LANGUAGE of the NIGHT

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Contents

THE FIRST PART
Abroad

Fragment 1
Setting off

I decided to take with me just seven dreams out of the nine hundred and thirty one safely stored away for more than a decade. Prepared for a prolonged journey, I meant to travel light.

I recorded all these dreams faithfully over a memorable period of three years when my sanity was seriously in doubt. On rising, before the cares of the day could encroach, I sat down to write down the stories of the previous night. Sometimes there was more than one, at others there was none but I ensured that, over these three perilous years, no dream was left out, that nothing was discriminated for or against.

I shared their secrets with no one since the power of a dream, it seemed to me at the time, lay foremost in it being dreamt and secondly perhaps in its recording whilst the experience of the night was still fresh. In the process of disintegrating, the only question was how to survive.

At then, I was made more or less whole again. How much I owed to dreaming, and the daily transcription of my dreams, is difficult to tell. My hunch is that the debt is too significant ever to be repaid.

"A man in a vineyard is fermenting wine. To test its maturity and strength he has to release some vapour from a tube and put a light to it. My shadow and I are standing at a safe distance. The vapour escapes, a light is put to it, but the vapour does not ignite. The vapour expands and turns into an ever growing cloud. We fear a huge explosion and retreat further and further into the distance, expecting the worst. When the cloud envelops everybody there is no explosion, just a sort of damp squib, completely harmless."

"We are on our way to a village on the outskirts of a town. Accompanying us are two black dogs and a peculiar pig-like animal. We are embarrassed by these creatures that attach themselves to us. We would like to get rid of them, particularly the pig-like one, the dogs are more acceptable. On the approach to the village the pig-like creature rips off a mask to reveal a human head."

"A military man of high rank, handsome, is called away to fight in a war. He leaves behind his son to be looked after by me. The infant is fully formed and normal except that he is about four inches in height. I have difficulties in keeping track of so minute a human being. Fortunately, most of the time he hangs onto my jersey with miniscule talons formed on his feet."

"I am standing on the balcony of my childhood home. A devastating summer storm left just one huge tree standing, towering over the house. The tree is severely damaged, perhaps already dead. It is black and grey with many of its branches smashed to the ground. Yet still large chunks of the tree are above my head, about to fall down on me at any minute.

I am afraid and excited at the same time. I feel brave standing my ground, not trying to run away. As the remaining branches are falling, they turn into paper shreds floating gently past me. I come to no harm."

"A mine. Soft dark greyish coal like substance is being dug up. The workers are using spades – they are digging into the substance. An attractive, young, blond man appears on the scene. He is full of vigour and wants to introduce new ways of mining. He is using a spade to demonstrate what he wants done. In a movement both clumsy and sinister his head is completely severed by the sharp edge of the spade. The head, on its own, utters a few words, asking for help. The words turn into a whimper."

"Against the backdrop of semi-dark sky a flock of birds disappears into the distance. I am deep underwater is a sea inlet. On one side of the inlet a castle wall reaches right down to the shore. On the other side, the sharply sloping ground displays rocks with interspersed vegetation

I am moving along in the water but not by swimming. A force behind propels me forward. I do not feel human; I do not seem to be inside my body. I am some kind of human submarine.

Loud music is blaring in my ear. Finding all this very strange, I question myself whether this is the state of being dead. In fact I am unsure whether I am dead or just about to die. Almost colliding with a moss covered rock, I wake up."

"In company with my sister and someone else. We are in a field. In an adjoining field we see a bull. My sister is afraid. I reassure her by drawing her attention to the dividing fence between the two fields. I point out that we are near enough to the other fence and can jump over it if the bull decides to charge.

The bull rushes at us at speed and it becomes obvious that we cannot reach the safety of the fence in time. As the bull approaches he turns out to be not a bull but a pre-historic monster. The third person in our group is now revealed as a mythical beast, half human – half animal. He interposes himself between us and the monster, facing him with extreme confidence.

The combat is fierce as the two creatures rise, locked together against each other. The mythical beast unfolds the top of a vestment he has been wearing, revealing half his chest to show and prove something. He scratches himself as a gorilla would. It is evident that he lost the fight and is about to die. His last words are: 'don't kill the …' pointing to the monster"

Before setting off, for my spirits to calm, I let a decade elapse. The journey was a quest. I needed answers to questions that have been round ever since Adam ate of the fateful apple and man became conscious of himself. When do we dream? How come we dream? Do the dreams tell something important about a past, a present or a future? What do they mean, if they mean anything at all? Why are the stories of the night so strange, often absurd yet vivid and so credible, at the same time? In what way do they compare with daytime stories that inspired our childhood years? And above all, who was the mysterious creator of these disconcerting tales?

The questions were few and simple, the answers dubious, far ranging, and few of them in accord. In bewilderment across the centuries, I decided to consult the wisdom of the ages, starting from the very first available source.

Fragment 2

In Egypt, at the Temple of Thoth

Thus I found myself at the temple of Thoth, the fount of all Wisdom. I could have chosen other temples, like that of Amun the God of Creation, or Isis the God of Magic, or Osiris, the overlord of Death, or Nut, ruler of the stars, but it was right here that the leading dream experts practiced their arts.

The duty priest received me with benign courtesy, as befits all religious shrines. Clad in white robes, immobile, he resembled a statue viewed from afar. With a long, probing nose and penetrating eyes, he listened in perfect silence to my personal confession. Only his fingers moved, lacing and unlacing while I spoke. He asked me when and where I was born, who my parents were, what was the state of my business, health, the frequency, durability and rigidity of my erections. Having committed my answers to memory, the priest set the time for my next appointment and sent me away with an injunction to prepare a donation, as temples were not state funded. I was also told to purify myself and contemplate the Nile.

The required donation posed no difficulties since I spent much of my life accumulating wealth. The purification took place in public with quantities of holy water poured generously over heads. The same words were repeatedly mumbled, mouths strained, faces inspired by fervour. I was the one, the only one, without faith. I spent two days, from sunrise to sunset, on the banks of that life sustaining river, trying not to be distracted by marauding crocodiles and a continuous stream of boats sailing downwind with diverse merchandise. I learnt nothing of obvious significance but at the end of it I felt empty, at peace with myself.

At my appointed time the temple gates opened. A servitor guided me through convoluted passages to an inner chamber decorated by numerals. There my donation was counted, coin by coin, from palm to palm. With the accountant satisfied, I was ushered into a chamber whose walls and pillars depicted creatures the like of which never saw the light of day. Waiting there, the duty priest introduced me to his superior, another priest wearing a robe with a red embroidered hem, evidently a specialist in dreams.

The time of the specialist, unsurprisingly, was precious. The tone of the consultation was brusque. My dreams were too rich for his liking, too full of mixed omens both good and bad. The trend just then was for short, simple stories with a single character, object or event, in the central role. A deep well, a mirror, a shining moon, a large cat, eating crocodile flesh, are the kind of things that were in demand. My dreams, I was informed, were highly exceptional. They required more thought, more effort and time. To make matters worse, I was a foreigner, worshipping he knew not what alien gods. With such reservations, and with some reluctance, he delivered his version of God's message in a few brief words:

"Fermenting wine is brewing a troubled life but you will cope with the mounting troubles and they will dissolve in harmless clouds.

The pig revealing a human head presages your return to the long forgotten schools you left behind in your quest for the riches of the land.

The talons of the tiny child hanging grimly unto to you means that something you did when you were still young will haunt you for the rest of your life.

The tree that came crashing unto your head in the summer storm is a dire warning that the Gods want you to cease doing what you do for a living and move to a new occupation in another field.

The severed head that still utters words foretells news of a promise that will reach you far too late in life.

The bull pitted against you, and the half human monster, are both bad omens. You are in great danger. Their fatal struggle signifies that you may not escape.

Your dreams are full of death. You see yourself dying. An excellent omen. You are destined to live to a ripe old age."

I thanked the priest, of course. As he was taking his leave I ventured to mention the real purpose of my pilgrimage. When he learnt that I came to enquire about the nature of dreams in general, that I wanted to possess their secret myself, the man became agitated. His voice and manner acquired a hostile edge as he dismissed me with a speech that must have been well rehearsed.

"We are professionals. Apprenticed for seven years, on probation for another seven, we study endless scripts and learn the variety of gestures and faces of men. That is why we are mandated by God to intervene between the dreamer and what he dreamt. Do you really think that all our knowledge, wisdom and craft can be gifted to you in the blink of an eye? I do not know how dreams are dealt with in your land but here they are a serious industry. Hardly a man is untroubled by dreams, at one time or other, in his life and where do you think they all go for help? As you see, thousands flock to our shrines and there would be thousands more if they could but afford the price. We were the first to uncover the truth, the first to understand the secret messages of the night, the first to provide temples where the right kind of dreams could be dreamt. We were the first and are still the best, whatever our Babylonian colleagues spin with their biased scribes.

Why don't you try Deir el-Medina or, better still, the library of Kenhirkhopeshef. Read the Dream Book for yourself. It is dated of course, the text is positively ancient, but it may be of some help to a rank beginner like yourself".

I did have a go at the Dream Book. That the gods could see right into the hearts of men and commune with them personally, I found not at all strange. That men of learning sat down seriously to compile dreams they considered mainstream and they spent their life classifying occurrences, activities and emotions that were most common, I thought admirable. The omens, good or bad, was to me of no real interest since events in my life turned out to be less stark, neither wholly one nor wholly the other. The recommended spells, to be recited whilst eating fresh bread, I dismissed as of no consequence. Even though the custom has survived to this day and is still popular with pious people of differing faiths.

Fragment 3

Still in Egypt, with Joseph

Reminded of faiths, I sought next to interview one of my more distinguished forefathers, the man whose spectacular career was founded on dreams. It was not easy to gain access to Joseph, the son of Jacob, son of Isaac, son of Abraham, now the ruler of the land of the Nile and way beyond. Claiming direct descent and kinship of blood, I did eventually get past dozens of gatekeepers, secretaries and counsellors before being ushered into the presence of the great man himself.

A somewhat corpulent Joseph, securely enthroned in his comfort zone, greeted me with suspicion: "I do not like giving interviews to people who write stories about me afterwards, especially without having the final say on any published text. Whatever I tell you, if I tell you anything at all, is for your ears alone. Is that understood?"

I gave my word to Joseph but I had no intention of keeping it. Once his tongue was loosened, his speech was fluent, he needed no prodding. Being intolerably vain from birth, he was in the habit of boasting and all I had to do was listen and take note.

"No doubt you are curious about all that business of Pharaoh's dreams. Everyone marvels at just how well I understood them and how wonderfully they foretold the future. In truth, their meaning should have been obvious to anyone schooled in dream analysis. Numbers usually refer to time, so the seven cows and seven ears of corn had to measure days, weeks, months or years. But since the cows emerged from the Nile, a river whose fluctuations determines whether we eat or starve, the answer simply cries out. That the Nile, the cows, the corn have all to do with our food supply is blindingly obvious. So why did none of the priests, all so expert in divining dreams, spell out the simple truth? Ah, my friend, none of them dared to put their reputation, perhaps their head, on the line. I, a prisoner, had nothing to lose.

Besides, do not forget that the season's inundation has always been the foremost concern in everyone's mind. Expectations were immense. What is more natural then that the Pharaoh should be exercised at night with the burning issues of the day? Do not events of our daily lives furnish the material for all our dreams?

At the time. I didn't know much about the cyclical nature of the rise and fall of the waters of the Nile. I didn't need to. The Pharaoh and his advisers knew enough. The measurements went back hundreds of years and records were meticulously kept. They had a good idea of what was to come, they just did not know they knew.

Besides, the seven years of plenty were not each exactly plentiful, nor the seven years of famine equally severe. Only I had full access to the accounts, so the figures published were rounded up…or down…in rough conformity with the omens of the dreams. So you see, divining the dreams was not all that extraordinary. Of much greater moment was taking over the government of a world power, nationalising a fifth of its land, exacting a fifth of all its produce, creating a bureaucracy to extend central power and entrench government control. That was indeed an exceptional achievement by any count and I am very proud of it."

I could not but agree with Joseph, just did not much like the smug expression on his face. I raised the delicate matter of Potiphar's wife, hoping it might wipe off that silly grin and lower the triumphant tone. He raised his eyebrows but, unembarrassed, continued much in the same vein.

"You should not believe all the stories that circulate around prominent men. Gossip distorts and exaggerates. She did not pursue me, she never tried to grab me, she didn't need to. Young, curvaceous, undulating in movement with a husky voice, she was difficult to resist. The accusations about rape were of course nonsense but caught in a compromising situation what else could she say? It also suited Potiphar; a captain of the guard isn't much of a man if he cannot even satisfy his wife. In fact the whole household was delighted to get rid of an unwholesome foreigner, a Hebrew to boot.

Anyway, I cannot complain, prison was the making of me. All those suffering men, the fear, despair, all that hope, and the dreams that sprung from them, for someone perfecting his profession, was paradise. The baker and the wine steward was just the start. Virtually all the prisoners, guards, officers brought to me the outpourings of their disturbed nights. Every morning a queue formed itself outside my cell. One by one troubled men told me their tale and listened in awe to the verdict of my God. A captive audience, you might say, on which to hone my skills. The divining of dreams can never by a science; it will always remain an art. An art that needs a God given gift but also demands unremitting years of boring, repetitive practice. Dream talent I had at birth, prison gave me the practice. By the time Pharaoh summoned me, I was more than ready."

As I was keen to learn about his childhood dreams, the ones that nearly cost his life, I enquired as to the well being of his family, politely of course.

"Oh, they are quite well, thank you. My parents died of old age some years ago and as for my brothers, I do not see a great deal of them. Being Hebrew is something of an embarrassment, especially when it comes to meals. And then we cannot altogether dismiss what has taken place between us in an ever present

past. When a relation decided to kill you once, family ties could never really be the same again.

Our family troubles go way back, long before I was sold into slavery. This business of the first born is over rated. It has always been a source of strife. Their rights, their expectations are set sky high, no wonder that in some places, among some people, those born first merely serve as a sacrifice. My father cheated my uncle out of his birthright and so had to migrate to another land. I was far down the ladder, the seventh son if you discount those born of servant stock; my only hope was to dream up an altogether different course. As I was not my father's first born, I had to be the one my father loved foremost. Jacob's love was never easy to be had; it took a thousand mischievous smiles, endless little flatteries, unfailing attention to boring, oft recounted memories, to become the apple of his eye.

Of course, to gain my father's heart was nowhere near enough. To have a multi-coloured coat and the envy of my brothers was great but what I really needed was their acknowledgement, their respect, their wholehearted subservience. I could have regaled the family with tales of my overarching ambition till the cows came home but what would it have served? They would have just laughed, and teased, and tormented me to tears. They could do no such thing with dreams. For, as I am sure you are aware; dreams are in the gift of God. The sun, the moon and eleven stars bowing down before me, you can't aim higher than that. You have to take it seriously. And the family did. So seriously that it nearly cost my life.

I don't want you to get the impression that a given dream may be ordered to be neatly delivered the following night. A dream is not a dream if it is rehearsed in daytime. You may pray and pray again and nothing will happen. You may long for good omens and be given ones full of menace. You may fear ominous signs of coming pain, death and disaster, only to end up with the fruits of your heart's desire. But then, for us, the very few who are in close touch with God, our dreams are not quite so unexpected. Even if we do not have our prayers answered in the light of day, they will resonate in the course of the night. Even as a child I knew how to dream. I have always been a natural dreamer."

I was about to introduce Joseph my dreams. He stopped me in my tracks. In his exalted position he wanted to have nothing more to do with dreams, his or those of others. Having conclusively retired from the business, he dismissed me, my dreams, my quest, without any regrets whatsoever.

Fragment 4

In Greece, with Socrates, Aristotle and the god Asclepius

Thus rebuffed, I left Egypt and sought the company of men who made thinking their profession and thus conceived an enduring race of philosophers. I looked in on Heraclitus who, as always, was in a state of flux, busy transforming himself with no respite, without pause. I could not pin him down to attend to any of my dreams. He did say, whilst passing from one state of being into another, that dreams were a private matter, to be settled between me and myself. His fleeting remark made me reflect and on reflection I came to the conclusion that he may well have been right.

I could not ignore Socrates, of course. All roads crossed his path, a path that did not lead anywhere in particular. We walked along it, side by side, old friends to all appearances, chewing the cud. He quizzed me on the matter in hand, in his inimitable style, to demonstrate how little either of us knew about the substance of dreams. If we had doubts about what we see or touch in the daytime, if what we consider reality is akin to a dream, the dream itself must be more ephemeral still and thus further removed from the truth.

I summoned the much beloved Homer and quoted Penelope's famous dream about her twenty geese feeding out of a trough with the great eagle swooping down the mountain to kill them one and all. Did she not say "…dreams are very curious and unaccountable things, and they do not by any means invariably come true. There are two gates through which these unsubstantial fancies proceed; the one is of horn, and the other of ivory. Those that come through the gate of ivory are fatuous, but those from the gate of horn mean something"? Was not Odysseus the murderous eagle and did he not kill off twenty sponging suitors in his house? I maintained that if we separate the meaningful from the meaningless we cannot just dismiss in one breath the lot. I even reminded Socrates of his own recurring dream, directing him to take up music and the arts. He took that seriously enough, so why not include dreams in our quest for knowledge, our reach for the truth?

All to no avail, you can never win an argument with Socrates, he has always been the most exasperating of men. Professing to be humble, he proceeds to make every one doubt the obvious whilst appearing invariably and irritatingly right. And after the killing he made on the price of olives, anticipating an exceptional harvest, his disguised arrogance knew no bounds. On top of that he was suspicious. He insisted on never writing anything down and disapproved of pupils taking notes. Pointing to young Plato, ever lurking with paper and pen, he warned of the danger posed by ideas conserved and transmitted in the abstract, beyond the place of their birth. You

understand of course, he said, that Truth, Right, Freedom, and such like, in the hand of over ambitious men, destroys a civilisation with greater ease than any weapon of war.

Worshipper of Reason at the expense of every other faculty, I did not bother to ask his help with my dreams, leaving long before his oh so rational approach got him into serious trouble with the local authorities.

On his advice I skipped Plato's Academy and made my way straight to the King of Classification, ruling single handed an empire of Filed Facts. I found Aristotle absorbed in filing and cross filing, referencing, defining, redefining and identifying any and every separate thing under the sun. Each type of rock, plant, bush, tree, flower, insect, fish, bird, mammal, human artefact, perception, affection, conception, quantity and quality, all branches of knowledge, were there under numerous headings, all crowding each other in the confines of a relatively boring space.

"Dreams?" Aristotle asked, getting at once down to business, *"dreams ?, dreams? They gave me a lot of bother, I seem to remember. In the space for knowledge I have, as you can see, only two rooms: in the one I keep all that relates to sense perception; in the other, all that belongs to the faculty of intelligence. The trouble is that dreams do not fit in either. Plainly we cannot see with our eyes shut yet dreams are made up mostly of sights. At the same time, whilst we appear to form opinions and reason we have no way to ascertain these opinions and reasoning in our dreams to be true or false. In such difficulties we have to stop thinking and practice a little bit of science. Science, in any case, young man, is where the future lies. The philosophies of Socrates, Plato and the Sophists had their day, they are obsolete, past it, gone."*

Apart from addressing me in my seventies as a "young man", I thought he was a little harsh on his erstwhile teachers and expected far too much from what he called "science". But I kept my peace as Aristotle went on: *We can best understand the nature of the dream by looking at the circumstances attending sleep. As I have so often explained, what matters is the cause. Causes are everywhere. Everything and everyone has a cause or, better still, at least four causes. I shall not trouble you with first causes, last causes or any of the others, but the thing is they must all be linked into one long chain; one state causing another state and that causing yet another and so on and so forth. Once you know what causes what, you have it all, that is true knowledge. So what makes for dreams? Well, whilst you are awake you have vast quantities of sense perceptions. But what you have seen does not altogether disappear once out sight. It lurks on in the eye. It is captured and retained, however feebly, for some time. When you are asleep, with the faculties of reflection and opinion relaxed, these impressions are no longer organised into a rational view but are set free and allowed to roam and mingle with each other in the manner of cloud shapes in their rapid transformation now resemble men and shortly thereafter donkeys. There is, of course, more to it than that but in essence dreams are the by-product of impressions registered in the daytime, you might say, the unfinished business of the previous day. The answer is all there in a brief treatise I wrote on the subject a few years ago. It was*

well received as far as I remember, why don't you buy a copy, surely a man in your position can afford it.

I took leave of Aristotle with due politeness but I had no intention on acquiring a copy of his well publicised treatise. On first sight his observations showed some insight and I could see the attraction his views for those with a scientific bent of mind. Yet as for my dreams, and the questions I wanted answered, he could not help.

From Athens my quest took me to Pergamun since of all the sites devoted to the worship of Asclepius, it was the most venerable one. I thought meeting the servants of a God to be reached only through dreams may alleviate my pitiful ignorance. Passing the boundary stones of the sacred grove where no men die and no women bear children, I came to the statue of a God roughly half the size of the Olympian Zeus I just left behind. Of pure ivory and gold, the enthroned figure, with his left hand over a serpent's head and a dog at his feet, looked me straight in the eye. The richly carved throne depicted the deeds of legendary heroes, among them Perseus taking the head of Medusa. Still in the sacred precinct, I was guided along large slabs of stone recording the umpteen cures wrought about by Asclepius with the names and addresses of the patients healed. It was not easy to read the inscriptions since every vertical surface was covered with replicas of body-parts cured. They were offered as votives in gratitude or prayer. For myself, I thought such blatant advertising was over the top but the local priests entertained no doubt as to its efficacy.

