I was sent away to boarding school in 1974, a proper, old-fashioned boarding school with fagging and Greek and robust contact sports. One Sunday evening during my third term, in that precious hour of free time between house prayers and lights out, I found myself in the games room with the other boys in my year, doing what twelve-year-old boys have always done in games rooms pretty much since we came down out of the trees: seeing who could balance a snooker cue on the tip of their finger, who could fit a billiard ball in their mouth, who could hit a bull’s-eye by throwing a dart over their shoulder.

The hour rolled around, the bell rang, we trooped off to our dormitory and went to bed. Some time later we were woken by a prefect banging the door open, turning the lights on and telling us that the house-master wanted to see us all in his study. Now.

It’s hard to explain to anyone who hasn’t gone to a proper, old-fashioned boarding school the sphincter-tightening horror in those words. We got up, put our slippers and dressing gowns on and shambled downstairs, through the library, across the dining room and into what we called ‘the private side’ of the house,
through two white, wooden doors held closed by those plastic roller-ball latches I still come across sometimes in downmarket hotels and dentists’ waiting rooms, and whose slippery click still makes my blood run slightly cold.

We shuffled into the housemaster’s study and arranged ourselves in a semicircle smelling of Mycota athlete’s foot powder and Phisohex acne lotion while he smoked his pipe and picked idly at the tassels on his armchair. He let the silence run and the tension build until he finally said, ‘Who has made a hole in the games room radiator?’

Without thinking, I said, ‘It could have been me, Sir,’ because I was a good boy who always told the truth and because one of my darts had indeed bounced off the radiator. To be honest I was feeling a little smug. I was expecting a mild reprimand and a commendation for my honesty.

However, he simply said, ‘Thank you, Haddon,’ and let the silence run for a second time before he banged his pipe out on the metal fire-surround and said, ‘So who made the thirty-six other holes?’

The following evening I went up to the games room to examine the damage and discovered that whoever had vandalised the radiator had done so with some effort and application, possibly using a nail and a hammer. Whether that person was standing in the housemaster’s study when I made my naïve confession I never found out, but if they were they could probably hear the angels singing and see a shaft of golden light pouring down through a gap in the clouds. No one said anything, the other boys were dismissed and I was told to remove my dressing gown. The housemaster went over to the corner of the room and selected a weapon from a drawer full of canes. He came back, told me to bend over then beat me six times. I retired to bed weeping and bleeding a little.

The next morning I went down to breakfast feeling sore and sorry for myself only to find that something extraordinary had happened. Younger boys clustered around me, wanting all the grisly details and, if possible, a glance at the wounds, older boys patted me manfully on the back in passing as if I’d recently returned from an ascent of K2, even the teachers appeared to be treating me as if I was a little older, a little more mature. I had never been cool, partly on account of being overweight, partly on account of my constant low-level anxiety and partly on account of the purple rollneck jumper I sometimes wore on Sunday afternoons when we were briefly allowed out of uniform. Temporarily, however, I seemed to have been sprinkled with a little of that magic dust, and now it was I who could hear the angels singing and see a shaft of golden light pouring down through a gap in the clouds because I suddenly understood for the first time that both the school and the wider world were governed by two parallel but contradictory sets of rules. Good boys who always told the truth and scored alpha plusses on their
designing a pair of slippers with lights on the toes so that you could see where you were going in the dark. I’m not bitter.

It was the big questions, however, which excited me most, and the biggest was the simplest. Where are we? 288a Main Road, New Duston, Northampton, England, Europe, the Earth, the Solar System, the Milky Way, the Local Group, the Virgo Supercluster . . . What is the last line of our address? Where is the edge of the universe, and when you get to that edge, what’s on the far side? I knew it couldn’t go on for ever because, according to Albert Hinkelbein, whose Origins of the Universe I’d won as the Headmaster’s prize in 1973 at Duston Eldean Junior School, a fraction of a second after the Big Bang the universe was the size of a grapefruit and I understood, even at the age of ten, that however fast you expanded a grapefruit over however long a period it never became infinitely big because infinity didn’t work like that. It wasn’t simply a couple of stops past Really, Really Huge. But what was this expanding universe expanding into?

