past” (4). Veronica's doubts about whether or not she was abused make her uncertain about what will happen next, keeping her in the present, living moment to moment. Of the three, it is only Ruth who seems to manage true acceptance and integration of her past traumas, something which in turn enables to her to look forward and – we hope – begin to recover.

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