Without further ado I was ushered into an adjoining building, hewn from pure white stone, and commanded to observe a strict silence whilst attempting to fall asleep. Sleep however did not come easy. Apart from the scattered bodies of complete strangers fidgeting about, the sounds of slithering snakes and barking dogs kept me awake for half the night. The snakes belonged to the God, of course, and were untouchable. As they shed and renewed their skin every spring, so was Asclepius supposed to restore health and rejuvenate body and mind. Why the dogs enjoyed their exalted status I never found out. On waking up shortly after dawn, the man lying on my left introduced himself formally to me. He was no less than Aelius Aristides, one of the greatest orators of the age who, most unfortunately, found it virtually impossible to speak. This promising scion of a prominent family from Smyrna, at a critical stage of his career, when on the way to dazzle all Rome with his talented tongue, was struck down with a strange affliction of mouth, throat and lung. His gums were infected with teeth falling out, his breathing became laboured, and as his windpipe was blocked, he choked on his food. Having scoured the medical world of Asia Minor without finding relief, in a final attempt to find salvation, Aristides came here to throw himself at the mercy of this God.

I was surprised that he was still in Pergamun since I believed him to be either cured or dead. Seeing him as a permanent resident amidst such a religious community was a surprise. At the same time, I welcomed the opportunity to meet face to face with a man of great intelligence who made dreams his lifetime's work. Perhaps, I thought, he could shed some light on the obscure matters that occupied my mind.

Aristides explained: *When I first put a foot on this sacred ground, when I first laid my head down at night to await the arrival of Asclepius, I hoped he would tell me what needs be done and all my ailments would suddenly retire to the darker domains of unpleasant memory. Well, it was not quite as simple as that, but than what is? The God did come to me in my dream and he did tell me clearly what to do and I was healed not once, not twice, but every single time I dreamt here in this place and adhered strictly to the imperatives of the dream. I walked barefoot on icy roads, dived into wintry rivers, puked on demand and ate outlandish dishes, starved and exercised, exercised and starved and each time I obeyed the injunctions of the dream, I felt relief, warmth, harmony and renewed strength to keep going.*

Interrupting a flow that threatened to become an oration, I asked a simple question: if Asclepius was such a magnificent God, if he was so readily accessible, if the dreams were so therapeutic, if the healing was so spectacularly successful, how come his most fervent devotee, Aristides himself, was still here, a mind and body assailed by a wonderful array of recurring disease and haunting infirmities?

Aristides shook his head, swaying it repeatedly right to left, left to right. *It is a good question but I am not at all sure you'll understand the answer. You are a stranger, been here barely for one night with not a single sacred dream to your name. Many, many thousands of pilgrims, over hundreds of years, passed by here once or twice in their life, dreamt on till they met the God and then departed in perfect health. My case is not an ordinary one. It is unique. Asclepius singled me out. He anointed me as his official scribe, bidding me to record not only my own dreams but any others I thought significant. More than that, he made the state of my body the very embodiment of his sacred cult. That meant, of course, the endless metamorphosis of my highly valued ailments and treasured infirmities. I am ill, I dream, I heal and keep becoming ill. Does this make sense to you?*

Without waiting for a response, Aristides lectured on: *Why did Asclepius chose me to exemplify himself? You can never be sure why Gods do this or that but my great oratorical skills and the extraordinary fragility of my body must have counted a great deal. You seem sceptical. It is not your fault, you were probably brought up in a faithless age, an age that lost the faculty of believing without some sort of proof. They say 'seeing is believing' but when a thing is there to be seen by every Tom, Dick and Harry, who needs belief?! The whole point is that the God comes to each one of us separately and only in the darkness of the night, only in our dreams and only here in this sacred place. He knows well each supplicant, takes note of his particular troubles and speaks to him face to face, with the secret remedies whispered into his ear alone.*

I tried to protest, I said I had open mind, wanted to learn all I could and was indeed keen to have a serious discussion on the significance of dreams. Aristides, being an orator, went on in the same vein, not in the least interested in any dialogues. I*n my dreams I often see a statue of myself in the sacred ground which then becomes the statue of Asclepius himself only to turn once again into a self that resembles me, one that I may, or may not, become. And all these statues of the God and the various versions of*

me come alive and talk to me in a language we all understand and when I wake I know what I did not know before I went to sleep. I worship a living God, I worship and fall asleep, I fall asleep and dream, I dream and am in touch, I am in touch and find myself transformed. This is the significance of dreams, at least for those of us who have not entirely forgotten how to believe.

I was not overly impressed at Pergamun by the manifold cures of a rich variety of human ailments, the clever use of dreams in the treatment of diseases. All these I expected given its world wide reputation and the obvious popularity it enjoyed over four or five centuries. What was remarkable was the immediacy and directness of the dreams, tailor made for each and every individual, requiring only a minimum of interpretation by professionals. They were private, a matter to be settled between the supplicant and his God. Irrespective of its therapeutic value, the Asclepuvian dream was essentially a dialogue between the pilgrim and his dreaming soul facilitated by the most accommodating of Gods.

On my way out of the precinct, Aristides caught my arm and wouldn't let go before I promised to take on board this urgent warning: "*I hope you are not heading for Ephesus but wherever you go, avoid at all cost that dreadful charlatan, that pretentious fool, that prize ignoramus, who professes to be a dream expert, claiming possession of the largest, the most varied, the rarest and best conserved dreams in the world. You may have heard his name mentioned for he misses no opportunity to plug the one book he ever published. Its ridiculous title is 'Oneirocritica' and he goes by the name of Artemidorus. With his sharp pencil he recordsd dreams promiscuously from all comers: slaves, jail birds, tax collectors, athletes, noblemen, plutocrats, brothel keepers, artisans, seamen, soldiers, knights, even sophists and orators. He has covered the ground from Asia Minor, through Greece, Italy, the Mediterranean islands to god knows where, calling in on religious feasts and games, scribbling down whatever anybody chose to tell him. As all most dreamers want to know is what their dream foretell, his voluminous manuscript is filled with boring lists of everything under the sun. The penis, for example, corresponds to parents because it relates to the seed. It resembles children because it is the cause of children. It signifies a wife or a mistress since it is made to fuck them. It indicates blood relatives since relationships within the household depend on the penis. It stands for strength and vigour for obvious reasons. It is a sign of wealth since it expands and contracts. This ubiquitous organ may refer to secret plans, poverty, servitude, bonds or whatever. Is this for real?"*

I mentioned, however diffidently, that simple objects and events might, just might, stand for other, more interesting things and events, at least more relevant to our future. With a dismissive wave of the hand my intervention was brushed aside as Aristides carried on: *Its worse than that. The dreams themselves are classified, micro-classified and inter-classified into over a hundred different permutations. A dream may be meaningful or useless, concern the dreamer only or many others, it may have one image with many meanings or many images with a single message, it could be a good omen or a bad one or a succession of both, and so on and so forth. In any case the whole*

theory rests on comparing the meaning of dreams with the events they were supposed to predict after they actually took place. It is about as much use as explaining a good crop after the harvest when what you really need is knowing the outcome before the first seeds are sown. Believe me, Artemidorus is a waste of space. His book is long, expensive and dreadfully tedious. Dreams are far too important to be left in human hands. Their inspiration is divine. You need a God to teach you how to dream. I have Asclepius, you have to find your own."

Fragment 5

In the desert with St Jerome

At the first crossroad on the way out of Pergamum I paused for a moment. A well crafted wooden bench afforded comfort enough to allow me gather my thoughts. I felt my searches thus far had not been a waste of time. I always knew, of course, that dreams fascinated man throughout the ages, but I never realized that ancient civilisations had taken the business of dreams seriously enough to generate a host of professionals, cults, temples and shrines, let aside academics and specialist authors, all devoted to the mystifying and demystifying our nocturnal adventures. Nor did I expect the passionate controversies swirling around the whole subject of dreams in my lifetime, to have had such antecedents in antiquity. Practically every one everywhere had a different take on the subject, each one holding on grimly to his biased views.

The signpost at the crossroad gave me but two alternatives: venturing into the desert or taking the road to Rome. Rome had by far the greater appeal and it would have been my choice had I not remembered that in cultural matters Rome followed Athens. The Romans invented a wonderful civilisation. They organised an empire that dominated the world for many centuries. Their technological mastery and superb military discipline was unmatched by their contemporaries. But they were essentially practical men, adept at building bridges, conquering lands and governing. They were long on rational thought, short on imagination. When it came to the ephemeral, elusive world of dreams, I could not hope to learn a great deal from them.

As all men of action, the Romans were highly superstitious. They considered dreams on a par with peculiar flight of birds, unexpected fall of masonry, the entrails of goats and significant dates in the calendar, like the Ides of March, as harbingers of omens. Whether malign or benign, omens were at the whim of magicians, soothsayers, witches and priests, all paid to interpret them. So I decided to forego meeting such luminaries as Plutarch, Virgil, Ovid, Macrobius and other practioners of note in the Latin tongue. They all had something to say on the subject, be it brief comments or extensive works, but nothing relevant to my search. The most famous text, "The Dream of Scipio", turned out to be no dream at all, merely a literary device employed by that loquacious lawyer-orator-author-senator-meddler in chief, the much lauded Cicero.

The desert itself promised nothing but scorching sun, arid landscape, scorpions and larger, more dangerous, wild beasts. I hoped my excursion would be brief since I had just one person in mind and he, after all, chose to live there for the sake of solitude. Locating Jerome was no big deal. Contrary to popular belief, he did not exactly inhabit the sand dunes or one of the dark mountainside caves. No human

can survive without a good supply of water for two years, not even a saint and, in any case, when I met him, Jerome had not yet been anointed by any of the popes. In a pleasant oasis, under the shadow of date-bearing palms, with no distracting haloes hovering over his head, we could discuss in peace the matter of dreams.

After a few preliminaries, each asking after the other's health, I came straight to the point. Was it true, I asked, that a single dream changed the course of his life? Jerome was lost in thought. When he began to speak his voice was hesitant, as if rusty from neglect. *"The dream you mention is the one that made all the headlines. But I have always been a prolific dreamer, almost never waking without traces of adventures that belong to the night. You know what I mean, being dead and buried, flying over the earth, carried over mountains and that sort of nonsense that all of us have experienced. The beggar will dream of riches, the thirsty of drinking water, the Christian widow, well fed, of the apostles, whatever. As a habit, we dream of what we fear and what we lack. These vain imaginings have more to do with digesting the remains of a late meal than with the erratic wandering of a soul in search of meanings".*

I repeated my question. Jerome turned his head and looked over his shoulder at the vast expanse of an ochre coloured landscape. His voice was weary with a tinge of sadness. *Very occasionally, an exceptional dream will make its appearance, so true, so incisive, so close to the core of the dreamer that, having dreamt it, he will never be the same again. Some men never dream, some dream in fits and starts. Those who are chosen to receive that singular dream, once in their lifetime, are few of the few, hand picked each one of them. I consider myself most fortunate to be one of them.*

Jerome then insisted on recounting the dream in detail although, being so widely publicised, I knew it by heart. In essence it amounted to this: Jerome was dragged up to a tribunal and arraigned before a judge. In being asked as to whom he was, he said he was a Christian. Whereupon the judge accused Jerome of lying, of being a follower of Cicero and lover of secular literature. As a liar and lover he was then flogged with great severity and at great length. Unable to stand the pain, Jerome cried out and begged for mercy. Those that were standing around fell on their knees and pleaded with the judge to take Jerome's youth into account and give him a last opportunity for penitence. Jerome grasped at the chance and swore a solemn oath to refrain from owning or reading any pagan writings. After being allowed to return to the upper world, on waking up, he felt bruises on his shoulders and saw the black and blue marks left on his body by the cruel whip.

Judging by his demeanour, it was obvious that the dream left a lasting impression on the man. He believed with profound simplicity that his nocturnal experience was real and the oath that he swore whilst dreaming to be sacred and binding. This is how he came to live here in the Syrian Desert. And it had not been easy to make the break. Not only was Jerome a lover of words, a rhetorician manqué, but also a most sensual man with a passion for the female, in all her erotic forms. He had to give up the entire canon of secular literature, the subtlety of Quintillion, the eloquence of Cicero, the smooth grace of Pliny and all the magnificent works that meant everything to him.

And, of course, he had to do without the society of desirable and available ladies who formed an adoring circle around his shining presence. Without doubt the solitary existence was a life changing sacrifice.

It has not been easy, Jerome switched to the confessional mode, *the scorching sun outside and the bubbling fires of lust within make for a deadly brew. They keep dancing shamelessly and tirelessly right in front of my eyes, and my nightly torments are worse than the visions of the day. The swaying mounds of juicy flesh, both soft and firm in equal measure, the undulating limbs, the gyrating hips, drive me mad. The female creature is by her very nature lewd and lascivious. She pursues me, asleep or awake, wherever I go, wherever I stay. This desert is not vast enough to let me escape. I must admit that I was close to giving up after many a sleepless night. You'll never guess what brought relief just in the nick of time. All these temptations, stirring the basest thoughts, were somehow linked to my mother tongue and the languages of my youth. To stand a chance, I had to throw myself into a completely unfamiliar, strange language and ditch the cultured, mellifluous sounds of Latin and Greek. Hebrew was ideal for my purpose: it is harsh, unsophisticated, with many guttural and hissing accents and none of its literature is profane. Studying the scripture in the original kept me well away from all that I had foresworn. Unfortunately, I had to employ a Jew as tutor although the one I found was a least a convert. Personally, I have nothing against the Jews, they are uncommonly clever and exceeding resourceful but they are a most obstinate race. It is no use telling them that everything now works on a global scale; trade, economy, law, finance, politics, travel and even language, for without Latin you cannot get anywhere. For a religion to have a future, it must be open, inclusive, empire wide. The Jews just don't want to understand. They want to reserve God to themselves, as a niche cult, so that if you happen to be born outside, you have no way in. How long can they survive"?*

This was a rhetorical question and in any case I did not wish to enlighten Jerome about the future, either that of the Jews or his own. He could hardly cope with being a monk, never mind a saint. I wanted to get back to the very first question but Jerome had something more to say. *He was very good, my teacher was. Patient, thoroughgoing, well versed in the scripture but then most Jews are. Learning Hebrew did not turn out to be quite the salvation I sought but that was certainly not his fault. As a matter of fact, it was his idea that I should translate the Bible into Latin. I had to start with the Greek text which was a shame but my Hebrew was simply not good enough. And more significantly, it was he who taught me the profound meaning of the Song of Songs. Quite frankly, until we went over every line of the original Hebrew, I used to dismiss this book as a piece of lovelorn poetry that got into the Old Testament by an editorial oversight. When the talk is about beautiful feet, joints of thighs that are like jewels, a navel like a round, wine filled goblet, a belly like a heap of wheat dotted with lilies and breasts like twins of young roe, it is not immediately apparent that it is about the yearning of the soul, reaching out to an invisible God."*

All that was quite interesting but did not have much to do with what I really wanted to know, what brought me all this way. Could a single dream change the course of

a life? This was Jerome's final response: *I could not swear that my renunciation of worldly matters depended on that dream alone. May be I would have done it at the end even without the striking message of the night. I had certainly thought a great deal about the secular and the divine in previous years. But the truth is that I was not able to find in myself the resolution to make the break. It was the clarity and the power of a dream that finally moved me to act.*

I left Jerome in the desert convinced by his own belief. It would have been pleasant to linger a little longer, discussing the finer points of the original Pentateuch, but the days were getting shorter and I still had a number of engagements to fulfil.

Fragment 6

In Cordoba at the heart of Islam

By the time I reached Cordoba it was evening, some six hundred years later. The streets were brightly lit, the sidewalk evenly paved, the people clean, finely dressed and civilised. There was no jostling, no begging, no garbage, no drunken ribaldry, no offensive stench. For a tenth century capital city, this struck me as quite remarkable. Seeking the Seat of Learning, I was guided, with great courtesy, to a spacious district adjacent to the incomparable Mesquita. The mosque soared on wings of visual poetry, to the very heart of Islam.

Here, where I least expected, I lost my way. In a city submerged in knowledge, with seventy libraries, a profusion of schools and highly specialised disciplines, there was no signpost pointing to the Faculty of Dreams. I skirted the Universe of Numbers where the world's leading mathematicians were busy inventing the science of Algebra. I by-passed a forest of telescopes, focused on refining the movement of the planets and improving the map of the stars. I could not avoid the extensive medical quarter, where physicians or great renown dissected a multitude of bodies for the benefit of students and mankind. The chief among them, Al-Zahrawi, had just completed his masterwork on Anatomy that would serve, I was told, as the textbook throughout the Middle Ages. He was very good on blood circulation but weak on dreams because they were not part of his curriculum.

From there it was just a step to the schools of Philosophy and Languages, peopled by exquisitely learned scholars and most assiduous scribes, translating the lost classics of Greece and Rome into Arabic. Having traversed the major quarters of what would be later termed a University, I felt tired and depressed. I decided to take a bath. I chose the nearest one of the 3,000 public ones available in a city addicted to cleansing, relaxation of the body and stimulation of the mind. The man lounging in the water next to me was circumcised but of fair complexion and blue eyes. He had to be of mixed blood, the offspring of an Arab father and a Christian mother from the North. Such marriages were trendy just then, giving Cordoba a cosmopolitan appearance not just in culture but in the physiognomy of the population as well.

As was local custom, we got talking about this and that. He was proud to tell me he was an academic with tenure, attached to various faculties in some multi-disciplined capacity. I told him of my preoccupation with dreams and the purpose of my visit: to learn what Islam had to say on the subject, hoping it would be of help in studying my own nocturnal life. Sadly, I confessed, having gone through all the faculties, it was disappointing to find no teachers of dreams. My floating neighbour observed that I must have been to all the wrong locations and missed the one that mattered: the School of Poetry.

'Why poetry, what does poetry have to do with dreams', I asked, taken by surprise. *Everything*, he calmly replied, *You obviously know nothing about Islam. Our sacred books are poems in themselves, the flow of our script is sheer poetry, our spoken language, our thoughts, our faith can only be understood in poetical terms. But, of course, dreams and poems are siblings, they have a common parentage and both are unfettered by the constraints of mundane reasoning. The School of Poetry is on the other side of the Mesquita, right next door to the architects. They share, in fact, some of the teachers. A pair of ancient palm trees guard the gate, you cannot miss it.*

I was received with genuine warmth there, notwithstanding that I was an infidel. The Umayyad caliphate of Al-Andalus was relatively tolerant towards Christians and Jews, provided they did not go on ranting about the Prophet in public. Anything like that would quickly be followed by a curved scimitar separating your head and body with a single stroke. In great comfort, reclining on ottomans, served with a drink that was remarkably reminiscent of tea, we whiled away a few pleasant hours without touching on the subject of dreams. The group of scholars in attendance were keen to learn my provenance whilst professing a most modest degree of knowledge of their own. 'Praise belongs to Allah, the Lord of the Universe and may Allah bless the most glorious of the Messengers, Muhammad, and his pure family and noble chosen companions'. Other blessings of this kind were rehearsed several times. Then, at long last we got down to business. This meant a day long lecture by a leading academic. This was its gist:

There are two kinds of dream: the true and the ordinary. The true ones are ascribed to Allah, the ordinary ones derive from Satan. Yet all dreams, true or false, are created by Allah. The true ones are created in the presence of an angel, the false ones are created in the presence of Satan. The true dream brings good news and warning. The other kind saddens or alarms and leads to temptation, betrayal and jealousy. To render such false dreams harmless, The Prophet commands his followers to conceal them and spit them out to the left side. The liar has mostly false dreams; the most truthful of people has the truest dreams.

It is best to interpret dreams in the morning when memory and understanding are not yet dispersed into the daily worries and desires. The interpreter needs to be familiar with the traditions of the Prophet, commonplace metaphors, poetry, the etymology and meaning of words and, above all, with the nature and particular fortunes of the dreamer. For the very same dream may have a different meaning for different people. A pomegranate may refer to a village that the Sultan seizes or a city he rules; the rind is its walls and seeds are its people. It may signify a house for a merchant or his ship full of people in the middle of the sea. But, equally, it could be a book, even the Qur'an, to a scholar; the rind being the pages and the seeds its wisdom. For a widower it may foreshadow a wife with beauty and riches whilst for a pregnant woman it refers to a girl concealed in her womb; the red juices of the fruit nourishing the life blood of the unborn child.

But still the greatest insight is provided by metaphor: a lemon clearly refers to a hypocrite because the sweet promise of the appearance is in direct contrast with the sour taste of its inside.

Therefore the interpreter has to have intelligence and must fear Allah. He should know the shipping times, the ebb and flow of the tides, the customs of the city and what is native to it. He must be well versed in the language, sensitive to its nuances and colloquial expressions. For a falcon flying in a dream translates to a man of courage for the saying is "He is a falcon among men". A long hand in the dream indicates charity since the saying goes "he has longer hand than you". Then dream events could predict their opposites: weeping means joy, laughter means sorrow. When a sick man dreams he is healthy enough to leave his home, he will die.

The principles of dreams consist of categories, types and natures. The category is like trees, wild beasts and birds. All of these are generally men. The types refer to the species of the tree, wild beast and bird. If the tree is a date palm that is an Arab man since most dates flourish in Arab lands. If the bird is a peacock, it is a Persian. If it is a male ostrich, it is a Bedouin.

You penetrate into the understanding of the dream by three types of knowledge. The first is basic principles, their meanings, their differences, their strengths and weaknesses in good or evil. The second type is the connection of the principles to each other so as to extract the substance whilst discarding the trivial, the whims and sorrows implanted by Satan. The third type is the intensity of the investigation, delving into what is not immediately evident and relying on the exact words of the dreamer. This is the science of dream interpretation.