I remember giving myself a literal headache thinking about this conundrum while sitting in the bathroom of 288a Main Road, New Duston because it was the only lockable room in the house and therefore the only room in the house where you could think deeply for long periods without interruption, and sometimes even now when I’m trying to think deeply for long periods without interruption I can still see, high on the report cards, they won prizes on speech day and had their names written in gold leaf on the walnut scholarship board in the hall, but the other boys and a good number of the staff despised them, reserving their real admiration for boys who scored straight betas and showed character by drinking and smoking and shagging girls from the town then getting a solid second in geography at Bristol before becoming colonels in the Grenadier Guards.

Several terms later the housemaster was sitting at our table for lunch when he was asked by one of the more forward boys in our year how he could justify beating children. ‘I can justify it,’ he said, ‘because I always know that they are in the wrong and that I am in the right.’ It was, without a shadow of a doubt, the most educational moment in my entire school career, the moment at which I realised that you should never take anyone’s explanation of anything for granted.

As a child I was obsessed with science. I dreamt of being a member of the Leakey family, hunting for Australopithecus bones in the Olduvai Gorge. I invented the Linear Electric Motor and was greatly distressed to find that Eric Laithwaite had already built one. At the age of eight I won a coveted Blue Peter badge in their Year 2000 competition by designing a machine for extracting hydrogen fuel from sea water. My sister won a Blue Peter badge in the same competition for
wall, that bar-fire with its silvered housing, its orange elements and its pull-cord toggle, and the little rubber elephant heads suckered to the tiles above the bath upon whose trunks we hung our damp flannels.

I know that there are many intelligent men with beards and poor social skills and mismatched socks who will tell me I’ve got it all arse about face, that what I’m calling ‘space and time’ is simply my own parochial view of a much larger and stranger thing called ‘space-time’, that the edge of something is what you reach when you travel in a straight line until you can’t go any further, and that travelling in a straight line until you can’t go any further is not something you can do in the vast expanses of space-time. But that’s not an explanation, as in, ‘This is how you play Scrabble,’ or ‘This is how a toaster works.’

Maybe the men with the beards and the mismatched socks are right. Maybe what we call ‘explanation’ is itself a parochial phenomenon which is limited to our little world of Scrabble and toasters. As Richard Feynman didn’t quite say, ‘If you think you understand, then you don’t.’ Over the years, however, I’ve come to realise that it’s not the explanations which matter, it’s being able to understand the enormity of the question. What matters is standing outside on a cloudless night and looking up and knowing that the dark between the stars contains older, more distant stars, and that if you could see those stars the dark between them would in turn contain even older, even more distant stars. And if you could see the dark between those stars . . . ? Where the hell are we? I think that if, for just a couple of seconds, you can get that question whole and true it’s one of the most frightening and thrilling things you can do with a human mind.

I was lying in the bath moaning about not being able to write, which I do a lot, except that this was seventeen years ago and I was fully clothed and there was no water in the bath and my girlfriend was getting rather tired of me, so she suggested that I get into the Fiat Panda and drive, partly to get rid of me and partly because I’ve always found long motorway journeys inspiring. Motorway service stations, too, oddly, proper old fashioned motorway service stations with obese lorry drivers and crusty ketchup bottles and those crimped, silver foil, mince-pie ashtrays.

So the following morning I got into the Fiat Panda and drove. Two days later I pulled up in Durness on the north-western corner of Scotland, which is about as far as you can drive without sinking. Beaches like Greece and a wind like Siberia. The following morning I took a little boat across the kyle to Cape Wrath piloted erratically by a large, bearded man who was clearly still drunk having been up all night at a ceilidh in Oban.
Several years ago I was teaching creative writing at the Arvon Foundation’s Lumb Bank centre above Hebden Bridge in Yorkshire. In one workshop I was trying to show students how easy it was to generate plots. We covered the dining table with a huge sheet of paper and covered the paper with a constellation of big dots, labelling each one as a dramatic turning point in the lives of our characters, in the lives of any characters – birth, marriage, divorce, death, adoption, coming out, triplets, zombie attack, ordination, terrorist outrage, melanoma . . .