Do not present your opinion until you have investigated all the dream's aspects. If you refine and purify the dream from superficial intrusions, doubts and padding, you will find what is sound, straight and agrees with the wisdom of the interpretation.

If a dream reveals a grave fault in the dreamer, do not rub his nose in it. Do not tell anyone else about the man and his fault, it should remain a secret between the dreamer and you.

None of the ancient principles of the dream have changed. Only the people, their aspirations, manners and preferences have altered. Previously that aspiration was their deen rather than this worldly life, now their preference is for this world, for possessions and affluence. This is not the case for the people of the deen.

The Companions of the Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, saw dates and interpreted them as sweetness of the deen. They saw honey and

it meant for them the exquisite recitation of Qu'ran, the joy of knowledge and the enchantment of piety.

At the end of the lecture, at dusk, I was ushered out of the school into a side street teeming with humanity. My usher was kind, lively and blessed with a loose tongue. He found the scholars punctilious, boring and of little practical use. They never even mentioned the kind of dream in which neither Allah nor the Satan featured, but wherein the dreamer was in communion with himself. In any case, they were merely regurgitating the work of the master: Muhammad Ibn Sirin, the foremost practioner of the art. That is why what he wrote in Baghdad two centuries earlier was still the text book on dreams. But he did not interpret dreams wholesale; mostly he confessed his ignorance, pronouncing on no more than one in forty. When a dream was brought to him, he pondered it for a long time, asking the dreamer about his state, his work, his people, his livelihood and what linked the answers to all these questions. He did not omit anything. He drew conclusions from that and used it for his client and in the pursuit of science. Bowing to bid me farewell, the usher reminded me that the whole of the Qu'ran was given to the Prophet by the angel Gabriel in a dream.

Fragment 7

In Cordoba with the Jews

Waiting two more centuries for Maimonides, I used the time to consult the great Rabbis of Cordoba. The Jews have always claimed to understand everything; they would surely have something to say on the subject of dreams. The city was full of Jews. They were entrenched and prosperous. That meant a great number synagogues and sundry seats of learning, each equipped with at least one rabbi. *Yeshivot*, as these seats of learning were appropriately named since the literal meaning of the Hebrew word was 'the place where you sit', abounded in Cordoba. Students, dispersed at random, sat loosely grouped around tables loaded with immense books open on pages finger-rubbed over many centuries. The volume of sound fluctuated from whispered insinuations to a cacophony of categorical assertions raised in vehement argument. Each student appeared to be both part of the group seated at his table and immersed in his own sea of words. The sounds, soft or harsh, were accompanied by a continuous movement: bodies rocking to and fro, arms sweeping in wide arcs, hands gesticulating vigorously. The scene did not resemble the ordered academic world of teacher, pupil or tuition. Standing there for a day or two, I could not make head nor tail of it.

On the third day in August Rabbi took pity on me. His white beard disappeared under our smallish table situated in one of the quieter corners of the hall. First he apologised for not being a dream interpreter. That was a profession in itself and although some rabbis did occasionally have a go, he was not one of them. So I have refrained from recounting my dreams and listened attentively to what he kindly offered to impart. This amounted to a series of quotations, some of them recited by heart, others read out from the substantial tomes crowding the tabletop. The list of these quotations was exceeding long. It took the best part of a week to get through them and still more would have been forthcoming had it not been for the Sabbath. What I retained was a paltry selection of what had been a lavish feast.

Rab Judah also said that there are three things for which one should pray: a good king, a good year and a good dream

Rab Hisda also said: a dream that is not interpreted is like a letter that is not read. Neither a good dream nor a bad dream is ever wholly fulfilled.

The truth is, said Rab Johanan, that just as wheat cannot be without straw so no dream can be without some nonsense.

Rab Ze'ira said: if a man goes seven days without a dream he is called evil. He sees, but he does not remember what he has seen.

When Samuel had a bad dream, he used to say, the dream speaks falsely. When he had a good dream, he used to say, does the dream speak falsely? Raba pointed out the contradiction but there is no contradiction for in the one case the dream is imparted through an angel, in the other through a demon.

Rab Bizna said in the name of Rab Akiba who had it from Rab Padna who had it from Rab Nahum who had it from Rab Biryam reporting Rab Bana'ah saying: There were twenty-four interpreters of dream in Jerusalem. Once I dreamt a dream and went round to all of them and they all gave different interpretations and they were all fulfilled, thus confirming that all dreams follow the mouth.

Rab Johanan also said, three kinds of dream are fulfilled: an early morning dream, a dream that a friend has about the dreamer and a dream that is interpreted in midst of a dream.

Rab Samuel ben Nahmani said, a man is shown in a dream only what is suggested by his own thoughts.

A certain Min said to Rab Ishmael: I saw myself in a dream pouring oil on olives. The Rab replied: you have outraged your mother. Then Min said: I dreamt that my eyes were kissing each other. The Rab replied: you have outraged your sister.

If one dreams that he has sex with his mother, he may expect to obtain understanding, since it says, Yea, thou wilt call understanding "mother". If one dreams of having sex with his sister, he may expect to obtain wisdom, since it says, Say to wisdom, thou art my sister.

All kinds of beasts are a good sign in a dream except the elephant, the monkey and the long-tailed ape. But a Master remarked that seeing an elephant brings a miracle. There is no contradiction for it depends whether the elephant is saddled or not.

At the end of the week, the Rabbi must have read the utter bewilderment on my face for he did his best to comfort me: *You came here seeking the truth, my son, a truth plain and simple. This is not the place for that kind of truth, we are not dealing here in what is quick and easy. The truth, the whole truth, is in the Torah. But you have to learn to it and this learning takes many lifetimes. Our people have been at it for a thousand years and have yet to unveil the truth. I doubt if we ever will. We live here to learn and learn here to live. Learning the Torah leads to more learning, never*

to final answers. Even such tentative answers as our greatest sages committed to paper are always anchored in the original text. Nothing is ever excised, not a coma is ever altered. Whatever was written and sealed first and whatever was written and sealed over and above that and whatever was written and sealed a third time, merely serves to find meanings unconsidered before. Meaning upon meaning, truth upon truth, world without end.

As the sun was setting on that Friday I accompanied the Rabbi to his synagogue. Walking side by side we had further words: *I am sorry that you are disappointed but at least you are not going away empty handed. There are one or two clues for you to take home. For example, that interpretation matters more than the dream itself; that sense and nonsense are equally the stuff of dreams; that not to have dreams is to neglect, at one's peril, what has been revealed; that events and thoughts of the preceding day are likely to intrude into visions of the night; that words associate with words and phrases link to phrases at night in ways forbidden in daytime; that finding contradictions within the Torah is significant because they are but two facets of the very same thing.*

At the door of the synagogue the kind rabbi embraced me and bade farewell with these striking words: *When something is hard to understand, try to tell yourself a simple story.*

Awaiting the birth of Maimonides, I tarried in Cordoba pondering the wisdom of the Jews. A measure of scepticism and a dose of common sense never did any harm. Their emphasis on interpretation was way over the top but understandable with people who spent a thousand years interpreting.

It was, however, the overt, almost casual, introduction of incest that preoccupied my thoughts. I had not imagined mothers and sisters as physically desirable even if only in dreams. And I took years to see the blindingly obvious link of intimate family relations to understanding and wisdom. Olives produce oil, so pouring oil on olives is like returning to the womb whence you came in the first place: one of the profound of life's many secrets.

Lost in such speculations I completely missed the arrival of Maimonides. By the time I have recovered my senses he was gone. I had to follow his trail to Morocco, then to Jerusalem, before catching up with him in Cairo. Getting hold of, perhaps, the most important medieval thinker proved something of a nightmare. Being in the service of a hypochondriac Sultan, his presence was required in the palace six days a week and an interminable flow of private patients left him with barely enough time to eat, sleep and study. The Sabbath was of course consecrated to prayer and religious instruction of a congregation that doted on every word that passed his lips. Such a regime left virtually no opening for me, a swift traveller in dreams. To make matters worse, Maimonides was not particularly interested in dreams. He was, however, passionate about prophets, prophesising and prophesies.

I spent many a day in a queue of inflicted people. Diagnosed, prescribed and ministered, they were despatched amidst wringing hands and grateful tears. I was obviously in the presence of a physician of genius but my turn never came since I was not ill. Driven to join the weekly Sabbath crowd I had to partake in one the most refined orgies of textual scholarship. No notes taken, nothing ever written down. Heads buried in ancient manuscripts, eyes harrowing acres of words cultivated line by sacred line, whispered questions followed by answers that raised more questions: such was the general scene. Maimonides was the only exception; he never asked a question and did not even look at any text. He knew every word of the corpus by heart and had the answers to questions as yet unasked.

If there is among you a prophet, I, the Lord, will make myself known unto him in a vision; in a dream will I speak to him. This quote from the twelfth chapter of the Fourth book of Moses, spoken in the mellifluent voice of the sage, caught my attention. It touched on what I came here to learn. Frustratingly we spent the rest of the day on the meaning of prophecy. Despite a common perception, the prophet was apparently not a wild eyed creature raving and ranting in poetic verses of doom. On the contrary, he was endowed with a fine intellect, was of exemplary morals and absolute faith, able to understand by divine intuition what reason alone could never attain. The degree of prophetic quality rested on three kinds of perfection: mental perfection acquired by training, perfection of the natural constitution of the imaginative faculty and moral perfection produced by the suppression of every thought of bodily pleasures and of every kind of foolish or evil ambition.

But, of course it wasn't as simple as that. An intellect confined to logic, lacking in imagination, only yields wise men and philosophers. Whilst imagination deprived of logic leaves us with politicians, diviners, charmers and men who have true dreams or do wonderful things by strange means and secret arts. A prophet must be endowed by logical and imaginative faculties in equal, and complementary, measure. He will have an intuition so strong that something assumed by him to be in existence, will be confirmed by reality to be so. He was talking about an intelligence untroubled by syllogism that went beyond premise, perception and inference.

And so, naturally, we came at last to God. For such extra curricular knowledge was within His province. He alone had the power to impart it to the select of his choice. The divine message to the prophets was revealed in visions and dreams. There was just one exception: Moses, the greatest of them all. He met God face to face, by private appointment, on the mountain top. And, by the way, this is why the commandments he brought down the mountain were the sacred font that inscribed the written testament and carried his name.

We were warned by the Master in no uncertain terms to ignore the general run of visions and dreams, visions and dreams that were composed of bits and pieces of our day-time lives. They lacked a divine inspiration, a revelation never bestowed on mortals of the ordinary kind.

I hung on to the coat tails of a fast departing Maimonides, badgering him all the way home to have a final word on the subject of dreams. A little exasperated, the great man once again resorted to a quotation: *'according to our sages the dream is the unripe fruit of prophesy'*. This saying set my mind in turbulence. Whilst I was wrestling with these intriguing words, Maimonides vanished leaving me, once again, alone.

Fragment 8

In Vienna with Freud

My subsequent travels through six centuries of spectacular cultures, in between the medieval and modern worlds, produced virtually nothing significant in the matter of dreams. It was not that people, in this period, were any less preoccupied by their dreams. On the contrary, they sought professional help, searched for meanings here, there and everywhere. But whilst both art and science reached unprecedented heights, no new light illuminated the darker moments of the night. And during most intense exploration of body and soul, nothing original was forthcoming in this period. This is why I found myself walking up the spacious staircase of 19 Berggasse in the ninth district of Vienna, at a time when Franz Joseph was still the emperor of an empire about to collapse. I was breathing fast in anticipation of meeting a revolutionary in the realm of dreams.

The waiting room of Dr Sigmund Freud was furnished generously in the fashionable fin de siecle style much beloved by the well to do Viennese. I took my seat on one of the velvet upholstered sofas ranged between the window and the dominant ceramic stove. Two unconnected ladies, suffering from different variants of hysteria, helped to oppress the circumstantial air. Avoiding each other's presence, we all gazed at the intricate geometric pattern of the fine parquet floor, constructed from three quite distinct types of imported wood.

My presence there was preceded by protracted negotiations conducted partly through a receptionist and partly by correspondence with the Professor himself. He insisted on my being a patient with a mental affliction before granting an interview. I failed to convince him that I brought my dreams for his attention with no other objective in mind. Eventually I gave in, made a regular appointment and paid the appropriate fee.

Having a year's analysis, I learnt, at some cost, that Doctor Freud was indeed a remarkable man. Few of his contemporaries could match his diagnostic insight, lateral thinking, original ideas, mastery of languages, communication skills or prodigious work rate. Having any one of these attributes would have sufficed unto itself, to possess them all made for potential greatness. And yet, additionally, Doctor Freud had presence, charisma and an air of authority, possessed only by the serene owners of the whole truth. This, of course, was not lost on his patients, helping both the healer and those about to be healed.

Religiously, at the same time each week, I lay on the couch as we perused the dreams I dreamt on the eve of each session. This was an exceeding laborious process since everything had to make daytime sense, everything had to fit. No word, no image, no event was too insignificant; there was to be nothing accidental, arbitrary or irrelevant

in my nightly excursions. As, on the face of it, most of the dream content seemed spurious, improbable, absurd and disconnected, the scope of each inquiry reached far beyond the brief remains of the night. In probing further and further I was enticed into chains associations the links which, as we all know, never end. Fortunately, the doctor knew precisely when to intrude into the state of my horizontal somnolence, to freeze the reveries with a precise word.

In this way, the dream that I recounted, paled into a remote shadow of itself. Looming large in the forefront an altogether different apparition took its place. For all intents I was the apparition's inevitable hero although its character was formed jointly by the good doctor and me. With becoming modesty he insisted that it was all my work, he having merely lent a helping hand. Not that it made any difference. What mattered was the emerging of a hero I scarcely knew, a portrait of myself I hardly recognised. I was reassured, however, by Doctor Freud that it was a true resemblance, a great work of art penetrating to the very depth of my soul. For in his scheme of things, behind every dream there was another one, entwined in the true meaning of the first. And behind every man visible to the eye, there was an invisible counterpart, more elemental, older than the first. Deciphering the dream, getting hold of its meaning, would bring within my reach the man hidden in the complexities of my adult life.

The year we spent together, me lying on a couch and the doctor seated at its head, was rich and rewarding. We went down the forgotten paths of my earliest childhood, encountered intimate relations long dead, explored the underground of distorted desire and uncovered the primal source of my elemental fears. We mapped the contours of my true ambition and logged the sad record of achievements never achieved. At the end of our sessions I felt more at peace with myself. Doctor Freud truly earned his demanding fees.

But, of course, to improve my health was not my aim. And in the matter of dreams, at least for me, Professor Freud was not a great help. This was understandable since as a professional healer, he needed dreams to diagnose the ailments of his patients and minister new salves to their bleeding wounds. All the same, I have to admit that he had some interesting notions. We discussed them at leisure because by the end of the year, with the treatment of my psyche complete, we were on friendly terms. I was permanently off the couch, seated comfortably on an adjacent armchair and we were on first name terms.

According to Sigmund we dreamt for a very good reason. From the very beginning of our lives our instincts were curtailed; our desires thwarted; our wishes repressed by those who had greater power; who controlled our actions, who brought civilisation to bear on our primal will. Simple things, like killing a father; like grabbing the alpha female; like doing away with superfluous siblings and unwanted rivals; like riding freely the waves of raw pleasure; were all denied. And later on, throughout our lives, the same selfish drives, albeit in more moderate form, went on being suppressed not just by the practicalities of social intercourse but even more so by our own civilised

good manners. These wishes, unfulfilled in daytime; unrealised in fact; unforgotten; were poised, impatiently waiting for the darkness of the night. And when sleep enveloped our senses, they surfaced triumphantly in our dreams.

Our talks never amounted to a dialogue. Sigmund expatiated on his ideas which were, on this and any other subject, pretty well fixed. Quite frankly, I could detect but few instances in any of my dreams a thoroughly repressed wish. At first sight, an explosion that never happens; a pig-like creature that reveals a human head; a miniscule child with talons on his feet; the collapsing branches of a massive tree that turn into gently floating paper shreds; a blond young man who severs his own head; have nothing much to do with thwarted desire. Sigmund smiled with a smile that pities the ignorant. Then he proceeded to impart the great secret in terms that even a child could understand.

The sentry that stands guard between the two selves, the one familiar, the other in the dark, is vigilant. Almost nothing is allowed to pass between them. In the daytime, whilst devoted to our immediate business, occasionally there is a little accident; a lapse of memory; an unintended gesture; a mistaken word; that escapes the guard. At night the sentry is less alert, but alert enough, at least to censor our dreams. The self lurking in the shadows has to employ the most fiendish guile to convey the forbidden thought, to express the inadmissible urge. Nothing is therefore what it seems. Everything is part of a secret message transmitted in an intricate code, devised for the purpose and altered at regular and irregular intervals, to confuse the censor's eyes.

Sigmund became quite animated in recounting example after example of how, in his experience, it all worked. Bare acquaintances could well be disguised parents, linked by tenuous association of names, of physical features, of occupations, or just a specific colour of skin. Similarly, one location could take the place of another; an imagined event could hark back to a long forgotten past. Objects could make their appearance in various shapes and sizes that are distorted versions of bits and pieces unseen, unheard and unmentioned in the civilised world. There are always two dreams: the one we recount that is mostly disjointed, bizarre, absurd, unlikely and unintelligible; and the second, the substantial dream full of meaning, coherent and reasonable, the dream that carries within it the perfect interpretation of the first. No single word, or event, is out of place or surplus to requirement. It is the convoluted passage from the actual dream to the real one that requires the guidance of an expert navigator. Sigmund stated, without a trace of embarrassment, that he was the first, the foremost, the very best of guides.

It was, by any yardage, fascinating stuff. I do not remember what impressed me most. Was it the discovery of the volcanic terrain of the vast unconscious? Or the tracing of early childhood experience that reappears to haunt the unguarded moments of our uneasy sleep; or the virtuoso performance in transposing the chaos of each and every dream into a lucid statement of unambiguous intent; or the meticulous handling of the detail to exact the appreciation of its full significance; or the creation of a discipline that defined the interpretation of dreams for decades to come; or the ability

to put into language the wealth of his insights, his lonely medical journey, his highly original thoughts? It was, perhaps, the sum of all these, their totality, that determined my admiration of the phenomenon we all have come to call simply 'Freud'.

On a number of occasions, as we sat side by side, I asked Sigmund some questions that preyed on my mind. How come the primitive child-based self was equipped to construe coded messages of such ingenuity as to confound the rational, analytic, sophisticated faculty of an adult mind? Can one not relate any two apparently unconnected things if the chain of associations is long enough? Dreams steeped in dread, anxiety and fear, what is their underlying wish? Do primitives, who repress so little, have any need to dream? And tribes, subject to taboos, do they break those taboos in their dreams? Why do all dreams need conform to one pattern? Why must everything in a dream be significant when no explanation of human intent or action, can ever be complete?

These questions, and some others, were left unanswered. Sigmund either dismissed them with an impatient wave of the hand or concocted answers unworthy of his intellect. He was wedded to a single set of closely knit ideas. All his research, experience and insights were used as supports of a unified theory. Shades of a monotheism inherited from his biblical ancestors, embedded in his genes, must have played a part. And this was a shame since he led the way to the subterranean world of childhood, an uncharted and unrecognised source of every adult life. In any case, all this was academic. Freud was a most distinguished embodiment in a long line of dream interpreters that stretched back, beyond pre-historical times. But it was not dream interpretation that brought me there. I was after the dream itself. Forever and ever people took it for granted that dreams had meaning. Where the mainstream turned into rivulets was the question of what this meaning was. I took nothing for granted. Be it a revelation from God, or a prediction, or a healing instrument, or an insight into the psyche, was all the same for me. It was not the interpretation; it was the dream itself that mattered to me.

Even so my sojourn in Vienna was by no means a complete waste. I was grateful therefore to Sigmund and said so when taking my leave. Freud was inquisitive as to my next destination and when I mentioned Zurich he became visibly agitated. It was obvious that my intention of getting in touch with Jung disturbed him. He spoke with some feeling of the brilliance of an erstwhile student, assistant, disciple and principal ally in the painful struggle against a medical and scientific establishment. They fought together to make psychoanalysis respectable. But the distinct trace of bitterness, of the kind confined to those who feel deeply betrayed, never left his lips. Carl had unfortunately gone dangerously astray. He warned me that listening to him would just confuse my enquiries. He insisted it would be better for me to stay well away. I had every intention to ignore this advice.

Fragment 9

In Switzerland with Jung

Leaving the much diminished capital of a collapsed multicultural empire, I headed from Vienna to a neutral Switzerland untroubled by an epic war that passed her by and oblivious to another that was waiting in the wings. I came to see the other great luminary of the age, one that professed to comprehend the arcane domain of dreams. He lived in a small village on board Lake Zurich. He named his house Kussnacht and affixed the following inscription over the gate: '*Volatus atque non volatus deus aderit*'

God, invited or not, had to be present in a house blessed by the kiss of the night. The first few times I approached the house Jung was absent. Apparently he was on his travels to explore the primitive tribes of the Pueblo Indians, or the Elogonies of Kenya, or the Moroccan Berbers or some other obscure community still in the grip of the collective Unconscious.

Persistence prevailed. I nailed him eventually on a fine Friday afternoon of a glorious summer month well before the gods of war unleashed their fury in yet another European conflagration. I knew at once the man was at home by a swarming colony of Jungfrau buzzing around the house. The ambiance provided a vivid contrast to the oppressive air of the Freudian premises I had left behind. The ladies were more talkative, the gossip louder and a sense of hopeful expectancy replaced that of individual hysteria. Fewer suffering Jews, but a plenitude of inquisitive souls, intent on cultivating their under nourished intellects.

Jung received me graciously. I was not even required to be a patient. Our meetings involved no money and no treatment. Aware from whence I came, he inquired warmly about Doctor Freud, his family, his state of health, his general well being. It was near twenty years since they had last seen each other. In the interim Jung had multiplied his own theories and the gulf between the two giants had expanded into an abyss. Nevertheless, throughout our invigorating sessions he was paying homage to Freud's work. After all, it was he who unveiled the Unconscious and endowed with meaning every single dream. The former acolyte stressed how profoundly he agreed with his mentor on the central role of dream interpretation in the healing of minds.

But Jung was never content being a mere psychologist. His mind was rich, restless, imaginative, with a bias to lateral thinking. His dream world moved on from that of a diagnostic tool used to try heal a single psyche. It encompassed fairy tales, poetry, art, religion, alchemy, the occult and, indeed, the entire culture of our convoluted race. The difficulty in my dealings with Jung was not just keeping pace with his breathtaking vision. I had to bring back often his rambling discourse to the events of the night. I found the man and his ideas utterly fascinating. So while he was in full flood, writing anything down was not an option. Fortunately, the copious notes taken

shortly after the end of our sessions, with impressions still vivid and memories fresh, helped me to retain a crude distillation of Jung's astonishing take on dreams. This is, the gist of what he believed:

The combination of ideas in dreams is essentially fantastic. They are linked together in striking contrast to our day-time, logical way of thinking. Dreams may appear meaningless but, as Freud empirically, and conclusively, demonstrated, they make perfect sense. Every psychic manifestation is the result of antecedent psychic content. The explanation of any dream must therefore be derived from preceding experiences of the dreamer. On the surface, this content is readily traceable to some actual experiences of the previous few days. But why does the dream echo one experience at the expense of a hundred others which are condemned to oblivion? Why does the opening of one nondescript door reverberate at night whilst many more distinguished doors remain undisturbed by the slumbering mind? To answer this question we have to dig a little deeper and discover the obscure network of associations the dreamer has with the door endowed with such significance. This means employing the method of free association created by the genius of Freud. This will establish the material that leads from the manifest dream to an altogether different story, a story that gives the dream its true meaning.

But we are still left with the question of what drives the dream in the first place, what are its psychological motives, why do we dream at all? And as every move has also a psychic source, as every impulse to act carries its own emotive force, what is the neglected need that creates this particular dream, at this precise time, in the mind of this highly individual dreamer? In resolving this overriding issue, Freud went dreadfully wrong.

He seized on the unfulfilled wish, of the denied desire, and never let go. The sexual urge may compete with thirst and hunger for sheer driving power but in terms of repression it is way out in front. This greatest taboo originates from the moment when its first object is a beloved parent. With incest at stake, its manifold tentacles are shrouded in the deepest realms of the unremembered past. In sleep, when the censor guarding the gates of the conscious are weakest, the forbidden winds its tortuous path into the awareness of a dormant mind. At the end of the day, in one form or another, according to Freud, dreams come down to this.

The Freudian analysis as to the cause of the dream is not incorrect. It is just insufficient to answer the more probing questions of what is the purpose of the dream and what effect is it meant to have? The interpretation of dreams merely as infantile wish-fulfilments fails to do justice to the essential nature of dreams. A dream, like every element in the psychic structure, is a resultant of the total psyche. Hence we may expect to find in dreams everything that has ever been of significance in the

life of humanity. Human life is not limited to this or that fundamental instinct, nor can the dream derive from a single element within it, however beguilingly simple such an explanation may seem. No one dimensional theory will ever be capable of encompassing the human psyche, that mighty and mysterious thing. The dream is equally immune to any reduction to one simple principle.

The thoughts, inclinations, and tendencies which in conscious life are little valued come spontaneously into action during the sleeping state, when the conscious process is virtually absent. The dream not only fails to obey our will but very often stands in flagrant opposition to our conscious intent. The opposition need not always be so marked; sometimes it is merely a slight deviation and occasionally it may even reinforce the original intent. In any case, since the conscious and the unconscious inhabit the same individual, they must relate to each other. The conscious takes the form of day-time deeds and thoughts, the unconscious finds expression in night-time dreams. The extensive practical study of individual psyches and their dreams, clearly demonstrates that dreams perform a compensating function to help the conscious and the unconscious maintain a balance between the intended and unintended manifestation of a single self. This psychological adjustment carries on irrespective of the dreamer's subsequent recollection, analysis or understanding of the dream. Of course, taking a serious interest in one's dreams over a long period of time, bring memories, insights and awaken dormant qualities of the personality. Thus it serves to enrich the dreamer's mental horizon.

Such a wide ranging approach carries a number of practical implications. Dream images still retain their symbolic potency but this is now drawn partly from personal childhood experience and partly from the communal culture of the human race. The unconscious thus becomes highly individual and wonderfully collective at one and the same time. A fountain may be associated with an incident of scolding by an anxious mother for one dreamer, but an exhilarating ride on a father's shoulder for another. Yet in both dreams the fountain carries, in addition, the same collective symbolic significance associated with youth, constant renewal, the font of life and other cultural icons of universal significance. This is why in interpreting dreams we must be familiar with the personal history, the circumstance and the immediate state of the mind of the individual. But, simultaneously, we must bear in mind the general potency of deeply entrenched cultural icons in art, worship, literature and alchemy, accumulated throughout man's incredible history.

To approach dreams in terms of balancing the psyche is not meant to lead to an exhaustive explanation of all their possible functions. The dream is an extraordinarily complicated phenomenon, just as unfathomable as the phenomenon of consciousness itself. Undoubtedly, in many cases the reductive imagery of the dream is predominant in its pitiless revelation of repressed infantile-sexual wishes

and most painful weaknesses of character. And yet, other dreams anticipate future achievements, something like preliminary sketches roughed out in advance. These prospective dreams do not necessarily foretell actual events to come, but having access to rich subliminal resources unavailable to conscious thought, they are surprisingly prescient.

Beyond dreams whose function may be primarily compensatory, reductive or prospective, there are those that merely reiterate, repeatedly, a major trauma suffered by the dreamer some time in the past. A wartime atrocity, a nasty accident, a particular scenario of public humiliation, any profound psychological shock is sufficient to haunt the victim with recurring night time visions that recall the horror but with ever diminishing intensity. On the other hand, there is nothing wrong with admitting that not all dreams are significant enough to merit interpretation. Often the content is concerned with a slight reorganisation of the business of yesterday or that of the morrow. Even primitives distinguished between 'little' and 'big' dreams. The insignificant ones are easily forgotten whilst those remembered for a lifetime sometime prove to be the richest jewel in the treasury of the psychic experience.

The most profound revelations of the night emerge from the collective unconscious since that is more distant from the ordinary day time activity of the dreamer. The imagery of such rare dreams tends to display a great poetic force and remarkable beauty. Here we meet dragons, demons, the Wise Old Man, the wishing tree, the hidden treasure, the cave, the walled garden, the gold derivatives of Alchemy, all enveloped in adventures, ordeals and heroic escapes.

Dreams also vary hugely in their form. The spectrum ranges from lightning impressions to well spun out narratives. Even so, there is a pattern that wholly or at least partly is common to most. The first phase, the Exposition, indicates the scene of action, the people involved and the initial situation of the dreamer. Something like 'I am at a railway station with my uncle; we are awaiting the arrival of a family friend'. In the second phase, the Development, a series of actions or events move the story from its first setting: like 'the train comes into the station with the family friend who is blind and is led by a guide dog'. The third phase, the Culmination, takes the story to a decisive moment when something changes completely: like 'suddenly, the guide dog turns into a ferocious beast and drags our friend into a restaurant nearby'. In the fourth phase, the Solution or Result, the story culminates in an event, action or realization with a sense of finality: like 'sitting at a restaurant table with this friend it is obvious that he is not blind at all but merely training to be an actor'. This division into four phases applies to the majority of dreams – an indication that dreams generally have a dramatic structure.

Basically, the dream is a fragment of involuntary psychic activity, barely conscious enough to be reproducible in the waking state. Of all psychic activity, it presents the largest number of irrational factors: it lacks logic, coherence, its morality is questionable; much of its content is incompatible with reality. The dream follows no clearly determined laws or regular modes of behaviour. Anxiety dreams are not unusual but they are by no means the rule. There are typical dream-motifs, such as flying, climbing stairs or mountains, going about semi-naked, losing teeth, crowds, hotels, railway stations, cars, snakes and so on. These, however, are not enough to yield any systematic organisation of dreams in general. In search of meaning we are therefore utterly dependent on the dreamer. The words of a dream-narrative have not just one meaning but many. Even a simple word like 'wheel' has quite specific associative meanings for different dreamers and none of them limited to the objective, dictionary, meaning of the term. The whole dream-work is essentially subjective. It is a theatre in which the dreamer himself is the scene, the player, the prompter, the producer, the author, the public, and, sometimes, even the critic.

Thus Jung. I cannot remember how many visits I paid to Kussnacht over a period of seven years. We talked and walked, walked and talked, as we made the rounds of Toni, Sabina and various other mistresses of the master before settling down to a copious Swiss meal prepared by Emma, the complaisant wife. Atmospheric conditions were on the whole pleasant, the female entourage analysing random visitors, writing monographs on Archetypes, Introverts, Extroverts, Mandalas and other such symbols of transformation that inhabited the Jungian firmament. They were of academic interest to initiates and novices of a mini-society that was a cross between a school, a sect and a sanatorium. The towering presence at the centre radiated hope and benevolent belief. He was adored and respected by all, as was his due. After all he analysed over two thousand dreams every year.

Jung was kind enough to look at some of my own dreams. After reading them, he sat me down on a bench overlooking the lake and, in a gentle voice full of wisdom, gave me this little talk:

'Having not been introduced to your psyche, I am in no position to interpret these dreams. In more general terms I will venture to tell you this much: the origin of these dreams is hidden in the depth of your soul. Their content is definitely the work of the Collective Unconscious, well beyond the confines of your personal resource. Pig-like creatures with a human head; miniaturised infants with talons for fingers; crashing tree branches transformed into gently floating paper shreds; a self-severed head; moving fish-like under the sea; a bull, a pre-historic monster; a mythical beast; they are the very stuff that make up the universal human psyche. These are all rather rare dreams, dreamt by few people, only at a turning point or crisis in their lives. They are the creation of an unbalanced, gravely disturbed mind. When, by the way, did you have these dreams?

As a matter of fact, it was not a question of balance or disturbance of the mind. At the time I was near going mad. And it was, at least in part, dreaming these dreams that saved my sanity.

It was time to depart. I have overstayed both my and his time. As we shook hands, Jung left me with a final, lingering thought. It was Nietzsche, he said, who viewed dream thinking as an older, archaic mode of thought. Just as our bodies, in coming into being, incorporate previous forms of our race's antecedent species, so our minds, in growing up, retain the faculties of most primitive mental structures. A much maligned and misunderstood man of letters, Nietzsche, he thought. And so we parted company, on the most friendly terms.

Fragment 10

Visiting the sleep laboratory

I wanted to move on, complete this odyssey. I was diverted unfortunately by the intrusion of yet another world war. This time round I was no longer just an onlooker, in a minuscule way I was a bit-player as well. The war, for better or worse, changed the course of my life. It turned out to be a catastrophe for my people and it left an indelible mark on many of my subsequent dreams. After the war nothing was the same again. I noticed the tectonic shift all over but acutely so when I resumed the quest.

When I reached approximately the present I had to go to university. I chose one that was at the cutting edge of science but had a reputation going back centuries. All branches of learning were represented with professors of note, a lavish teaching staff, a comprehensive library, sophisticated labs and adequate funding to make academic life comfortable. Traversing an impressive snooker hall, I asked a group of students, all smoking and drinking beer, the way to the Department of Psychology. They knew of no such faculty and did not appear interested. One of them, chalking his cue, suggested I should try the Faculty of Statistics, they did most things and maybe Psychology would also be on the menu.

Statistics was huge. Its halls, lecture rooms, numerical repositories, libraries and experimental stations reached across a number of massive buildings, each one occupying at least nine floors of feverish activity. I had some difficulty in finding my way amidst a multiplicity of subjects taught. Apart from 'Mathematics', signs on outwardly similar doors read: 'Geography', 'History', 'Medicine', 'Linguistics', 'Literature', 'Sociology', 'Archaeology', 'Astronomy', and others I recognised of old but there were some I had never encountered in academia before. There were invitations to study the environment, nutrition, fashion, media, entertainment, and such like, all leading to degrees of sorts.

As I wandered dazed the corridors of confusion, rescue materialized in the shape of a little man with an oversized head framed by outlandish spectacles. His badge had no name, it merely identified him as Professor of Statistics. Apologetically he pointed out that this did not mean a great deal since over half the professors bore the same title. With Communication as his speciality, the Professor was more than willing to help on my way. Noticing my bemusement at the astonishing expansion of his department, he took the trouble to explain.

'In the end everything comes down to quantifying knowledge. In Geography we study peoples, their life-spans, sustenance, movement, mating, birth rate; and so on. The data is then processed and a statistical average is determined. In Medicine we measure symptoms across a number of controlled groups to establish correlations between

various factors. If this number is significant, we simply assume a causal link and can confidently predict the degree of risk, the chances of recovery. In researching literary text we simply count the frequency of certain words, the length of sentences, the use or overuse of adjectives, and other such factors subject to statistical analysis. It can be so much more accurate and objective than any opinionated textual critique. He went on in this vein enumerating subject after subject, demonstrating with a triumphal flourish, that we lived in an Age of Quantity. The Mediocre Man was in. Outstanding individuals were passe, of little consequence.

By the time I reached a door marked 'Psychology' it was late evening. Some of the lights were still on, so I ventured inside. The hall I entered was a large long rectangle divided by a partition into two unequal halves. The lesser section had a row of monitors set along the walls, their screens flickering with wavy lines moving from left to right. The greater portion of the hall was filled with neatly aligned beds of a hospital ward. From what I could see in the dimmed light, the occupants of the beds were human beings with a bunch of wires attached to each body. They all appeared to be asleep. The white coated men, manning the monitors, were, in contrast, seriously awake. They moved smoothly from screen to screen, observing and taking notes. I asked to see the professor. He was not available. I took the white coated men to be technicians. They turned out to be postgraduate students working on their doctorate. One of them looked away from his screen and asked me if could he be of help. With some diffidence I confessed to having brought with me some of my dreams in the hope that current science could shed some light on them.

The young man, with a dismissive gesture, spoke thus: *We are not interested here in dreams. They are nebulous, immeasurable, unpredictable, insignificant. This is a proper sleep laboratory, not a dream workshop. We happen to know, of course, that people do dream. We have established the time intervals of their dreaming. But all that is just an amusing by-product of our sleep research. Sleep is what matters, it can be measured, quantified, studied and understood. And this is what we do here, using an accurate cross section of the population. They are doing their best to sleep here, in front of our eyes.*

As we walked along the neat row of beds with human heads sticking out from under uniform blankets, my guide explained proudly the function of each wire attached to one or other portion of the slumbering specimen. There were sensors monitoring head movement, sensors for eyelid activity, for heart rate, for blood pressure and, obviously, for brainwaves. He took it more or less for granted that I was familiar with the fourfold cycle of the night so we quickly moved on to talking about what he called REM sleep, a phase characterised by rapid eye movement, recurring at regular intervals 4 times a night. I learnt that, on average, we spend about a quarter of the time in REM sleep. As a throw-away remark I was told that it was then that we dreamt. I asked, with some diffidence, how do we know that dreaming in ongoing during REM sleep. The answer came pat: when subjects were systematically woken from REM sleep, 95% of such interventions resulted in dream reports whilst a significantly less yielded dreams from subjects woken from deeper sleep. The correlation was satisfactory.

As for the dreams themselves, there is nothing you can do with them. An endless sequence of rehashed, distorted, fragmented memories, bizarre non-sequiturs, impossible or improbable events and jumbled up nonsense of every kind, none of which could be related to physiological observation. Many scientists made attempts, using all kinds of external stimuli: scents, ice cubes, ringing, clapping, barking, creaking of doors, flashing lights, all to no avail. All this assailing of the senses produced no predictable patterns, the dreams varied from dreamer to dreamer, from night to night.

Escorted out of the sleep lab, I wandered disappointed the length of many academic corridors before I stumbled across a most intriguing destination. In prominent, unashamed, letters the door introduced itself as DREAM SCIENCE. The very juxtaposition of two such alien terms heightened my expectations as I entered the promising domain. A gaunt man with bulging eyes and elephantine ears was there at once to greet me. A youthful zest and unbounded optimism overlaid a wrinkled age that was steeped in experimental experience. A senior man, he spoke as though he knew me, expected me and was familiar with my quest.

You are late. As a matter of fact some thirty, forty years behind the times. You must have been delayed by the sleep labs The electroencephalograph was indeed a breakthrough and it had, of course, its uses. But it is now antiquated. We have moved on by quantum leaps and now use only the most exquisite of instruments.

The Professor of Dream Science proceeded then to give me a lecture on the subject of his life time work and enduring passion. The words just tumbled out of his mouth at an excited pitch, so my notes of this lecture were somewhat sketchy and may not have done justice to such a detailed exposition of this captivating science. Even so, I am reasonably confident that the essentials were captured and are here faithfully reproduced.

It was recognised before the war that sleep was not uniform and intractable, any more than it was inert. Electrical patterns of brain activity changed continuously. As the REM periods occurred at roughly 90 minutes intervals and lasted in total for about 2 hours each night it seemed to provide more than enough time to allow for any amount of dreaming. Unfortunately, the correlation between REM sleep and assumed dreaming proved to be imperfect because dreaming can occur in non-REM sleep and even, especially in children, is frequent at the onset of sleep. In any case, scientific observation revealed that when brain activity, heart action, fast and shallow breathing, were all at a high level, correlating with REM sleep, awakenings yielded a rich vein of long and complex dreams. The characteristics of these dreams are intense hallucinations, a lack of self-reflective awareness, indefinite setting of scenes, poorly defined persons and powerful emotions.

A great deal of time was then wasted in attempts to relate the dream content, as reported by the dreamer, to the readings of the polygraph. As such correlation proved a hopeless enterprise, we now restrict ourselves to trying to measure the degree to which dream reports are hallucinatory or rational. Of course, dreaming will always be vivid, bizarre, emotional, unreasonable and hard to remember. But once we give up on content based theories, Freudian or otherwise, the how (the question of mechanism) and the why (the question of function) lends itself to scientific analysis.

One of the most influential contributors to our science was Michel Jouvet, a neurophysiologist. He worked in Lyons from the mid-1950s onward and proved that REM sleep was organised by the brain stem. By discovering the active suppression of muscle tone, he also helped to explain how the brain could be turned on without waking. As the motor system is blocked at the level of the spinal cord, real movement is impossible despite elaborate dream scenarios we frequently experience. However, in accepting the similarities between waking and dreaming consciousness, dream scientists failed to ask questions as to the difference.

Why is dreaming so deeply preoccupied with movement, especially extraordinary movement that surpasses the most vivid waking fantasies? Why is dreaming seldom self-reflective when waking consciousness is dominated by internal thought? Why is it so deficient in recall? Why is almost all dreaming forgotten and why are dreams so bizarre? The short answer lies in the biochemistry of the brain. The serotonin and noradrenaline cells that modulate the brain when awake, reduce their output by half during non-REM sleep, and are totally shut off during REM sleep. That means that the brain has to work without the chemical systems that are active in supporting such mental functions as attention, memory and reflective thought. Waking and dreaming are two states of consciousness whose differences are just a matter of chemistry. Experiments conducted by injecting drugs into the pons of cats strongly indicates that the cholinergic system is more active in REM sleep when the two other chemical systems are shut off. So theoretically we can induce, or least enhance, dreaming by the simple application of drugs.

The chemical approach still leaves open the question of the function of dreaming, Why do we dream? We know, of course, that sleep is vital for survival as sleep deprivation in rats leads quickly to death. REM sleep must also be essential and not only because it is omnipresent in all mammals. Since newborn creatures across the species experience almost exclusively REM sleep and since it takes at least seven years in humans to reach adult norms in the ratio between the sleep patterns, REM sleep must have a huge role to play in the global development of the brain itself; a role probably lasting lifelong. Dreams are emotional and hyper associative, thus they help restore the most basic of our cognitive capability. We need to know when to approach, flee, attack, seek nourishment or mate. These are the skills that

sleep refreshes every night without us remembering any of this process. On the other hand, there are many individuals who dream seldom or not at all and so, as scientists, we are entitled to consider dreams as epiphenomena, causal occurrences of no significance.

Before the end of the last century, two decades of sleep lab dream research yielded precious little. Fortunately, at the turn of the century the emergence of a completely new scientific tool revolutionised the situation. With the help of the wondrous PET we could suddenly image the whole brain and accurately map its manifold functions. Positron emission tomography, just like magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), produces images of the brain itself by computing density variations in the tissue as the different regions of the brain are activated.. Whenever neurons become more active, they require more oxygen which is supplied by increasing blood flow. So through PET we can actually 'see' the brain as it works. Isn't it amazing?! Just imagine that we can observe the intensity of hallucinations which is exaggerated in dreaming and the diminishing life in areas associated with directed thought, in dreamer after dreamer, in easily repeatable experiments.

What do we find? The reason that dreams are so perceptually intense, so instinctive and emotional, so hyperassociative, is because the brain regions supporting these functions are more active than in the waking state. And we can't keep track of time, place or person and can't think rationally because the corresponding brain regions are less active. Thus, attention, located in the thalamocortical region, is difficult to direct, whilst emotion and instinct, seated in the limbic part of the brain, are strongly manifest in elation and anxiety, in fleeing and aggressive scenarios. Thinking, orientation and volition, all operating in the cortex, are deplete or non-existent. Narration, on the other hand, centred in the left temporal cortex, is active and highly creative. Feeling and primitive behaviour are enhanced by the activation of the limbic brain in REM sleep. Thought and orientation are impaired by the regional deactivation of the global and local memory systems. Hence all cognitive functions that depend on memory are weakened in REM sleep. Dream consciousness is therefore both a poor analyser and poor organiser of its content.