‘Choose a handful of dots,’ I said, ‘and connect them randomly with a single line. Here’s a life. Take another handful of dots and connect them in a similar way. There’s another life. Here’s a novel, there’s a novel. In front of us right now we are looking at ten thousand possible stories.’

‘But how do we join these scenes together?’ the students asked. ‘How do we link the ordination and the zombie attack? How do we link the triplets and the terrorist outrage?’

‘You don’t,’ I said. ‘That’s the reader’s job. Write a scene, then write another scene and lay them next to one another. Alex is reading a bedtime story to his children. Alex is making a bomb in his garage. We can’t hear that without creating a narrative. It’s what human beings do.’

It’s an eleven-mile walk from the ferry to the lighthouse at Cape Wrath. The whole moorland peninsula is an MOD bombing range so it’s almost empty of people and spectacularly beautiful. Kearvaig Bay, the Cathedral sea stacks, the cliffs of Clo Mor. Once upon a time the lighthouse was connected to the rest of civilisation by a single telegraph wire running beside the track and you can still find lengths of rusty wire knotted round white, ceramic bushings from the tops of the poles. I stole one of the bushings, obviously, because that’s what you do, just as I once stole a pebble from the remains of Thoreau’s cabin beside Walden Pond. I thought I might get a poem out of it at the very least.

If this was that kind of nature/travel essay I’d explain how Robert Stevenson designed and built the lighthouse in 1828, how in 1915 the HMS Caribbean went down in bad weather bound for Scapa Flow with the loss of all its crew and how the light became automatic in 1998 and is now run from an office in Edinburgh. But when I read that kind of nature/travel essay it fills me with a queasy sense of my own inadequacy because I really do wish my mind worked like that, that I was able to focus on some small corner of the world and get it whole and true, whereas I know a little about particle physics and a little bit about George Eliot and a little bit about abstract expressionism which is great for a certain kind of middle-class dinner party, but is
I was, until recently, infatuated with the work of David Foster Wallace. *Infinite Jest, Oblivion, Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* . . . I’m in remission now but I still love his footnotes – big footnotes, sometimes longer than the text they’re footnoting, footnotes to footnotes, occasionally footnotes to footnotes to footnotes – because isn’t that how the mind works? Or maybe it’s just me. I’m walking around the Ashmolean Museum and I see a tiny Cucuteni clay horse figurine from 4,000 BC and read on the accompanying label how it’s probably evidence of primitive magic, and I think, ‘Isn’t it always? Tiny models of people and animals?’ It certainly is for my children and even I have a plastic cow key ring which lights up and moos when you squeeze it and I wouldn’t feel entirely comfortable if I lost it. Then I remember the Action Man I had as a boy, in particular the fantastic silver foil fire-fighting suit, then I think about Neil Armstrong taking that final bouncy step down onto the lunar surface in 1969, then I think how the dark between the stars contains trillions of tiny particles of soot and sand of a kind that you could collect in a jam jar.

Some years back I volunteered to help with an experiment at the Warneford Hospital in Oxford which involved having my brain scanned while I watched a series of seemingly random images flashed up on a screen. Some were clearly meant to be neutral, others
highly stimulating in one way or another. I remember a bath towel dropped on to a wooden floor, which was the most wonderful shade of turquoise. I remember pictures that were meant to be pornographic but which had clearly been taken from a copy of *Mayfair* c.1972 and were therefore antique and oddly charming. Soft focus shots of The Tennis Girl soaping herself in the shower after a sweaty match. I remember a photograph of a horrifically mutilated human body followed by a picture of a tiny silver cake fork which was one of the funniest things I have ever seen, as if something had gone slightly wrong at a tea party.

One of the joys teaching at Arvon is seeing that light bulb come on over a student’s head when they realise what all half-decent writers realise eventually, and what some very good writers tragically forget later in their careers, that it’s not about you. We all start by trying to get down on paper as accurately as possible the wonderful ideas and images in our heads. Sooner or later, however, we realise that the readers can’t see the wonderful ideas and images in our heads and therefore have no way of judging how accurately we’ve described them, and don’t give a damn anyway. It’s what’s on the paper that matters, period. Does it entertain? Does it move? We don’t matter. We have to make ourselves small, we have to make ourselves vanish, almost.