At the same time, we have clear experimental evidence that some learning goes on in sleep, particularly in REM sleep. Such learning, both in humans and rats, has to do with low level stuff, such as orientation and primitive skills, rather than abstract knowledge. Night time learning is, in fact, akin to the kind of day time learning we accomplish without being consciously aware of doing it. Curiously, there seems to be a time lag between the point of daytime learning, night time rehearsals and improvements in performance. One thing sure, there is a great deal of brain work going at night and science has barely begun to delve into it.

Essentially, there is no longer any mystery of dreams. In the place of dream mystique, we aim to install dream science. The study of dreaming is inextricably linked to the science of sleep and thus to neurobiology. Brain activation varies in a systematic manner during sleep and peaks of this function are highly correlated with dreaming. What is the brain doing in sleep? It is processing information, consolidating and revising memory, learning newly acquired skills. The brain self-activates to exclude outside information but it is unable to realize the motor acts it generates. So we experience emotions in our dreams and visualize scenarios that do not or cannot happen. In isolating itself from the world, the sleeping brain radically alters its chemical climate. It is this difference in brain chemistry that determines the difference between waking and dreaming consciousness. That is all there is to it!

These were the notes I read over and over again after leaving the Professor who, I must confess, had impressed me with facts and figures tha seemed to add up. I had no reason to doubt the accuracy of his observations nor the veracity of his measurements. Then, on reflection, some questions made their tentative appearance. They gradually grew insistent, and as questions have the habit of doing, became harsh in their demand. So I made a list of troubling questions and presented them, in no particular order, to the Professor whose door seemed permanently open to anyone willing to learn and listen.

The first question concerned memory. If dreaming was supposed to be continuous throughout REM sleep, how come recall was so minute and evoking only the bit dreamt just before waking? The answer provided by dream science claimed that the chemical system that supports the memory was deficient in sleep. But that answer raised even more acute questions. How was it then that some people virtually never dreamt and those that did, dreamt some nights and not others? Was such deficiency total in some individuals and vastly variable in the remainder? And if dream reports, even disregarding content, varied so radically between individuals and for the same individual with different nights, what basis could there be for the general premise that REM sleep equates to dreaming for all the people all of the time?

Perhaps even more significantly, throughout the length of any dream there is a plot, a story line. But even allowing for sudden gaps and bizarre turns, the sequence is meaningful, one thing follows another and the two are somehow connected. For that to work short term memory is essential. No story, in the telling, can do without it. And beyond that, all modes of remembering in the daytime are highly discriminatory. It is patently impossible to remember everything we experience, while total oblivion is confined to cases of trauma induced amnesia or alcoholic stupor. We tend to retain what is new, unusual, useful, remarkable, disturbing, pleasurable, dangerous or in some other way distinct. Remembering has never been a wholesale affair. Even taking account of quantitative differences in the brain chemistry of the various functions, has night time memory nothing to do with its daytime counterpart? At this point of the questioning, the Professor changed the subject.

The second question probed the relationship between REM and non-REM sleep. If dreaming and REM sleep were so closely wedded to each other, how was it possible for some individuals some of the time to report dreams on being woken for non-REM sleep? The answer was that such reports were significantly less common and the dreams themselves tended to be curt, unelaborated and lacking in sophistication. This conclusion appeared limp and lacked conviction, even for the Professor himself.

The third question sought clarification of the general claim by dream science as for the function of brain activity in sleep. Accordingly, the brain was processing information, consolidating and revising memory, learning newly acquired skills. But nothing in dreaming even resembled any of that. On the contrary, raw information in dreams was scarcely reliable, memories were fragmented, distorted and had more to do with the distant past than any recent events. If any newly acquired skills were being polished there was no detectable trace of them in the stories woven at night. So either brain activity in sleep, particularly in REM sleep, accomplishes little of any value or the observed and measured brain activity does in no way contribute to the understanding of the dream phenomenon. As neither alternative appealed to the Professor, this question remained, sadly, unanswered.

The next question dealt with animals and babies. Since REM sleep was so preponderant when these creatures were not awake, would it be reasonable to assume that they not only dream but dream vastly more than adult human beings? The professor smiled in an academic sort of way as he readily conceded that we could never have an answer since cats were deficient in linguistic skills and toddlers lacked the conceptual framework to understand the question. However, all available evidence indicated that brain activation was not enough to produce dreaming. The cortex circuits that supported language and thought had to be active and play their part too,

Then I enquired about the rate at which chemical and neurological activities change. I was categorically assured that the brain does not suddenly switch from one state to another, that, in fact, brain states change gradually and continuously. Just to make absolutely sure, I asked whether this observation applied universally, even to sleeping, dreaming and waking. The answer was an uncompromising yes.

We moved on to the more substantial matter of content: what was the meaning of dreams and how would dream science help to interpret them? *It always comes down to this, you people keep looking for this mystical meaning that is simply not there.* The Professor now spoke with an agitated voice. *Since history began man was disturbed by his dreams, then endowed them with mysterious attributes and spent the rest of the day trying to decipher a non-existent secret of his own creation. We, scientists that we are, have wasted many decades researching dream content without ever being able to formulate even a systematic hypothesis. Of course, I can assert with some certainty that dreams have all to do with the instinctive and emotional brain, in our terms, the limbic systems. They are characterised by associative thinking, the product of the lower or more primitive elements of the cortex. And obviously the dream material is suffused*

with imaginary movement since the all motor functions are strictly inhibited. Beyond that any meaning you may find in dreams, is to do with your own dreams, And is your personal business. You alone will know and appreciate that the postman's beard in your dream refers to your father's unshaven face, a father whose grave you visited the previous week and who was wont to deliver written admonitions to you during his lifetime. Associations will lead you here, there and anywhere but their significance is pure conjecture. Dream science does not pretend to help interpret dreams, because there is nothing to interpret.

I hesitated a little before asking the last few questions as I sensed the man was becoming weary of me. Still, I put it to the Professor that his reductive analysis, allocating the varied elements of the dream, each to a specific neurological and chemical brain activity, left out the one entity that could be the most crucial one. There had to be an 'I' who orchestrated all the disparate bits of memory, event, action, man, woman and child, into a credible dream plot. There had be someone who told the story. A somewhat apologetic figure emerged from the prolonged silence that followed my remark. *We don't really know how the dream scenarios are composed, any more than we know how ideas are generated in the daytime. But bear in mind we are a young science, we have made great strides in a very short time. With the help of accelerating technological innovation, we will have, sooner than later, all the answers.*

What about the great Unconscious? If such a great deal of valuable assimilative brainwork goes on in sleep, and presumably also when we are awake, without us being consciously aware of it, isn't it justified, isn't it necessary to posit an Unconscious? In replying to this question the Professor generously conceded that Freud was the first to highlight the Unconscious and was altogether right to insist on its importance. He hastened to maintain, of course, that Freud was wrong just about everything else to do with dreams: repression, coded meanings, wish fulfilment, free association, the lot.

I put my final question to the Professor very gently. I did not want to wound someone who, after all said and done, devoted his life to a matter so close to my heart. Yet I felt I had no choice. Was dream science, at its best, merely concerned with describing the physical mechanics of dreaming, not its very essence? Would an intimate knowledge of the exact movement of Shakespeare's fingers, of the ink, quilt and vellum he used, get us any nearer to Hamlet? The response was what I more or less expected: the analogy did not hold since Hamlet was public and its language communal whereas the meaning of dreams, if any, was private, its language privileged to the dreamer.

On this note we shook hands and parted. Our paths and minds went their separate ways but I did not regret our meeting. I saw and learnt a lot even if what I saw and learnt was of no immediate help in dealing with the dreams carried in my permanent baggage.

THE SECOND PART
Dreams and Stories

Fragment 1
Navigating the shoals of narration

Fifty centuries of travel left its mark on mind and body. I was enriched, exhausted, bewildered. Left with disjointed fragments, it was a daunting task to make some sort of sense of a dream universe in total chaos. Previous analytic attempts at organising the material within a rational framework, seem to have failed. So, I fell back on intuition, allowing the dreams themselves lead me wherever they would. And, first of all they presented me with the stark realization that every dream is a story.

For what is the elemental story? It is a recounting of events that may, or may not, have happened. It tells of what could, or could not, have taken place. It need have no regard to actual space or time. It may fuse characters, relocate objects, transpose scenery, establish moods and evoke strong emotions. Its narrative, in its most primitive form, is made up of sequences that succeed each other in a strictly linear order, moving the action remorselessly forward. There is no pause, no deviation, no harking back on what went before, no reasoning as to the whys or wherefores. The teller of the story and its listeners are in league; they both believe that what is being told is all there is. Reality is noted merely by its absence.

Isn't all this so very true of dreams?!

That dreams are stories is so obvious a fact that professionals throughout the ages failed to notice it. They devoted themselves wholly to the meaning of dreams. And who can blame them: that is precisely what their clients wanted to know. On waking from a bewildering dream, the first question that poses itself is: what it all means? Is it something good, something bad, is it something of significance hitherto unseen? It is no surprise that meaning took centre stage and its unmasking became the main business of dreams

Meaning accompanied my travels and invariably preoccupied those most closely involved. There was no encounter that I could remember where it did not form the core of all that was taking place. Wherever dreams were traded, *meaning* was the currency. Whenever dreams were dismissed, *meaning* was the first casualty. The priests of Thoth in Egypt, those of Asclepius in Pergamun, the sages of Islam, the

Rabbis of the Jews, all dealt in meanings; Joseph built a brilliant career on divulging hidden meanings; Saint Jerome took upon himself to change his lifestyle through the meaning of a single dream; Freud and Jung initiated a novel and thriving profession, endowing dreams with meanings of profound significance; whilst scientists, specialising in the workings of the brain, spent a lifetime of academic research doing their best to demonstrate that dreams have no meaning at all.

And yet, strangely, this common currency meant something else, something particular to each tradition, discipline and approach. In the temple of Thoth the meaning of dreams translated into omens of the future, some good, some bad. For the Pharaoh, the meaning of his dreams acted as a guide for the conduct of the state. In Pergamun dreams meant instructions to restore health. For Saint Jerome, divine intervention was the purport of his life changing dream. To the followers of the Qu'ran, the meaning of the dream was a communication from Allah or Satan, as the case might be. For Jews the meaning of dreams was an invitation for any number of interpretations, all claiming an exclusive truth. In the view of Maimonides, dreams of any significance meant divine revelation to the very few, to the prophets of the single true God. Freud thought that psychoanalytic interpretation gave the dream its meaning, a meaning that itself *was* the *real* dream, whilst Jung considered dreams the royal road to the Great Unconscious. And all the while, the science of my contemporaries defined the meaning of dreams as that which could not be repeated, measured, predicted, or experimentally proved. That which could not exist.

And yet through this sea of diverse meanings ran a common thread. All those who dreamt and those who dealt in dreaming thought of dreams as something apart from ordinary human experience. Be they divine or satanic missives, revelations from an intangible and unfamiliar unconscious, or phenomena unsuited to scientific analysis, dreams troubled, intrigued, puzzled man from his origins to this day. That man should consider dreams extraordinary, outside the bounds of his comprehensible experience, seems fairly obvious. After all, we dream at night, in darkness, with our eyes closed, oblivious to ourselves and the world at large. The dream comes to us from nowhere, unfolding at its own pace, in complete disregard of our intent, wish or resistance. It is a theatre created not by the dreamer, as he thinks of himself. It is a story told by someone the dreamer considers a stranger, a story that seldom makes plain sense. True there were other matters in his environs that made man wonder and filled his mind with awe. The movement of heavenly bodies, the changing face of the moon, the miracle of procreation, the fragile fertility of the soil, fires that consumed the living whilst leaving stones unhurt, and other such mysteries. But these were witnessed by everyone and could be handled with regular sacrifices to appropriate gods. Awesome as they were, they could somehow be accommodated in the course of daily life.

Not so with dreams. You lie down, close your eyes, go to sleep and then your father rises from his grave and, in rude health, takes you with him on a hunt as he did in bygone days. You are traversing a familiar territory but still lose your way. Desperate

to get somewhere but you know not why. The king has you as a guest, then, for no particular reason, as his favourite dwarf. An enemy lance runs through your heart, you bleed but feel no pain and live to fight another day. A fire rages, a house goes up in flames, its smoke turns into bluish birds that settle on the branch of a flowering tree. The horse you are riding takes off all of a sudden and flies you over a devastated countryside. From great heights you fall vertiginously downward and just before hitting the ground you open your eyes and wake trembling in fear. What do you do? How can you keep quiet and forget what appeared so tangibly real moments ago? Isn't it instinctive to share your secret; to consult the elders and risk disbelief; to ask questions; and try desperately to reconcile what you know with what you know is impossible.

On reflection, it seemed to me quite natural that dreamers, disturbed by their nightly experience, should seek some form of resolution, some relief. It was this need that spawned multiple generations of professional dream interpreters who have endured, in different guises, to this very day. Even now, when a dreamer recounts the strange events of the previous night, the first question that almost always comes to mind is: what does it all mean? As the dreamer cannot make sense of a troubling dream, he worries lest he missed something important, something that might have a crucial effect, for better or worse, on the course of his life. And so he finds any interpretation preferable to having none. Uncertainty is incompatible with peace of mind.

So in dream business, interpretation has always taken centre stage. Thus interpreters were absorbed in the *what* of every dream. What was the dream about? About what place, what event, what object, what character? From the temple of Thoth to Vienna's Bergstrasse; from Pargamun to Kussnacht; from Jerusalem to Cordoba; from the simple to the most sophisticated discipline; the preoccupation was the same. Even the cutting edge of science focused on the significance of the dream content, whatever that was, in order to deny it. Having such a singular orientation, while understandable, made it difficult to look elsewhere, to have a different approach, to ask questions of another kind, questions the dream professionals have, paradoxically, failed to ask.

Fragment 2

Through the forest of myths, legends and fairytales

Realising that the dream, whatever else, is essentially a story, I asked myself what kind of story is it? Narration has such a wide variety of homes. It lives in a beautifully crafted tale that flows smoothly from the pen a master story teller. It partakes in bedtime stories that help children cross into the darkness of the night. It resides in stories invented on the spur of the moment to justify a lie. It helps to while away the time. It creeps even into the mouths of witnesses in a court of law. Narration holds together the great universal myths, at once profound and childish, so meaningful and so absurd. It is the stuff of legends whose origin is buried in some distant act. It sustains familiar fairy tales that grew up wild and now enjoy an iconic status in societies, more or less, civilised.

Yet if narration inhabits such a diverse range of stories, it can never be the whole story. It is, though, an essential element within it. Perhaps the most important one, its very core. But what exactly is this core?

Within a story, a descriptive passage has a wonderful freedom of choice; where to begin and how to meander along. Within a story, characterisation can go to any depth and fit in anywhere. Within a story, explanation, circumstance and motivation, can commute between generalisation and individuation at will. The narrative core has no such freedom. It is limited to events and actions. It is constrained by sequence and temporal precedence.

The story of a fire that destroyed a home could start off with the materials used in its construction; or its inhabitants; or the circumstances that occasioned it; or a warning of dangers in general. These matters, or others, could be brought into the story almost anywhere and in any sequence. They could be interspersed, fragmented or exhausted in one go. They could be spun out, marginalised or highlighted at will.

The narration core, on the other hand, will commence with the first spark that set the fire alight, continue with the arrival of the fire brigade, the saving of the people, and end in the smouldering ruins left behind. If the arrival of the fire brigade were placed before the outbreak of the fire, the story would be hardly a story at all.

The time related sequencing of narration, in itself, is elementary. It would hardly be worth a mention, were it not the critical relevance it has for dreams. Just as a compelling force drives the narrative onwards, a relentless one-way movement imposes itself on the dream. As it unfolds, the dream forces scene after succeeding scene on a captive audience, asleep and deprived of its will. Even when the dreamer is the central character of the story, he can do nothing to stop the flow of events. He

is often despatched to unfamiliar places to pursue objectives of which he is entirely ignorant. Despite the obstacles of a train suddenly reversing; or a fork in the road with illegible signposts; or a staircase leading nowhere; or a monster barring the way; he ploughs on regardless in pursuit of an arbitrary goal. And if the dreamer is merely a bystander, an observer of fast moving events, he cannot avert a disaster, nor improve the situation, nor prolong contentment and intensify joy. Hero or spectator, the narrative impulsion is just as present, just as decisive, just the same.

To understand the link of story to narration, I had to journey to their source. As with the Nile, the search proved prolonged, convoluted and laborious. Narration is now so widespread in our culture that its variety and volume posed an intimidating task. No matter where I turned, narration, in one form of another, looked me in the eye. It played continuously on the screen, in soap operas, documentaries, and even the news channels; it was rife on the trains as passengers read papers; it appeared in the law courts as distinguished barristers conjured up barely credible scenarios; it featured in male bonding sessions with tales of sexual conquest; it was a tool in the hands of parents to terrify and comfort their offspring; and it was on the tongue of children when they imagined what could happen next.

To save myself from drowning in an ocean of narratives, I chartered a boat of academics to skirt the treacherous shores of what was being taught as literature. We sailed through the classics and left behind with regret the greatest story tellers of all time. Homer, Cervantes, Shakespeare, Balsac, Dickens, the Brontes, Tolstoy, Dostoyevski, Proust, Thomas Mann, all wizards with words, were of little use to me. The very brilliance of their language inevitably eclipsed the story line. "Hamlet's father is poisoned by his uncle who usurps the throne and marries his mother. The ghost of the father visits Hamlet, to reveal the truth and demand vengeance. Hamlet hesitates, confronts his mother, pretends to be mad, is killed by a poisoned sword supplied by the usurper who in turn is despatched in revenge" is not Shakespeare. It is however a plot he borrowed, a plot whose origin was lost in the mist of literary time.

It was relatively simple to discard narratives conceived on the spur of the moment to alleviate an urgent need or those inspired by the temptation to embellish one's evolving autobiography. They are, after all, arbitrary concoctions apposite only to single individuals. I was after the original source from which narration sprung and all narrative flowed. Driven ever further back, stripping away layers of magnificent entertainment that merely soaked up the story line, I came to a narrative world where simplicity and purity were of the key. I was beyond the written word and its attribution. I came to where the same story was told both by everyone and yet no one in particular. And since these narratives survived the ravages of man's inordinate imagination and overlapped the boundaries of numerous civilisations, I could sift through them in their original state. Myths, legends and fairytales are, of course, diverse and culture specific, but they have enough in common to form a natural and harmonious family.

The narrative of a fairytale speaks of things that only children believe could ever happen. The narrative of a legend hides within itself the distant memory of something that once upon a time might well have happened. The narrative of a myth crafts a story to justify what exists. But myth, legend, fairytale, are all simple, brief, straightforward narratives with event succeeding event, action leading to action. Description is rudimentary; characterisation is reduced to malign or benign; motives are basic, emotions crude but intense; the credible and the incredible are inextricably enmeshed into a never to be forgotten tale.

The stories collected by the brothers Grimm have been part of popular culture, passed by word of mouth, across countless generations. Their origin will never be known but each one must have gone through a variety of iterations before assuming its well recognised narrative. No story of such an ancient provenance could have had a single author or a single moment of invention. But the final version of any fairytale, having undergone a myriad of alterations, bears testimony to the profound resonance evoked in the mind of a people, assuring its immortality. We don't have to know why the witch had turned the prince into a frog; whether the princess was mischievous or just careless in letting her ball fall into the well; the psychological relationship between king-father and princess-daughter; the exact wording of the fatal promise; or whether a kiss or the sharing of a bed was the transforming moment. What is striking, is that something slimy and universally repulsive can perform a valuable service and claim an intimacy with a virginal beauty that fulfils their individual and communal desire: he is made man, she is made woman, and they become an item.

The origin of a legend is not a story, it is an event, or series of events, centred on outstanding individuals who were active at a given time and place. The story rooted in heroes and happenings is composed of elements that are physically not impossible but, on sober consideration, scarcely credible. In all likelihood a minor local outlaw did conduct a successful guerrilla campaign against a particularly avaricious Sheriff of Nottingham. The rest is not history, it is legend. King Arthur did reign, did have a queen and was obviously surrounded by a coterie of nobles. Whether the refractory table was circular, whether they lived by a strict code of chivalry, whether transcendental love reigned between knight and his lady, whether Camelot's sword did have supernatural qualities and the whole business of the holy grail; is more open to doubt. From fact to fiction the story takes wings by dramatisation, magnification and idealisation. Accretions from all sort of foreign sources are tailored to mesh with the very basic original narrative. The growth of the story is not arbitrary, it reflects deeply set human instincts, profound fears and primeval desires. We all want heroes larger than life, we all need distinctions between good and evil that are stark. We are drawn to confrontations both violent and decisive, we all long for successful conclusions or at least impossible attempts that end in glorious failure. But however intricately woven, the legend will retain the strong simplicity of its story line and the pre-eminence of a core narration.