On my first Arvon Course I did a workshop in which I handed each student a card with a location written on it – ice cream van, lighthouse, brothel, crypt . . . I then handed each student a second card upon which was written a rule to which they had to stick rigidly while writing about their location – exactly four words per sentence, every sentence in the second person singular, no letter ‘E’ . . . Chris Thomas, who had never written anything creative in his life, got ‘Bathroom’ and ‘Every sentence in the negative’. I can still remember what he wrote.

This was not the Hilton, I thought, entering the bathroom through an aperture that I later realised was not a door. The absence of running water, a lack of taps, and a floor covering that was far from waterproof were disturbing signs. That dangling object, was it a shower curtain? No. The wallpaper, I realised, on closer inspection, wasn’t.

It was a light bulb moment for me, too, because we can see that bathroom even though he has described nothing in it. Because it’s not just connections that we make automatically. Images themselves spring to life at the slightest provocation, so that sometimes I think a writer’s job is simply to create the gaps which the reader is hungry to fill.

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*Full Moon*, Jonathan Cape, 2002. It’s one of my favourite books, a collection of photographs taken on the
Apollo space missions and digitally restored by Michael Light. Incredible crispness, incredible detail. Dust on the chunky tyres of the moon rover, Walter Cunningham asleep in a wonky trapezium of sunlight in the command module, the tiny Polaroid Charles Duke had taken of his wife and children in their Houston back yard, which he left lying in the dust of the Descartes Highlands and which is probably still there, arcing over our heads a quarter of a million miles away.

The pictures are so clear, you think, ‘My god, it really happened.’ The pictures are so clear you think, ‘Maybe it didn’t, maybe this is a soundstage in Hollywood.’ Because it wasn’t like that, was it, in 1969, when I was sitting in the living room at three o’clock in the morning watching Neil Armstrong take that final bouncy step down. It was the gales and the static humming in the cable which made it real. Z-Cars, Play-school, the Arsenal/Liverpool cup final of ’71 . . . everything seen through a blizzard of zigzag snow which proved that these things were really happening over the hills and far away.

I’ve always loved wild places, mountains and rocky coasts especially. Loch Coruisk on Skye, the Ordesa Valley in the Pyrenees . . . That double frisson of fear and freedom, the way the scale of the place makes you so small, makes you vanish, almost. Partly it’s Wordsworth’s ‘sense sublime of something far more deeply interfused’, and partly it’s the realisation that the world doesn’t give a damn for Wordsworth or you or me but will roll on regardless till we’re all soot and sand. Or perhaps they’re the same thing, the ‘sense sublime’ and our absolute unimportance in the great stretches of time and space.

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This from Thoreau’s Walden:

We need the tonic of wildness . . . At the same time that we are earnest to explore and learn all things, we require that all things be mysterious and unexplorable, that land and sea be infinitely wild, unsurveyed and unfathomed by us because unfathomable. We can never have enough of nature . . . We need to witness our own limits transgressed, and some life pasturing freely where we never wander.

—

The Apollo 11 capsule is in the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum in Washington but the Apollo 10 capsule is in the Science Museum in London. It’s pure steampunk, all rivets and handles and battered panels, burnt and burnished like a brass bedpan on a pub wall, but it went round the moon and came back with John Young and Thomas Stafford and Eugene Cernan on board. This was earlier that same year, 1969. We didn’t get pocket calculators till 1971. I still can’t quite get my head round this fact, but it’s true and it’s
real and it happened and the capsule is right there in front of you and if no one’s looking you can reach out and touch it and it has that same radiant presence that I’m always looking for in stuff. The Cucuteni horse, the bushing, the turquoise towel, the bump and crackle of a coal fire.

The poet Don Paterson wrote that the function of art is to introduce a little more chaos into the world, though on the average Wednesday morning I suspect he’s doing what most of us are doing, trying to introduce a little more order into the chaos. What he means by ‘chaos’, I think, is not smashing things but smashing the links we habitually and lazily make between things.

It’s a clear night and if I walk outside and stand in the centre of the lawn I can see Orion. Betelgeuse, Bellatrix, Rigel, Mintaka and a powdering of smaller stars. He was a son of Poseidon who got drunk and raped Merope. He was blinded by her father as a punishment and eventually killed by the sting of a giant scorpion, as tends to happen in that kind of story.

If you look at Orion with an infra red telescope, however, if you look at the heat instead of the visible light, the sword becomes a great double-splash of flame and the head becomes a dragon’s tail of fire circling a single burning eye. We can’t really see what we call Orion at all because we’re looking at the soot and the sand and they’re warm and they swill and clump and gather in monumental, dark nebulae of which most of the time we are completely unaware.

Gemini, Andromeda, Pegasus, Perseus . . . We look up into the sky every night and tell the same stories about the same characters, but there are ten thousand ways in which we could connect the stars and ten thousand possible stories we could tell, and if we could only see into the dark between the stars . . .

—

I think of the opening of the poem ‘Snow’ by Louis MacNeice.

The room was suddenly rich and the great bay-window was Spawning snow and pink roses against it Soundlessly collateral and incompatible . . .

How he simply lays one thing beside another. Snow, roses, glass. How he doesn’t draw any conclusions, how he simply celebrates what the poem calls ‘the drunkenness of things being various’.

—

I went into my son’s class last year to take a lesson. These were children of eight and nine. We talked about stories, the ones we liked and the ones we didn’t, why we thought they worked or didn’t work. I said how strange and sad lingered longer in the mind than rude and funny. I said that all good stories began with a
I was unsure whether the letter was genuine, not least because for several years I had been sending out fake Christmas round-robin’s from Geoff and Eileen Collins who lived in Winchester, whose lesbian daughter ran a grocers in Hebden Bridge called *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* and whose son had been brain-damaged after being struck in the head by a stray golf ball. I sent a reply, because I am a very nice man and I always do reply eventually, unless someone sends me a letter which contains weird sexual threats or is accompanied by a novel written entirely in numbers (thankfully I have only ever received one each of those), and being a very creative person I decided to compose a letter which somehow took account of all possible realities at the far end. I thanked her for her kind offer but said that I was very happily married and would therefore not be contacting her daughter. I added, however, that I had recently attended the Whitbread Book Award ceremony where I had met Mr DBC Pierre. He was single, as far as I knew, and very charming, if a little over-eager to get to the free bar. A month or so later I got a letter from Winchester thanking me for my thoughtful reply. She had written to Mr DBC Pierre but had not yet received a reply. The letter ended, ‘I live in hope, Yours Sincerely, Angela Alcock, (Mrs).’

This was one of the few highlights of the post-*Curious* publicity marathon which consisted mostly of a hundred, a hundred and fifty, two hundred interviews in newspapers and magazines, on radio and television,
It’s a Tuesday in late July, nine or so in the evening, and I’m swimming in the River Thames on Port Meadow, just upstream of Bossom’s boatyard. Two days of rain have cooled the water after a week of intense heat. The airy cages of Hopkins’ Binsey poplars are shimmering above me and the sun is going down over Godstow so that the grass and the stones and the battered boat moored on the far side of the river are all gilded. Above me this monumental sky, peach-coloured lowlands and Himalayas of receding snow.

I swim into the middle of the river and float, feet hanging in the colder current deep down. Swallows skimming the water for midges, flotillas of Canada geese, cows drinking at the water’s edge. A C-17 banks over Wytham Woods making its final approach into Brize Norton, all that tonnage kept aloft a kind of miracle.

As a child I was terrified of deep water. Ponds, lakes, rivers, oceans. Partly it was the fear of drowning, partly it was the fear of things I might tread on or be eaten by. Pike, jellyfish, sea-urchins, Great White Sharks. Most of all I was terrified by the lightless abyss which went down and down and down to the sulphur vents and the transparent crawling things and the bone-crushing...
pressure and those uncharted continents of Christ alone knows what.

Whenever I teach creative writing I tell students to be concrete and specific. It’s about looking, really looking. No one ever drinks a beer or sees a tree. They drink a bottle of Kelham Island Pale Rider or they see a black poplar with its diamond leaves and great fissures in its bark and big burrs bursting out like giants’ kneecaps. It’s the detail which brings writing alive. Tigers in red weather, the bracelet of bright hair about the bone, a raindrop that sits unbroken in a floating feather.