Myth predates legend and goes well beyond fairy tale. There has never been a tribe, a race, a culture, a people without a range of its own myths. The bushmen of the Kalahari, the aborigines of Australia, the Maya, the Aztecs, the Babylonians, Egyptians, Jews, Greeks and Romans, all created a rich variety of defining stories, stories that share some common features of crucial significance. Gods, or other fantastical creatures, bestride the central stage, guiding the destiny of mere mortals whilst shaping their physical environment. The sun god drives his chariot of fire across the skies to bring light into the world every single day; Marduk rains down lashings of water to drown the land and then turns off the flow to allow the waters to recede into a sea, saving enough dry land for man and beast to prosper in each other's company; other gods traverse the middle of Australia leaving in their footsteps mountains and song lines to ease the passage of aborigines on the move; Zeus keeps hurling his bolts of lightning from the heights of Mount Olympus whilst his brethren, conducting, in parallel, their own dysfunctional lives, cause havoc in the affairs of mortal men; and in the meanwhile our own god was at work creating in the space of seven highly productive days an astonishing universe.

A rich array of such stories survived from an epoch well before quill and papyrus. Their themes were inspired by the preoccupation of men still uncivilised enough to be at one with a living world that both nourished and threatened them. Their narrative is content with the bare essentials and thus speaks only of what really mattered. Bereft of refinements, their plot reveals man's first glance at himself and his earliest attempt to come to terms with his surroundings, his history and a destiny over which he had little control. Almost invariably myths are answers to implicit questions, unspoken and all the more pressing for that. Who am I? What brought me here? How was what I see around me brought about and why is it such as it is? Who makes things happen, who is behind the miracle of life and the finality of death? What determines the course of my life? These questions have troubled man ever since he started thinking.

Drops of life supporting water fell from the sky, sometime in overabundance, sometime not at all. The sun rose over the horizon every dawn but there was no guarantee that it would always do so. Fire consumed all in its path but was itself consumed be water. Gazelles hove into sight on some hunting expeditions but on others nothing edible turned up and the hunters themselves became the prey. Some trees bore fruits, some fields yielded good harvests, some women gave multiple births, but other trees, fields and women remained barren. Hordes of invaders appeared from nowhere, killed, destroyed, captured, raped, enslaved and looted, reducing to ruins centuries of loving care and ingenious labour. Faced with fear of the unknown, desire for the unattainable, with unexpected events that came in isolation, how could man cope and make some sense of such a devastating reality? He turned to the only means at his disposal, he told stories to himself.

Narrative, in its simplest form, was part of man's daily life long before the advent of myths. Men returning from the hunt, with or without prey, would surely give a blow by blow account of what took place. Women carrying the fruit they gathered would

do much the same. There is, of course, something of a leap from a transitory, localised story of actual events to a myth that embodies universal statements to which there could never be witnesses. Yet the fundamental structure of both are the same.

The myth of Adam and Eve has long held its own fascination for me. It captures the tragic dimension of man's whole existence: At the glorious birth of self consciousness comes also the awareness of our own inevitable death. We have eaten of the fruit of knowledge, we know who we are, what it takes to love, mate and give life but we also know that it is all to no avail, that we shall return to the dust from whence we have risen. The snake, in ironic contrast, will always crawl in the dust, ignorant of himself but also oblivious to his demise. There is, of course, even more to this myth than that. Its elements: the garden, the trees, the snake, the divine embargo, the temptation, the fig leaves, the banishment, the different treatment meted out to man and woman, are all sublimely chosen to carry many profundities of the human condition. What is striking is the simplicity and purity of a narrative charged to carry the weighty content of the myth. No other literary form could have achieved such a feat.

Fragment 3

Drifting into uncharted territory

Why did narration take such an early precedence over descriptive, reflective or analytical thinking? The story teller of an actual event has a number of options. He could lavish his attention on presenting the scenario, describing the features of the participants, delving into causes and allocating praise or blame, all at the expense of a simple narration of the event. Traces of description, characterisation, causal attribution and emotional response survive even in the most primitive stories but they pale into shadows in the harsh light of the narrative itself. Why is that?

I was moving here into uncharted territory so I decided to take time off and let my mind drift. I found myself in the bush on my way home from a hunt with a dead gazelle on my shoulders. It had been a difficult but exciting expedition, a long trek away from home, so my people would expect to hear a detailed account of the adventure. I try to keep fresh the memory of all that's happened. I rehearsed the same images over and over. I held on to them, not straying into how things appeared, or what might have gone wrong, or the fear and elation in my heart. I needed these images, in their sequence, to tell the story of the hunt they are all agog to hear.

The reverie came to an end, I was in the present again, stone sober. But I came back not empty handed. I brought back with me a striking discovery: the very first stories told were transcriptions of memories into words. The memories are visual replays whereas the words are arbitrary sound devices. The gap between the two is a yawning abyss. Visual images are experienced, the words needed for the story need a language. It must have taken many millions of years of human evolution to get from a visual recall to narration. The recalling of private visual traces must be somewhere at the very dawn of thinking. Their translation into a public language, with the power to evoke a similar visual experiences in others, comes much later. It is a milestone on the way to more sophisticated forms of thinking. Infants have memories years before they could follow, let alone tell, any kind of story.

This realisation, of the link between memory and narration, filled my heart with great excitement. I was close to the source of the narrative. I was near but not quite there. Memory having played a dominant role at the origin of narrative thinking, the remaining question was whether the strict time related sequencing of the narrative was bestowed by memory or acquired by chance? We can, after all, easily envisage calling to mind events in our personal history not in the order of their occurrence. Memories may reappear in order of importance, or be evoked by a later experience, or as a single still image that retrieves others further back in the past. The picture of my mother's anguished hands covering her unseeing eyes at the death of my brother is etched in my memory as a single still. All this it true but it is not the point. Such

secondary manifestations of memory relate to material lifted out of context, purified, burnished and stored in the half light of semi awareness, to arise as the occasion demands.

The memory that is formed in the immediate aftermath of the actual event is the primary memory. And primary memory is religiously sequential because it copies what we see and we see the world in sequence. We start remembering as we see. What we see, and what we are interested in seeing, is in movement. From the day we open our eyes we see a moving world, not a stationary one. Both as preys and predators, we can survive only if we are acutely aware of what moves. No animal will keep himself alive by contemplating an unchanging environment. Drooling adults will only attract the attention of babies if they wave their heads and keep altering the architecture of their faces.

The source of narration is thus laid bare. I understood why, initially, man comes to terms with the world around him by way of telling stories. The stories had to be pure narratives since they were patterned on primary memories which, in turn, were determined by how we see. To begin with, we tell stories as we remember and we remember as we see. The primacy of time related sequencing is not arbitrary, borrowed from elsewhere. It is at the very heart of narrative thinking. As is the case with many significant discoveries, once they are made, they seem obvious. So the link between seeing and remembering, as between remembering and narration, is intuitively simple. Its relevance to the understanding of dreams, though not immediately obvious, is crucial.

It was high time to return to the stories of the night. I did feel early on in my quest that they belonged to the family of myths, legends and folk tales, but now I knew what kind of family that family really was. A treatise, a political manifesto, a polemic, a thesis, an essay, even if imperfect in logic, are all the offspring of rational thought. They are, or pretend to be, devoid of emotion. They are striving to be factual. And they are virtually narrative free. In terms of thought evolution, they are the product of a late, late mental development. Novels, thrillers, plays and fiction in general, have all a narrative element. But they have other, often more dominant, ingredients that reduce narration to a mere skeleton of the work. Detailed description of the scene, intimate characterisation, attribution of motives, discussion of ideas, flashback and projection, analysis of feelings, and other distractions introduced to enrich the story line do so at the expense of core narration.

Modern fiction has grown into a vast forest of words whose nurturing requires a great deal of reasoned thought. It draws on creative imagination, it draws on emotion but it is written within the limitations of what is factually credible. Even such great masters of the irrational as Dostoyevsky and Gabriel Garcia Marques, deal in realities shared by their contemporaries. The reader could well visualise himself as one the fictitious characters in a more or less familiar situation, but it would be something of a stretch to ask him to identify with the frog prince, or with one of knights of the round table, let alone with a naked Adam biting into the forbidden fruit.

Where literary fiction has become increasingly sophisticated, distancing itself from the core narrative, the dream family of stories remained true to its roots, keeping strictly to time ordered sequencing of myth, legend and fairy tale. But perhaps the most important medium of our modern culture, paradoxically, reverted to the earliest forms of the core narrative. The art of the screen, be it the cinema or television, differs essentially from literary fiction, in that it conveys the story in moving pictures rather than in words.

When people come to watch the movie of 'War and Peace' they come not to hear Tolstoy's words but to experience the dramatic visual unfolding of the story. The screen has become the most popular art and entertainment form of our age. And no matter how vital a role words play, the screen displays a predominantly visual narrative. In a most profound sense, the screen story comes closer to the core narrative than the myth, legend or fairy tale. And it is hugely significant that dreams are spontaneously likened to films. The story unfolds to the eye of the dreamer as the movie captures the eye on the audience. Both audience and dreamer are passive viewers of a time driven succession of images.

I had now no doubt that the first story emerged from the deepest of depths, at a time when man had no other resource to reconcile a dangerous and puzzling world. Its roots have survived in the minds of children who have not yet learned to reason and compromise. It still resides in the borderlands of seeing and thinking, where neither holds sway. Thus the origin of narration had to be a visual experience strictly ordered in time. The stuff of core narration and that of dreams is virtually the same. Narration and dream share a common source.

Dreams are part of a large and well respected family. Myths, legends and fairytales are their close cousins once removed. What holds the family together, its blood line, is the narrative. They are all telling stories somewhat removed from facts. In a manner of speaking they are all liars but liars who cannot help but tell the truth.

There is the darker half of our planet, where night vision prevails. That is where the mind's eye rules. The moving image is a narrative in itself. This narrative goes back beyond language and creates a wordless story that abstract thought can never touch. It is a profound tale that sometimes surpasses its own literary counterpart.

THE THIRD PART
Taking the stories apart

Fragment 1
Surveying a pageant of characters

Nine hundred stories helped to keep me sane. A little less than the number that saved Sheherezade's life. To explore such a volume was forbidding enough. But it was their excessive diversity that brought me near despair. To follow the tracks of my illustrious predecessors was not an option. The interpreters searched for objective meanings in a daytime language alien to dreams. They tried to decipher messages of the night in terms of recent days. They failed.

If dreams are stories, it is as stories they had to be approached. This meant keeping to the narration itself and asking elementary questions. What characters inhabit a tale? What do they do? What happens to them? Do they travel, moving with difficulty or with remarkable ease? Whereabouts does the action take place? Is the story set in the present, the future or the distant past and what difference does that make? Does the story have a theme or does it meander between the ordinary and the bizarre? Is the bizarre always one and the same kind of bizarre or are there varieties? Does the story have a satisfactory ending? Does it raise the spirit, fill the heart with fear, take cares away, bring tempers to an even keel?

This bewildering array of stories, remarkably, had but one narrator. I hoped answers to these questions would help in discovering who he is. Which is, after all, the main object of my quest.

To start with characters, there are no less than 1,600 distinct appearances across the 927 stories. My friends, relations and work colleagues are pre-eminent but not too far behind come armies of people I never set eyes on – men, women and children in complete anonymity. And then there are a great number of people who identify themselves only by their profession, rank or title. Quite a few unremarkable animals pass in and out of the stories, mostly dogs, fish and birds. And, very occasionally, an altogether strange creature occupies centre stage.

About half of the characters unfamiliar to me appear as members of a convenient class. We have doctors, surgeons, nurses and midwives from the medical world; soldiers, officers and generals from the army; bobbies, officers and inspectors from the police; heads of delegation, masters of ceremony, governors and ministers in an official capacity; managers and executives, always in charge; footballers, tennis and ice

hockey players, the odd rower, from the world of sport; shopkeepers, sales assistants, ticket and newspaper vendors; kings and queens, princes, princesses, noblemen from the aristocracy: chiefs of gangs and sects, dictators and rebels, all lead their followers; janitors, valets, porters, dustmen, waiters, gardeners and bodyguards, are there to render service; fathers, mothers, daughters, sons and brothers are members of unspecified families, other than mine; instructors, headmasters, gurus, drivers, navigators, professors, conductors and guides, all teach, whilst pupils and students, all learn; popes and prelates from the church; directors of film and stage, conductors of orchestra, all in control; singers, actors, pop stars, musicians; architects, inventors, designers, artists, composers and writers; demolition workers, fire fighters and removal men; criminals, rapists and terrorists; judges, jurors and diverse examiners who tend to arbitrate; lawyers, barbers, tailors, journalists, politicians, auctioneers, craftsmen and other professionals; Red Indians, Japanese, Jews, Romanians, Hungarians, and others defined by their ethnicity; businessmen with their business unspecified; a croupier, a clerk, an agent, an art dealer, a sexual deviant, a bride, an insane individual, a chess master, who each make just one appearance; and, finally, Death who comes in person to play with me a game of chess.

On the face of it, such a rich and extensive range of people corresponds roughly to the spectrum of inhabitants of my daytime life. I see hundreds of faces and bodies passing by every day, on the street, in trains, buses and cars, in crowds, in foregrounds and backgrounds, without recording names and looks and identities. They have been, and will continue to be, night and day, anonymous. There is also a host of people I treat every day not as human beings in the round but in terms of a single attribute. My doctor may never get out of his surgery; a teacher may not escape the syllabus; a policeman may not take off his uniform; my barber never gets beyond my hair; a chess player is restricted to moving pieces on the board just as football players are grounded on the pitch. I know, of course, that they all have a life beyond the confines of our relationship, I just disregard it. What matters to me is my doctor's medical assistance not his happy or unhappy family life.

So it would seem that the narrator, at least in this respect, observes the niceties of my ordinary daily experience. Like me he has a choice. He can pick just any white-coated doctor circulating in a hospital or one that is well known to both of us; a son of unknown parentage or my own boy; an unspecified dictator or Stalin; a gardener I meet for the first time or the one who tends my garden every day of the week. Yet the narrator and I differ on two counts. I am free to move from a single dimensional character to a fully formed individual and vice versa. He cannot. Once he made his choice, the odd gardener does not become the one I know and my gardener never shrinks to an anonymous member of the horticultural class. The stories simply lack character development. And when the narrator chooses a character intimately known to me, I, and only I, am his only audience. Not because some others are unfamiliar with this character, it is that no one knows him exactly as I do. No one has my associations and feelings, our history, attached to him. These are the kind of

idiosyncrasies that I hoped would provide some useful clues as to who is actually telling me the stories.

The named characters, part of a close circle of family and friends, are almost always defined as sharply as they appeared in my daytime life. Except that they turn up in most unexpected places, materialise at odd times, and occasionally perform acts both unforgettable and strange. My wife of forty years standing has by far the most frequent presence. This is hardly surprising as she is almost always near me at night, when the stories are being told. With some notable exceptions, she features in the stories not unlike she features in my daytime life – loyal, loving, strong and generous. The same goes for my son and daughters. They are mostly true to their gratifying selves, though regressing periodically to a distant age when they were still absorbed in the excitement and labour of growing up. The roles my mother and father play are of a different order. For one thing, they rise from the dead although by story telling time they have been under the ground for over two decades. Sometimes they pretend to have been around all these uninterrupted years, stubbornly insisting that they never did die. But at other times their reincarnation catches me by surprise as they descend on me all of a sudden, full of snap, vigour and good health. I marvel that they are still alive. On such occasions they are eager to learn, as I am eager to recount, what transpired in the intervening time. On the whole, my father remains instantly recognisable, distinct in speech, gesture and physical form. My mother, in contrast, is more volatile, taking on numerous guises, going as far as a terrified little mouse. My close friends and working colleagues assume their customary identities except that they are capable of doing and saying things they would never attempt in daytime.

Apart from the anonymous, the unnamed ones distinguished by class, and those close to me, there are characters that belong strictly to the narrative of the night.

> *'My daughter's doll in a wedding dress performs, on her own, a forward tumble. All the joints of her loose-limbed body are so overstretched that her grotesquely elongated body falls apart'*

> *'A giant teddy bear, about my height, furry with a little pot belly, is standing about ten yards away. He is fully alive, able to understand and speak human language. We are in the park of my childhood home, about to set off towards the town centre. I am supposed to be in charge. The trouble is that the teddy, being an animal, cannot conform to the dictates of human civilisation. I am at unease, being conscious of having no means of controlling him. I expect he will embarrass me'*

What I find fascinating here is that the doll and the teddy bear are animate and inanimate at the same time. They are toys and live creatures, displaying features appropriate to both. The doll clearly remains a doll whilst doing gymnastics; the teddy bear remains a teddy whilst being an animal and conversing with me as a human. Such anomalies do not seem to bother the narrator. It is as if the daytime distinctions

do not matter, as if he feels no need to obey them. The same cavalier attitude applies to differentiation of species.

'A girl and I walk along a broad pavement. We are both of very short stature which brings our eyes close the ground. In the cobbled stone gutter tiny creatures, having both mechanical and human characteristics, move about. From time to time one of them gets stuck in the cobbles. I bend down to free them. One creature behaves more and more independently. She makes her own bed and lies comfortably in it'

'In a large swimming pool, a creature both penguin and human is performing a feat of skill. He is quite cocky about his success. The last feat involves a black hat with a wide rim. The water breaks through the hat so that only the rim remains, floating on the water'

Tiny gutter creatures are, with perfect ease, mechanical products and miniscule human beings simultaneously. How the penguin is also a human being is unexplained and has no graphic representation. He has no arms, no bits of human face but nevertheless he is a human being without ceasing to be a penguin.

'A large black bear is taken to trial. At the end of the session he is escorted to a police van on the way to prison. He moves like a man. The police have to protect him from the violence of a surrounding crowd. I feel sympathy for the bear – he has not been treated fairly.'

'My mother appears. She is a mouse/rat. The appearance is that of a mouse and the size that of a rat. I play with her, stroking her gently on a table. We talk in our native tongue. She is terrified, deeply and permanently frightened. I am conscious that treating her as a human makes her aware of her dual state and probably accentuates her suffering. She keeps repeating that she must go and tries to escape down a mouse hole. I tell my wife that if we are not careful she'll disappear and that will be the end of her.'

In our Western culture the mouse is associated with fear and flight. Whether in cartoons, stories or sayings, the mouse is leading a precarious existence, pursued by cats and humans many times his own size. My mother was an anxious, frightened person all her life. What is really interesting is that the narrator, instead of saying that she was like a mouse, actually makes her into one. The idea that something is *like* something else, the simile or the metaphor, is a sophistication that belongs to the adult day. At night, the association between two distinct things is expressed in stronger, more brutal terms. The narrator must have a primitive streak. As for the bear that aspires to be a man, that must draw its inspiration from childhood years where all things are inclined to come alive and assume the full range of human

attributes. What favourite doll, teddy or blanket, does not have a heart, a voice, and the understanding of the concerns of an anxious child. Even more intriguing are the creatures of a fantastical aspect amidst the rich pageant of night time tales.

'A group of grotesque, dark coloured men are walking ahead of me. They are all bent forward, naked from the waist up. Each of them has a monstrous protuberance growing out of his back. These protuberances are diverse: some are smallish clusters like leaves of a bush, others are large, bulbous bags. They are, however, all alike in being fleshy, carbuncular and evil smelling. Some of the men take bites out the outgrowths of men ahead of them. They appear to feed off the backs of their mates whilst looking slyly in my direction.'

'A giant creature, wasp-like but without wings, with a body made up of transparent egg jellies clustered into an elongated form with a hole in the middle. The entire body is sticky so that any wasp landing on it is stuck, crunched and consumed. The creature eats its own species if the victims are smaller. At the same time it has difficulties with its own stickiness as some of its organs are glued to the main body.'

'I am sitting at a round table with a large cage atop it. An enormous lobster-like creature is crawling inside the cage. A large fluffy bird of indeterminate form is precariously poised on my head. I am not afraid, just uneasy. I am careful not to move my head – the bird has smallish, sharp claws. As I cannot see the bird's head, I know nothing about her beak. The bird seems gentle, even benevolent. She flies off but then returns.'

'A great diversity of people, of different ages, genders and nationalities, are gathered in a communal hall. An impending doom hangs over the assembly. Perhaps a nuclear holocaust. Nothing can be done to arrest the coming explosion/ massacre. Somehow I find a door. There is a faint chance of escape if I achieve this mission: I am to cajole out of the hall little baby people, one by one. These baby type people turn from being human into "pebble-people", almost toy like. I have to sing, the pebble people have to take up the melody and pass it down the line. It is critical that the singing should on no account be interrupted as it moves from one individual to the next.'

Attempts to translate such fantastical inventions of the night into meaningful terms of even the most imaginative daytime stories, have generally proved fruitless. Somehow, any rational approach destroys the essentially irrational magic of narrations carried to the surface by dreams from regions where order of any kind does not reigns supreme. Every so often creatures appear that are almost human, but not quite. The narrator himself seems to be in some doubt.

'Lying on his back, rigid, a youthful male figure akin to a life sized doll. It is viewed from a low angle from the feet up, the face and head are not visible. He is wearing trousers and a bright blue jacket, buttoned severely tight. The posture is altogether distorted, the jacket is far too small for him. The clear impression is that he died because life was squeezed out of him.'

'A boy aged eight or nine with a face that seems to be cat mask or a cat face painted over his own. Lots of black lines. On closer inspection, the boy has deep cuts and scratches all over his face. I feel impelled to help. I lay my hands on a spray bottle, its content may or may not be the right treatment for the face. I am consulting someone invisible about the treatment who turns out to be a "wise" baby standing on top of an upright piano. He speaks with knowledge and authority concerning the liquid spray and its efficacy.'

There is a great deal that is both intriguing and bizarre in the two stories. As for the characters, there is some doubt about the boy with a cat mask or cat face, and the male figure akin to a life sized doll. Perhaps the narrator was caught in two minds and felt no need for a resolution.

So what does his choice and treatment of characters and places, tell us about the narrator?