But there is something else I’m looking for too in all writing, and it’s the polar opposite of detail and I rarely talk about it to students because it’s impossible to put into words and it doesn’t come when you call and going in search of it will do you no good whatsoever.

Great White

Shark attacks were rare in Chapel Brampton. I should have been afraid of paedophiles, leukaemia or Neil Billingham who lost his right eye when he lit a can of underarm deodorant,

but when I lay awake at 2 a.m. as headlights swept the solar system

I suspect it began when I fell into the neighbours’ pond at the age of five. I was reaching out to grab their nephew’s sailing boat when a section of the rockery gave way. I don’t remember being afraid at first, only the shock of the cold and the dark and the somewhat unnecessary depth, a huge circle of sunlight above me, some intervening goldfish and hands reaching down. It

Carbaradon Carcharias. Six thousand pounds of muscle powering a hoop of butcher’s knives. Immune from cancer, constantly awake, the only animal that ate its weaker siblings in the womb.

And just as pious Catholics once fondled strips of cloth soaked in the hot fat of burning martyrs, so I’d run my hands across that photo of the fisherman from Cairns, his belly opened like a can of plum tomatoes.

Even now in lakes and rivers or ten yards off the beach at Swanage I remember what’s inside us all and sense, behind my back, that grey torpedo entering the shallows.

I
was not unlike fainting after I had my BCG vaccination at school, sniffing the ether on that little cotton wool swab, watching the skin puncture under the point of the needle and falling backwards into a great velvety darkness, vaguely aware of adults calling my name from the white coin of the well shaft’s distant mouth.

And then there is other fear, its polar opposite. It’s 1997 and we’re driving from Grenoble to Toulouse to catch a night flight home to Heathrow. Pitch black, visibility down to nine, ten metres on the motorway and a blizzard coming at us like we’re on the Starship Enterprise making the jump to hyperspace. We reach the airport in one piece, amazingly, then have to sit in a crowded departure lounge while the plane is de-iced three times. And maybe it’s delayed fear which, like Velcro or napalm, attaches itself to the nearest available object, but I become increasingly convinced that we are soon going to die in a cartwheeling tube of burning aluminium surrounded by two hundred strangers weeping and voiding their bowels. I keep the plane aloft all the way home purely by means of the strength of my grip on the armrests, and every time I see an aircraft overhead for the next month I feel angry and tearful and shaky.

It’s now some years since I first read Roger Deakin’s *Waterlog*, his joyous memoir of wild swims throughout the United Kingdom from Fowey harbour to the Cor-
having my hand held by a member of the cabin crew. I avoided air travel for quite some time after that.

I run regularly up the Thames. Godstow, King’s Lock, Eynsham, Bablock Hythe. A growing stillness inside and outside my head as the human stuff begins to thin out.

It was shame that did it in the end, the realisation that I was running beside this beautiful outdoor pool and missing something very special on every occasion. So one day, nearing home, I caught myself by surprise, stopped, stripped off and walked in. I do it all year round now, four minutes max in February to avoid the embarrassment of an ambulance, and something in me sings every time, those Scandinavian genes possibly, the ones that call to me whenever I see pine forests and lakes and capable blonde women in zigzag sweaters.

All the little details, the way my hands warp under a bottle-green bow wave, grebe chicks riding on their mothers’ backs, swimming in the rain, the surface fizzing and dancing and steaming while I drift in the submarine stillness, a raindrop that sits unbroken in a floating feather. A dog ran away with my socks once. It’s about being inside the landscape, it’s about some kind of membrane breaking down. I want to explain what it’s like because that’s what writers do, but I can’t find the words, and increasingly I’ve come to think that this is the whole point, finding myself in a place
The sixth course wasn’t a great deal of help so I decided to up my game and paid for Carol Cornwell from Aviatours to join me on an accompanied flight to Manchester and back. I rather fell in love with Carol, not least because of her sheer joy at being in the air. Carol, however, was in love with Concorde on which she’d worked as cabin crew for seventeen years. She talked about the plane as if it were a glamorous ex-lover and before she got too old she was planning to fly around the world saying goodbye to all nineteen of them, in Seattle, Barbados, New York, Le Bourget, Chantilly, Virginia . . .