All familiars come with a baggage whilst classified strangers are in the story for one purpose and one purpose only. I am uniquely familiar with the named characters, whilst a tag carrying stranger is identifiable by everyone in the world. I know my gardener, my doctor, my son, in my own particular way. They could appear in a story for any number of very good reasons. It could be because they have red hair, or because they are temporarily short of cash, or because we had a recent altercation, or even because I see something in them that I have decided to keep to myself. In stark contrast, at least in the domain of the stories, any old gardener is a gardener, a doctor a doctor, and a son a son. The tagged individuals speak a universal language but when it comes to familiars I am a privileged audience of one.

The same distinctions apply to locations. Most of the stories are launched with a mis-en-scene. A third of these places are taken from my day-time life, instantly recognised. A third are anonymous and yet another third are identified by a general term. An erstwhile school, a childhood home, a current place of work, all provide a familiar setting for a story to unfold; an undistinguished street, an open area, a characterless rural scene, are insignificant locations that contribute little to what follows. A fortified castle, a railway station, a football ground, define a class of locations and are thus integral to the development of the tale.

A story may begin thus: 'A duel was fiercely fought under a clear sky with swords glinting in the blazing sun…' or thus 'A duel was fiercely fought in the courtyard of a castle…' or thus 'A duel was fiercely fought in the playground of my secondary school…' When location is ignored or appears anonymous, the duel could take place

anywhere and the focus is solely on what is happening. When the scene of the action is set in an unnamed castle, the story teller assumes his audience is familiar with the characteristics of a castle. What matters is precisely the castle-ness of the location. Whereas the setting of the playground of my school confines the event to one highly specific place. This place has manifold associations for me: friends, enemies, bullies, wimps, teachers in attendance and the games we used to play.

So does the narrator have only me in mind or does he intend to reach a wider audience? Or is he in two minds, more modest some of the time, more ambitious at others? But this seems unlikely since both familiars and strangers feature often the selfsame stories. So different from myths, legends, and classic children's stories, all dispensing with familiars of any kind. Even when they are given names and sketchily described, the character of each hero, villain, bit-time player, is dominated by one attribute at the expense of the rest.

Then again, the story teller may not be bothered with the size of the audience. May be he does not have a fully accomplished story in mind but makes it up as he goes along. Perhaps, he lets the moving story lead him on. If so, this would provide me with a better clue to the working of his mind. The more I read and re-read the nine hundred stories, the more convinced I am that this is indeed the case. For very few of these stories have a conventional beginning, a satisfactory ending, a cohesive middle or a neat tying up of all the loose ends.

So if he does not plot and plan, but lets the story rip, how does such an unholy mix of familiars and strangers come about? Where else do we find a similar melange? Certainly not in the adult daytime world. As we come across them, a son is seldom without a parent; a teacher is usually attached to pupils; a doctor has a bedside manner; a leader is never without followers; servants come with troubles in their personal lives and pupils will be dim or bright, amenable or a pain in the neck. On the whole, few individuals will allow themselves to be rigidly confined within a single, austere, circumscribed class. Conversely, relations, friends and acquaintances, known to us in the round, will from to time assume one attribute that eclipses all the rest. A colleague at work, intent on promotion, can be easily transformed into a rival to the extent that he is a rival and nothing else.

My narrator, in sharp contrast, does not seem to have the option of shrinking familiars to figures of one dimension, nor of lifting strangers beyond their classification. Those close to me, being part of my life, remain unquestioned familiars no matter how strangely they act. And the strangers, however they strive, cannot become familiars. There is no cross over, no interchange.

I can think of just one other place in the psychic universe where the custom of my narrator is the custom of the land. The very young child, at the dawn of thinking, in the midst of creating his own language, tends to divide humanity thus. Those close to him, the ones he trusts and loves, those on whom his life depends, are recognised in their totality by a multiplicity of signs. They are imprinted in memory in their own complexity, before words are formed and classification begins. More than that,

they originate a class apart that persists throughout the child's adult life. The mother becomes a mother figure, the father evolves into a father figure, figures so profoundly familiar that they impose themselves even on total strangers. Characters on the child's periphery, appearing for the first time, moving superficially in and out of sight, are, in contrast, distinguished by one outstanding feature and allotted recognition by a single sign. It may be a beard, a uniform, the name of a dog, or a colour. So any bearded man becomes 'uncle' if an uncle was so originally identified; every man in a uniform 'soldier'; every red fruit 'tomato'; every dog 'Koko' if that was the name of the first dog recognised.

The realisation that the narrator feels himself at home in the region of a very early childhood, that he shares, in some essentials, the region's mode of thinking, comes both as relief and hope. Relief, because we have something in common. Hope, because studying closely the style and content of his stories is beginning at last to reveal his identity.

Fragment 2
Turning into the hero

The principal character in the stories, taken overall, is me. In over half the stories, and I say that without boasting, I am the hero. No other character comes even close. As for the rest, in about a quarter of the stories I am relegated to a minor role. In the rest of the stories I am a mere observer, hardly worth a mention.

There is no doubt that when the narrator designates me, he means no one else. My formal identity, in the course of the stories, is not challenged. Yet, I do not always recognise myself, at least not as the man who looks back at me in the mirror. He is sometime smaller or younger, of another gender or even of another species. He may be frightened when I would be calm, and resolute when I would be scared out of my wits. He is capable of doing things I could never do, and incapable of accomplishing what I do with ease. He can be friendly to my enemies and hostile to my friends. He utters the unspeakable and words fail him when the message is simplicity itself.

Of this disparity I do not complain. What would be the point? For all I know, the narrator has his own agenda and I instinctively feel that such intimate matters are for us alone.

'Holiday camp with family. Relaxed atmosphere. I am on my way to a large swimming pool where children are playing. I have to search for my swimming trunks and find my way around the camp. A tallish young man singles me out. He approaches. He implies he is an official and wants to interrogate me. I ask for his credentials. He becomes defensive. I attack him and he retreats. A small crowd has gathered round us. It becomes obvious that the man is up to mischief. I punch him in the stomach but I can hardly reach it. My eyes are level with the stomach and I cannot see anything above it because I am half the size of the man. My blows are feeble; the stomach muscles repel each blow. It is like a child trying to punch an adult.'

I wonder if the narrator is so immersed in the past that he thinks about a time when I was still a child?

'I am staying with my wife in a five star hotel. We come down to have breakfast on the terrace. The tables are set with white linen and silver cutlery. Two other couples are sitting at "our" table. I order soft boiled eggs. I am served something resembling an irregular fluffy yellow ball which I accept as an egg. Before I have had the chance to eat the egg, lunch is served with great flourish by the headwaiter. He places in front of me a meat dish garnished with potatoes and vegetables. He

asks me if I wish to have some beans. I think of Heinz baked beans and refuse. The headwaiter says: "Oh, you must have some of my beans" and without waiting for my response he dishes some green beans on my already overflowing plate. I now have the problem of eating simultaneously the egg, the principal course and a creamy pudding that appears suddenly on the table. I reflect on how anyone can be expected to eat breakfast and lunch, savoury and sweet stuff all at once. Later on, the headwaiter asks if we are guests of the hotel. I reply "yes, I have a box here" but then correct myself by "no, not a box, I meant to say a room". In bringing the bill, the headwaiter asks me about the others, who have in the meanwhile left the table. I indicate that I have no idea about the others. He now turns to the person on my left who is now not my wife but a man. The man confirms to the headwaiter that all the others are also guests staying at the hotel. The headwaiter and one of the attendant waiters have an exchange in their native Italian to the effect that the man's statement is acceptable because he is superior to me. I object, saying "No, he is not my superior, he is just my husband". Having said that I realise that I have been a wife all along."

At the beginning of the story I appear as my usual self. Presumably I must be quite successful to afford staying at a five star hotel. I am married and on friendly enough terms with other couples to spend a holiday together. The white linen table cloth and silver cutlery betokens of another age but I often have soft boiled eggs at breakfast. The trouble starts with the fluffy yellow balls, the exaggerated speed of service, the compression of a three course meal and the green beans virtually forced on me. When it comes to hotels, I am not a particularly difficult guest but I make up my own mind as to what and when I eat. To be constrained in any way is something I tend not to tolerate. The mistaking of a room for a box makes matters a little worse, it is a confusion that belongs to a young child, as is forced feeding. But that the narrator should make of me a woman is a real shock. It stretches credibility too far, it is insulting my intelligence, it undermines the foundations of my self belief. The idea that the narrator made an unintended slip is squashed by the story he told me next.

'I am heavily pregnant, about to give birth. There is a woman beside me. A doctor and midwife are also in attendance. The birth begins with the two professionals tending to me between my legs. There is some discussion about the width of my hips and the flexibility of my joints. We all wonder whether the baby will come out naturally, with or without medical intervention. Something is beginning to emerge from between my legs but the attendants decide that the baby is not yet ready to move. They think it may take another day or two. They plug the exit hole with something white.

I ask myself how the baby can come out of my body, me being male. I realise immediately that there has to be a caesarean section. I visualize a horizontal line across my abdomen where the cut is to be made.'

It is quite obvious that the narrator goes out of his way to persuade me that I am a female. Being pregnant and about to give birth is about as definitive as you can get. The amazing thing is that I go along with his story about pregnancy and the mechanics of birth whilst still maintaining that I am a man. The contradiction does not seem to matter. The narrator and I live happily together riding diametrically opposite beliefs. But then comes the caesarean section as an ingenious logical device in an attempt to reconcile the irreconcilable. As if switching genders is not enough, the hero becomes a member of another species.

'I am part of a group of men with extraordinarily long arms. We live in the branches of trees, swinging lazily from branch to branch. The group is engaged in a ritual competitive game. The rules are something to do with moving in accordance with a geometric pattern but in harmony with the other players. So the game is both cooperative and competitive. My angle of vision is not from above the scene but through my own moving head – as if a camera was fixed on my forehead.'

Locating the hero in the distant past is too frequent, too insistent to be accidental. It is not an occasional lapse of memory with the story teller forgetting that I am an adult, no longer a child. His painting me in the guise of a child, or acting like one, is quite deliberate. And he goes even further than that, he is in the habit of telling his story from the child's point of view, recounting events as a child would see them.

Being a child hero does not really bother me. After all, it is only a question of time before one grows up. Being made a woman is something else. The narrator, if he knows me at all, should be well aware how I have always prized my manhood, blessing God every morning for having created me not a woman. The difference was dinned into my head from day one: girls cry, boys don't; girls are scared, boys are brave; girls dance, boys fight; girls become mothers, boys conquer and achieve. To be transformed into a female and turned into a wife by someone who should know better, quite frankly, is unacceptable. Even worse, being left nine months pregnant, on the cusp of giving birth, the dreaded moment of every bride, seems cruel, calculated and sensational.

On the other hand, I have no objection to regressing a few million years to swing freely from branch to branch. Quite the opposite, I admire the range of the narrator's imagination, or range of memory, capable of transporting the hero to a past when man was half a higher ape. So vivid is this transport that the hero finds himself physically in the midst of a group playing games, so typically, both cooperative and competitive. And, even more significantly, he sees not from without but through eyes that move in line with the movement of his body and head. He is truly within the story, not separate from it.

Being the hero in most of the stories, having a minor part in others and banished to the auditorium in the rest, is disconcerting. I never know what to expect. How will I feature in the next story to be told? Does my narrator decide on a whim? Or has he

reasons and keeps the reasons to himself? I am used to story tellers who, generally speaking, prefer one style and keep to it once and for all. They will write either in the first person or the third person, refraining from switching between such two vastly differing modes of narration. In the first case the author is personally involved and has first hand experience of the events he recounts but is restricted to what he touches, hears or sees. In the second, he is absent from the scene yet knows all that happens, might have happened, why it happened and all there is to know.

With my narrator the dividing line is even more heavily engraved. As a hero, I am not only personally involved but everything that happens has directly to do with me. It is I who travel and have to find the way. The dangers are those I encounter, the objectives are for me to attain, the decisions are mine to take. The words of others are always addressed to me. The enemies are my enemies, the friends my friends and the objects scattered around are all within my reach. But when reduced to a mere spectator, I am detached from the fate of even those who are closest to me. But what I find most bewildering is the narrator's facility of crossing the dividing line from one mode to the other, from story to story and sometime even within the story itself.

The narrative literature of the daytime offers no clues as to the seemingly arbitrary night time melange of first and third person modalities of style. In fact, the more sophisticated the story, the more distinct and rational is the justification of the literary choice. Trying to assuage my bewilderment, I am forced backwards, moving to the more primitive forms of narrative life. Descending to the regions of early childhood I follow the convoluted footsteps of my narrator as he meanders between the present and the past. At the dawn of thought, as I began haltingly to find my voice, which came first: the ability to stand aloof and survey the moving scene, or occupying the centre of the surrounding world, unaware that I was there at all. Which came first, getting to know the world with me in plain action, or me in quiet contemplation, looking at it from the sidelines, safe, inactive and aloof? Putting it thus, the question answers itself. The stories with me as the hero are primary, those with me in a lesser role are obviously secondary and the ones where I merely observe, come a distant last.

This particular story teller has a preferred narrative approach yet with enough talent to vary it to the needs of the tale. In his preferred mode, speaking in the first person, he sees the world as I used to see it at the very outset, before I became clever enough to abstract myself from the general scene. Where I am a mere observer, in the style of the third person, the story takes on a more sophisticated form. It corresponds to a later period, to childhood years that form another language, a language with a grammar of concepts and of an objectivity of sorts. Stories with me in a supporting role are, obviously, somewhere in between. But even acknowledging that the three styles of the stories draw on three successive historical periods of a long buried past, I am still left in a quandary as to how and wherefore the narrator makes his choice. But then I am only beginning to surmise who he really was and where he comes from.

Fragment 3

Moving a great deal while being immobile

The adventurous return of Ulysses is perhaps the most famous story of a journey in literary history. Its title became a term in its own right, bestowed on any epic voyage. An Odyssey means nowadays a prolonged, laborious quest moving slowly towards an end particularly difficult to attain. That this narrative has become one of the greatest classics, could have many reasons: the poetry of its language, the imaginative vividness of its incidents, its aptness as a powerful metaphor of human life, and, no doubt, others. But what matters to my quest is that the story is created as a journey characterised by a series of physical movements curtailed by numerous obstacles and a great variety of severe difficulties. To a lesser degree virtually all stories told to children or adults feature characters moving from one place to another. These moves are seldom simple or easy. If they were so, they would not have deserved a mention.

Even so, I could not help noticing my story teller's obsession with movement. Their prominence, both in frequency and emphasis, is overwhelming. Walking, running, climbing, travelling by diverse vehicles on land, sea and air, the stories are full of them. About half the movements have an explicit purpose, the other half appear to have none. Many of the movements encounter difficulties of one sort or another: physical obstacles, conflicting choice of routes, disorientation, vehicles out of reach or out of control, rugged terrain and even strangely disobeying limbs. But then, more rarely, the hero moves with an exceptional facility not granted to ordinary humans.

> *'I am on the ramparts of a medieval castle built with huge stones. There are two ways down to the sea. I take one of them and realize midway that the route is blocked by a metal screen. I am annoyed with myself because I should have foreseen this barrier, having been there before. I have to climb back to the castle and go down the other route. Reaching level ground, I have to slide on my stomach to the water edge. People are watching, concerned lest my stomach is scraped on the heavy, sharp stones.'*

This brief story has a few significant, oft repeated, features: a difficult or arbitrary choice of routes, an impassable obstacle, a previously familiar environ and a difficult physical movement. My move does not appear to have a reason: why am I sent from the top of the castle to the sea?

> *'Holiday camp. The dining room is set apart from the bedroom complex. The way to the dining room is complicated partly because it is set at a much lower level. My wife and I are on our way to the dining room, she is descending some steps. I am*

following her, ready to jump down to where she is standing. I suddenly realise that the height differential is too great. I am afraid I am going to be hurt, even killed, by jumping. I think of alternatives like hanging down by my finger tips before letting go. In the end I take another route with a lesser jump. After a safe landing and a little judder I conclude that the height jumped was still over ambitious. I run towards my wife with a sense of achievement.'

Here is the choice of routes again and an obstacle presented by the height differential. At least there is clear objective to the move: the dining room where, presumably, some food is to be had. I note in passing the significance of the differential heights: either they are built for giants or I have shrunk to toddler size. As my wife steps down easily, it is I who must be a two years old who runs to an adult, proud of a feat.

'We are skiing in Switzerland with my brother and his family. There is very little snow; the half-way station is virtually bare. We hurry to gather up our skis. My own skis are a little way down the slope; I slip and start falling headlong over the edge of a precipice. Part of my body is still on the flat ground but no way can I lever myself up and avoid falling on rocks a few hundred feet down. My hands are pressing down a slight ledge, keeping my position precariously stable. Someone grabs my ankles and yanks me to safety. I cannot see who it is. When I recover from this terrifying ordeal I ask my wife who saved my life. She replies: "Who do you think? It was your brother, of course".'

My narrator is partial to endings. The dwindling snow signifies for him the end of the winter not the prospect of spring. I suspect he has an unhealthy preoccupation with death. Whose? His own, mine, or ours? But what I find striking in the story is that I am immobile yet compelled to move. Where else do I remember having been close to an edge, only to be picked up by someone stronger, someone I could not see?

'I am, accompanied by a shadowy figure who looks after me like a benevolent parent. We are driving back from a far away place. My jersey was left behind. Despite a day's drive, we decide to retrieve the jersey. We reach a difficult terrain, have to climb over rocks and follow a narrow path. We come to a ravine with a ladder over it. I have to cross by swinging hand over hand. The shadowy figure encourages me but I am still afraid and hesitate. I see some soft material at the bottom of the ravine to cushion a possible fall. So I set off and make the crossing.

A day's drive to retrieve a jersey is out of all proportion. The difficult terrain, the rocks, the narrow path, the ravine are typically the narrator's stocks in trade. Being encouraged to swing hand over hand on a horizontal ladder takes me back into a remote past with adults pushing a hesitant child to attempt a climbing frame.

'I am driving from the South towards Paris. Due to a moment's inattention whilst reading a newspaper, I find myself on a minor narrow road with a deteriorating surface. I have to weave slowly through crowds of pedestrians moving in the opposite direction. I come to a T junction manned by a policeman. I ask him the way to Paris. He indicates a right turn but I think the shorter route takes me left. The policeman admits that it is also possible to go that way. I turn left but now I am riding a bicycle. Road works are in progress but I expect this to apply to just a short section, before the road rejoins the main artery. The road rises steeply. I have to dismount and push the bike. The road turns into a very steep path so I have to carry the bike on my shoulders. A building blocks the path. I have to climb it'

Here again is the forced choice between two possible directions. The movement becomes increasingly difficult and constrained: from car on the main road to a car on crowded minor tributary, from car to bicycle, from riding the bike to carrying it, from steep path to a blocked one, from walking to climbing. The hero is compelled to move on against increasing odds.

'We are walking on a rugged terrain and have to pick our steps carefully. Time and again we have to choose between diverging paths or just move across fields with no paths at all. A large herd of sheep is driven alongside. We have to be cautious walking among the sheep. I am worried lest they stampede and catch us in a narrow crevasse. The herdsman is young and inexperienced – he is not in control of his herd. The sheep are crowding and pressing against a gate with vertical bars. The pressure mounts. The sheep are literally squeezed through the bars of the gate. Some of them get through unscathed but others are mangled. I see one ewe cut in half but still alive and moving.'

Beyond typical elements, such as confusing choice of routes and rugged terrain, the story focuses on diminishing freedom of movement. The hero is running out of space and is in danger of being overwhelmed. The outcome finds expression in the grizzly fate of mangled ewes. The narrator appears to traverse once more regions of very early childhood when room for movement is often arbitrarily inhibited with the child squeezed into limited space.

'I find myself in a garden, having been allocated a bed in a corner adjacent to the street. A high barbed wire fence protects me from an exuberant and hostile crowd of youths. They shout and throw things into the garden. I find myself wandering in my underpants all over the streets of the city trying to find my way back to the garden where I left my trousers and other belongings. This search proves long and frustrating. I am convinced I know the geography of the streets well, yet I cannot find the place. I do not remember the name of the street nor the number of the house but I am certain that the place is on one of three parallel streets, all abutting

a square with a church in the middle. I go round and round to no avail. A little girl passes me and, remembering that she should not associate with strangers, runs towards a nearby shopping precinct. I run alongside, trying to reassure her. We become acquainted and converse. She recommends I buy a map, but the shop has most inadequate maps. They are sketchy, too general or out of date, with pages missing. I set out now in a determined mood to cover systematically the relevant area. On the way I pass a barber shop. One of the barbers is shaving himself. He has a lot of foam on his face and an old fashioned razor in one hand. Outside the shop there is an extensive display of razors. I select one before realising that I have no money on me to pay for it. The barber comes out to me. He is friendly, telling me not to worry about payment. I promise him he will be well rewarded once I find my belongings.'

A recurrent theme: the hero is totally disoriented. His bed is in the corner of a garden. He is convinced he knows the whereabouts of his home yet knows neither name of the street nor the house number. He is desperate to get back home. Maps are of no use. The shape and layout of the location are clear in his mind but, try as he might, he cannot fit them into a familiar context. I wonder how many times this happened to me when I had a clear visual image but not yet a language of names and numbers to match it.

'I am ready to leave for home. I have a lot of trouble getting back. Although I have a clear visual map in my head, I cannot seem to follow it. I do not remember my home address, name of street, number of the house. I drive up and down streets trying to find a familiar feature. I am now in a panic, thinking I am going senile. The brakes of my car are failing. I nearly crash a few times. I come to a dead end because the way is cut off by a building site. I cannot get through with the car. The fence of the building site has been breached, creating a short cut. I use the hole in the fence to get through.'