I looked out of the window as we taxied to the runway and it dawned on me for the first time that all airports have been designed by seven-year-old boys. Huge fire engines, big capital letters all over the tarmac, massive trucks with monster tyres and low-slung cabs, actual jet-powered flying machines. As we made the descent into Manchester forty-five minutes later I looked out of the window again and thought, ‘This is like being in Star Wars’. We could have been on board the Millennium Falcon coming down into Cloud City, minus a welcome from the duplicitous Lando Calrissian and Carol ending up locked in a slab of carbonite. We could fly. How amazing was that? And how did we forget? I thought about the swimming, that flip from terror to love. There were people like Carol who adored flying. Might it not be easier to become one of those people rather than sit in seat 24C deep-breathing and pretending to be on the ground?

Looking down I can see Bossom’s Boatyard, the poplars, the cows. I’m in a Piper Cherokee taking my first flying lesson from Kidlington airfield just north of Oxford. 5mg of diazepam, nausea, severe abdominal tension. But I’m starting to get the Millennium Falcon thing again, the way the landscape becomes its own map, the sheer volume of the sky. My instructor, John, explains how even up here at 2,000 feet you can feel the colour of the ground because of the different ways in which woods and wheat and ploughed earth absorb and reflect and re-emit light and heat. I look down and see, far below us, a reservoir. The plane bumps on one side, glides across it and bumps off the other.

Every winter the Thames rises and spills onto Port Meadow creating a vast, shallow lake. Some years this lake freezes solid and for a couple of weeks it’s pure Breughel. Ladies of a certain age dig rusty skates from their basements, young girls in tan tights and quilted pink coats turn pirouettes, dogs pull makeshift sleds. Real ice hockey games with helmets and pads and goals and sideline barbecues. One morning we were walking
to school across Port Meadow through thick fog, thinking we were the only people in a hundred acres of frozen nothing, and then we heard them, far out, invisible, just the distant woosh and tock of blades and puck.

A really good poem restores the silence. Like a soap bubble, this tiny, frail rainbow-coloured thing reflects the whole world for a few moments and then . . . it’s gone. That little nothing afterwards, like a silent bell ringing.

Roger Deakin describes a kingfisher ‘streaking by in an afterburn of blue’. When I picture that kingfisher I’m on the lower reaches of the Cherwell where the trees lean over to make a cool, green tunnel. And it’s the kingfisher, of course, but it’s what’s behind and around and before and after the kingfisher. It’s what makes the kingfisher possible, it’s what makes everything possible, it’s the thing we sense for one heartbeat after the kingfisher has gone.

And I’ve come to think that the function of the detail – the tigers in red weather, the bracelet of bright hair about the bone, the raindrop that sits unbroken in a floating feather – is to grip us tightly by the hand and skate us at increasing speeds towards the very edge of language then let us go so that we spin out into the great frozen nothing where the words no longer work.

Kidlington again, 65 mph and I can feel the Piper Cherokee wanting to be airborne. John pulls the yoke, we rock back, the wheels let go of the tarmac and we begin our steady climb to the inversion. He sets the trim and gives me the controls. I’m an old hand now, a whole forty-five minutes of flying under my belt. No diazepam, no nausea. It is the most gorgeous day.

We’re flying through an archipelago of cumuli, islands and towers and arches of white, Mediterranean blue to the horizon. Looking down I can see the gloriously ugly cement works at Bunkers Hill, I can see the golf ball radar domes of Upper Heyford airbase, I can see the silver loop of the moat of Broughton Castle where I swam the previous year. But up here it is another world entirely, so hard to gauge the size of anything, mountains you could scoop up in your hand.

‘Let’s do some banking,’ says John. ‘See if you can get her over to 20 degrees.’

Gingerly, I twist the yoke and the planet swings under us like a great, green pendulum. I ask John what I’m aiming for.

‘That cloud,’ he says. ‘Let’s go straight through that cloud.’

I twist the yoke back, we level up and the cloud looms and looms and looms and we vanish into the white.