A familiar scenario: the hero needs to get home. He has no doubt about the location of his home but he is disoriented. He has a visual picture but no matching language. But is it the hero who is in a panic, or is it I, the audience, who know that such mismatch at my age means senility?

'I go up the stairs inside a public building. A concrete staircase with cast iron handrails. As I ascend from the first to the second floor I encounter an odd situation: the stairs are interrupted by a wall and a wide gap so that further progress is impossible. It is as if the architect or the builders made a mistake. I struggle up somehow to find myself in a big room full of important people attending a conference. My cousin says "I shall definitely not make coffee for everybody".

The obstacle in this story is a strange one in *that it should not be there*. The hero is perfectly well acquainted with a regular staircase and expects simply to go up it. He encounters, however, a fundamental fault with the construction itself. So the narrator assumes, in this instance, that his audience is well aware of the world as it should be.

'Kolozsvar, the place of my birth, 1944. The Jews are being rounded up: confusion, agitation. We are not threatened, so we are helping others. I have to find my best friend and save him. There is some doubt where he lives. It could be in either of two similar, steeply rising thoroughfares both of which played a significant part in my childhood. With my mother I go to one of these streets which means we have to cross the only bridge in the city. A stream of humanity is moving in the opposite direction. We have to fight our way through them. Eventually we reach the targeted house which turns out to be my old kindergarten. My mother has the key, opens the door. We go in feeling much relief. But the house is empty – no one is there.'

The move here has a very definite purpose. The difficulties are the uncertainty of the location and the tide of opposing humanity. The narrator takes me to my kindergarten but it is introduced as a memory, so he is aware I am now past that age. Yet, strangely, he thinks it is 1944 and I am 14 years old. The ending of the story is sad and ambiguous: is my friend absent because the kindergarten years are over, was he rounded up, or has simply vanished into the unknown?

'I am playing in a football match. My legs are heavy as lead and I have no hope of reaching any of balls flying around me. Eventually the ball is kicked sky-high and descends as slowly as a balloon. We are awaiting its descent from underneath.'

Obviously, the story teller is familiar with my enduring passion for the game. In many of the stories the hero scores goals freely, in others, like this one, he literally cannot move his legs. They are held back by an invisible, mysterious, force that does not permit any movement.

'With two companions I set out on an outing. We come to barren, steep mountains. Some of the mountain faces are too sheer to climb. I look for easier routes and find one. The man to my left disappears; the man to my right follows my lead. Even so, I have to retrace my steps a few times finding an accessible route to the top. Dry tree trunks protrude. They have holes in their middle. The holes are filled with water. Colourful, decorative fish swim in the water. I call my companion over to show him the strange sight. I push my face close to the water so that the fish almost touch my nose. A pleasurable feeling. We reach the top gently. Ahead of us stretches a pleasant, green scene with peculiar habitations: huge chimney breasts built in horizontal layers. I climb one of these structures – it is steep but stepped. In mid-climb I discover that these structures are in fact made up of ladies' handbags. I say

to a woman bystander: "How can you possibly use all these handbags?!" I climb down.'

Although on the whole the story teller is keen on the difficulties of moving, sometimes he is in a mood to dwell on its rewards. After the challenge of a laborious climb the hero is beguiled by pleasant sights and extraordinary experiences. Even the climb itself can be fascinating as the hero discovers whilst standing on a mound of ladies' handbags. There is a whole raft of stories with exceptional forms of movement not experienced in everyday life. Chimney breasts built of handbags is the product of the narrator's extraordinary faculty of imagination. He seems able to bring together things that are far apart in daytime, oblivious to the demands of reason and sense.

'A little girl aged about seven, in a white tutu, is dancing. Beautiful wings are attached to her shoulders. The wings are wonderfully coloured and appear functional. The colours are red, brown and gold. It is as if an eagle's wings had been amputated, rearranged and planted to grow from girl's shoulder blades. In dancing, the girl opens and shuts the wings. This enables the performing of movements she could not accomplish wingless. At the end of her performance an outburst of clapping greets her successful handling of the wings.'

The imaginative wings of the story teller are clipped. He provides wings but they are attached, only *as if* they grow from the girl's shoulder blades. They do not take the girl into the air and help her fly. There are moments in the stories where daytime realities seep into the wildness of the night.

'I am standing at the edge of our swimming pool. I dive in but instead of hitting the water, I fly over the pool with three breaststrokes. I land on other side of the pool without having touched water. I am astonished. I try to find my wife as witness of this amazing performance. She is talking to some people. I drag her to the pool and give her an identical demonstration. I am still astonished and can scarcely bring myself to believe what has just taken place.'

The feats of the hero are sometimes so incredible that I, as audience, force him to repeat the act in front of unimpeachable witnesses.

'I am in a strange city with someone younger and smaller than me. We are waiting to take our turn to fly a newly invented contraption. There is some hesitation as to which one of us shall have the first go. The contraption is an inflatable divers' suit. It has some sort of gas that makes it rise up in the air. It can be controlled, with some practice, as to height and direction. I fly about the place, at second floor height. The controls are quite tricky.'

The hero has a great time flying but the narrator feels the need to furnish a credible contraption to make this possible. In broad daylight, we are unlikely to find angelic little ballet dancers balancing on their tiptoes with the help of home grown wings. Or people swimming miraculously in the air, or pilots flying inflatable contraptions at second floor level along the streets of strange cities. So once again I have to ask myself where does this narrator come from, what world does he inhabit, from whence does he draw his inspiration?

There are two moments in life when our awareness of movement is at its most acute: during sleep when we would like to move but cannot and as toddlers trying to learn to walk. As an adult, most moving is taken for granted. But there was a time when climbing off a bed, negotiating stairs, crawling from one end of the room to the other, taking just a few steps, getting through doors, were all massive undertakings. Achievement came at a heavy cost: in frustration, repeated disappointments, huge physical effort and an unbearable crawling of time. Back then I was not sure where I was, where I was going, and how I was going to get there. I was vaguely aware of only two places: home and away. When at home my desires lay outside; when outside, I was drawn to the warm familiarity of a home. But it was also there or thereabouts that I saw myself swimming above the water, and flying effortlessly in mid air. And this was the moment when movement was most deeply felt and most gravely etched in my unremembered memory.

With the stories told me at night, held back from moving, trawling over my early years, it is only to be expected for movement to be such a predominant theme.

Fragment 4

In the world of numbers

Historical accounts tend to reflect numbers as they occur in the real world. The narrator may have met a stranger, may have had two alternatives, seen three birds on the horizon, spotted five stars in the night sky. A table may have been set for eight, eggs bought by the dozen and the cashier paid by a twenty pounds note. There is a rough frequency with which numbers appear in the natural course of daily life. Most probably the number 2 takes precedence for obvious reasons: we have two eyes, ears, arms, two lungs, two kidneys and two of some other internal organs; we mate in pairs; forks on the road and logic offer two alternatives; language tends to polarise itself into a pair of opposites: large and small, short and long, weak and strong, light and dark, warm and cold, and so on.

In stories led by the imagination, some numbers acquire a significance of their own. Fairytales and myths often feature a single treasured item, a holy grail; a separated pair that has to be reunited; three sons, three tasks, three muses; and, of course, always the magic number 7: seven dwarfs, seven days of creation, seven circlings of Jericho; seven wonders of the world, the seventh son of the seventh father, and so on.

My narrator seems obsessed by the number 2. In crude terms, this number features in well over a third of stories, sometimes twice or three times in the same one. The number 1, as a specific reference, features hardly at all although there are plenty of single characters and singular objects present on their own. The number 3 does well but not half as well as the number 2. Sadly, the other single digit numbers make it only about once in every twenty tales.

Even discounting the instances where the plot makes the number 2 mandatory, like the purchase of a pair of shoes, the frequency of this number is out of all proportion compared to its occurrence in daytime stories. The stories are densely sprinkled with this number: 2 judges sit on the bench; a house has 2 entrances; 2 weeks elapse for a telegram to be delivered; 2 decks of cards to play with; 2 messages for my father's birthday; 2 strangers break through 2 white painted doors; a giant packet with 2 chocolate bars; 2 boats are available to hire; a bag has 2 bottles; 2 identical keys to open the self same door; 2 doctors attend me; 2 flags to be hoisted; 2 mattresses to chose from; 2 kinds of bullet; 2 identical girls; 2 kittens and so on and so forth.

'The doorbell rings. I have to go down 2 floors *to admit a woman. In the hall there is a delivery of a large parcel from Hungary: second rate biscuits. The biscuits are poorly packed. They fall out of their packets and make a mess on the floor. Back on the* second floor*, looking out of the window I see* 2 huge trees *virtually decimated. Their main branches are lopped off – the trees look mutilated and bare. The phone*

rings. The line is bad, barely audible. I hear 2 voices*: male predominant, female soft and in the background. The call is from Hungary, somebody wants to discuss a computer game he invented.'*

'My wife, unbeknownst to me, bought a house in the city. It is a small house, as she says, 2 up 2 down. *It is almost poky. The* 2 downstairs rooms *are quite small – from them you can see the sloping roof over half an attic that has a period feel. She points out that quite a lot of work needs to be done but she will convert the place for her studio. She is in one of those incisive, go-ahead, determined moods. I feel left out and wonder how I could have allowed her to buy the property without consulting me. It is early morning, barely dawn. We go out of the house. A high ranking priest, dressed in official vestments, is waiting for my wife who is wearing a white surplice. They stand side by side. Behind them* 2 lines of men*, in white surplices, are standing in pairs. They are off in a procession to hold a service somewhere else. We wonder where to leave the* 2 Yale keys *to our house. Putting them under the mat seems stupid. No resolution. I am in search of a newspaper shop. After a few vain attempts I find one full of people in white surplices, obviously part of the procession. I find myself alone in a cathedral open to tourists on guided tours. The guides are catholic priests. I am hanging precariously to a statue high up on the wall. Next to me, an alcove leads to a convenient passage. To get there I have to step on a narrow, unsafe projection. Looking down, a sheer drop to the floor of the cathedral means certain death. I am stuck up there paralysed by fear. A group of tourists led by a priest squeezes past me, stepping on the protruding ledge. I follow the group but on crossing the abyss I drop one of the* 2 Yale keys*. It lands with a loud clatter on the cathedral floor.* 2 char ladies *are sweeping the floor. One of them picks it up and hides it. I run down lots of steps around a central pillar and pounce on the char lady, wrestling the key from her closed fist. I tell her I will make sure she is punished by being deprived of a share from the tips. She accepts the punishment as right and proper. On my way out I follow* 2 married couples*, middle aged, who form a cohesive, mature, harmonious grouping. We are still in the cathedral but now down in the vault softly carpeted with a low ceiling. The inward curving walls are totally covered in a mysterious writing of an unknown alphabet. It has an oriental feel. One of the men claims he knows the script but cannot remember its terms and meaning. The group discusses to which restaurant they should invite the guide/ priest who did such an excellent job.'*

The narrator is well aware that I would be shocked if my wife purchased a house for us, especially a poky one, without my blessing. Nevertheless he makes her do it. Or perhaps he makes her do it in order to shock me. Then, without further ado, he places me in a most precarious position where I am paralysed by fear. Fortunately, he is merciful enough to bring me down safely to a solid ground floor. All that, and what happens thereafter, makes for an exciting adventure but why is there 2 of nearly everything?

'I am at a kiosk buying condoms. They are wrapped in flat, square, brown packages. I hesitate as to how many to buy. I ask for 3. The female sales assistant says: "You are going to have some night!" Counting my loose change I am not sure I have enough cash to pay for 3. Another woman, in a superior position, suggests that I buy less than 3 since they are running out of supply and expecting other customers later. All in all we compromise and I end up with 2.'

It takes some doing, but the narrator does succeed in getting to his favourite number.

'An old man has his upper body jammed in a window. He seems unable to shift a shutter that pins him to the window frame. His face is worn, harassed. I am on my way to try to help but before I get to him he frees himself. I see one of his hands. It has only 2 truncated fingers. The palm of his hand is also bloody and wounded. When he frees his other hand, I see that it is white, transparent and horribly jelly-like. It is useless, rotting away.'

What a tortuous, gory, tale just to end up with an amputated hand and 2 truncated fingers?!

'I am involved with 2 businesses. I have partners. We are discussing the location of these 2 companies. I absolutely insist that they must be located in one building yet, at the same time, they must clearly remain 2 quite separate entities. So it is finally agreed that they be situated on separate floors of the same edifice with 1 receptionist looking after both.'

Although brief and uneventful, the story goes well beyond my business affairs. Now that I am in the middle of the day I see that it touches the most profound human predicament: we have to keep both our male and female selves in one human being where they are tightly bound together.

'2 electrical circuits lie on the floor. They are separate. One belongs to "us", the other, encased in black rubber coil, belongs to an "authority". We are trying to bring them together, that is to connect the 2 circuits so that we can get power from the authorised network into our own circuit. We must accomplish this operation in secret so that the authority is unaware of it.'

In this story the narrator takes the theme of *the two in one* a stage further. He pinpoints a difference between the two and takes sides. There is *us* and there is *them*. They have the authority and the power; we have the skill and initiative needed for unification.

'A pyramid shaped object, the size of a clenched fist. It is of a reddish, semi-transparent, semi-precious material. There are 2 of them. A business colleague and his son are part owners of these 2 pyramids. They are extremely valuable for 2 reasons: their unusually large size (like the Koh-I-Noor diamond) and the fact that they split into 6 layers repeatedly so that we are looking at the possibility of millions of small pyramids. These fragments could be dipped into liquid silver to form highly desirable pendant earrings. The prospect is one of a great fortune. The three of us discuss how to accomplish it.'

The story teller's addiction to his favourite number has me worried. Am I dealing with an unhinged obsessive, fixated on an arbitrary choice? And why 2? Why not 3 or 4 or 5? Is there something peculiar to this number that raises it above the others? Mathematics is not my field but even I can see that at least some other numbers, like the 1 and the 0, have an equal, if not superior, significance. So I turn my attention to find where else the 2 could have such a hyper inflated importance. And once again I find myself traversing the dim, distant regions of unremembered memories.

I cannot recall when I first noticed the difference between more and less. Perhaps, my mother had a more ample supply of milk in her left breast than in the right one, or the other way around. I imagine that the magic transformation of brute quantities into distinct numbers happened later than that. It may just be that the seismic moment of encountering 2 came when I had to give half my chocolate bar to my baby brother. But it is equally possible that this realisation struck me when I wanted to grab as many toys as I could but ended up with only 2, one in each hand. Or perhaps, when the idea sunk in that I had 2, but only 2, parents. But whatever form and shape it took, somewhere in my very early years, that moment changed my life. It opened the gate to the world of numbers for after discovering the 2, getting acquainted with the others was child's play. The 2 was my first number and as any other first; the first taste of a ripe melon; the first smell of warm milk; the first bicycle ride; the first friendship; the first kiss; the first fuck; the first sight of death; it has incorrigibly embedded itself in the workings of my mind.

Even more significantly than that, whenever any one thing is physically divided, it is always divided into 2. This is true no matter how many times this division is repeated to get from the original one to the ultimate number of portions required. And then there is the matter of differentiation, a principle that underlies the evolution of our bodies, our minds and our language. We like to pull apart the middle towards 2 contrasting poles, the better to see the world and improve our own vision. That is how the axis of East-West and North-South are born; how the brilliant light of day is set apart from utter darkness; how we feel the warmth against the cold and the cold against the warmth; how we measure pain and pleasure and weigh the good and evil on the 2 sides of the same scale. The irony is that having rent everything in two, the

two have to be held together somehow lest they wander off too far from each other and our race becomes extinct.

Thus I am relieved to realize that my story teller is definitely not insane, obsessed by an arbitrary number. He merely inhabits, at least part time, those primitive regions of my formative past where I was taught to absorb and forget what really matters. I am encouraged by yet another discovery of the landscape that seems to inspire my story teller. It could yield more clues that may, one day, bring us face to face with each other.

THE FOURTH PART
The oddity of the night

Fragment 1
Amidst gaps, ambiguities impossibilities and transformations

Some painters, composers and even writers have a distinct style that makes their work instantly recognisable. The paintings of Mantegna could not be attributed to any of the other Old Masters; the music of Johan Sebastian Bach is unmistakeably his or that of one of his closest relatives; no page of The Pickwick Papers could have been written by anyone but Dickens. So I surveyed the stories yet again trying to identify features unique to the work of my narrator.

Not surprisingly, I came across quite a few peculiarities that set the stories of the night apart from the narratives of the day. Some of these peculiarities exceed even the poetic license accorded to legends, never mind myths. Nor is it a matter of rare divergences, occasional aberrations scattered here and there. Almost none of the stories are free of at least one or two such oddities. I counted some one thousand and seven hundred of them across the nine hundred stories carefully preserved. These peculiarities tended to be lumped together as bizarre episodes of little consequence. Bizarre they may be, but they also differ from each other. I pursue them because the differences may be revealing and I need every scrap of every clue to get anywhere near the narrator. He is the most elusive of men.

'A desolate, largely uninhabited region. Vast tracts of stunted bush, all grey, no life, no green. I am entirely on my own, having come here by car. It is dusk with enough daylight to see outlines of things. I see a memorial in the form of a wall, perhaps something to do with the Holocaust. A small pile of sand in front of the edifice. The sand is made up of two substances: a light brown and a black. There are some horse droppings mixed up in it too. I have to shovel this pile on top of what might be a grave at the foot of the wall. Maybe to cover something. I think there is a neglect here that is shameful and should be rectified. I decide to attend to the matter in the morning. I lie down to sleep in a sleeping bag. At dawn, I see the lights of a car passing. The car stops on seeing me. Three men step out and approach. The leader, short, squat, fleshy, representing authority, tells me that no one is allowed to stop, or

sleep or be here at all. I must move on. I am in a primitive African village. A game of volley ball in progress. The players appear half-witted, moving at half speed. They have to be controlled by referees who carry guns, intimidating the players. It would seem that the players are a little mad, unpredictable and dangerous. They are also of very different heights. The volley ball turns into a game of football but the scene, the players, the man in charge; squat, short, fleshy, now carrying a machine gun, remain the same. I am invited to take control.'

The narrative has two glaring *gaps*: between me being in a grey, uninhabited region and finding myself in an African village, as well as between the volley ball and football games. But there are also obvious links: the same figure of authority, squat, short, fleshy, features in both scenes; the grey light pervading both dusk and dawn and the successive games played by the self same players. Then we have what appears an arbitrary introduction of two substances, a light brown and a black one with horse droppings added to them. They come in from nowhere and do not lead anywhere. The memorial may or may not be of the Holocaust, the grave may or may not be a grave and the hero has to cover something but does not know what. Such *ambiguity* and *vagueness* is an inherent feature of the night time narration. It is unlike the typical vagueness and ambiguity in daytime stories, where it occurs seldom and it is mostly temporary, awaiting clarification or eventual resolution.

Having to cover something unknown and being forbidden to be somewhere for no obvious reason, are driven *compulsions* that belong to the realm of the night. In the daytime self imposed arbitrary actions tend to lead to a mental institution. Although not impossible for referees of ball games to carry sub-machine guns, such a scenario is highly *improbable* even in places where football passion may rise to feverish heights. And the invitation to take control does not seem to flow from anything done or said before.

'My father enters the house. He is exactly as I remember him in the last years of his life. Just behind him my mother walks in. She seems as she was before her mental illness struck but the state of her health is doubtful. My father is obviously convinced she is cured. He is smiling and seems to say "Look here is Lili (my mother's name) – all is well". I am taken by surprise and overcome by indescribable happiness. My father and I embrace with tears of joy. I then rush to my mother, embrace and hug her. She seems happy but does not look me in the eye. She is silent. A younger generation of the family has to be introduced to my parents since they materialised during my parent's absence (through death). An illegitimate grandson of my father is there and I ask my father to guess who this man is. We can see his laughing face across the room. My father says "Kolozsvar?" (The city of our origin). I respond:"Yes, just after WW1, before you met Lili". I am trying to reassure him that his indiscretion does not matter. The conversation continues.

I: *"Juliska, don't you remember?"*
My father: *"Irenke, actually…a servant girl."*
I: *"The President of our Community revealed all to me"*
My father: *"Why does one have to rake over such intimate family business?!"*

Suddenly my father shrinks to the size of a four year old boy. He is standing on a small mound of earth, caught in brambles. I hold his hand and help him to jump off."

Continuing with the special night time peculiarities, the resurrection of my parents is, of course, remarkable yet by no means unique. They appear hale and hearty in quite a few stories, more often than not with the story teller oblivious to their death. Mostly in such instances, as in others of a different kind, the narrator is either unaware of, or simply disregards, *time constraints***.** What he is talking about could have taken place decades, years, months ago or belong to the present. It always takes the form of a live commentary unaffected by the fourth dimension. Except that, paradoxically, within the stories, the hero is very often short of time. In this story, however, the narrator is clearly aware of the elapsed time, my parent's long absence from the scene. The other spectacular feature is the *magic transformation* of my father into a dwarf, or perhaps into a little boy, who has to be helped down from a small mound of earth. It brings to mind fairytales.

'An international football match is being played indoors, on the floor of a dining room. The furniture is in the way and the ball is no bigger than an orange. I am a defender and score a goal across the carpet. When the opponents attack I discover that our goalkeeper, David Seaman the England goaly, cannot see well since his contact lenses have fallen out. He cannot even find the ball. I am the only one aware of the situation. I am anxious that the opposition should not discover our handicap and take advantage of it. But the opponents do score and are now ahead. Our manager, Bobby Robson of England, now activates a previously prepared plan by exchanging the keeper with an outfield player. It feels like a desperate stratagem.'

In addition to discarding the constraints of time, the story teller is contemptuous of *space limitation*. He is quite willing to transfer an international match from an arena holding thousands of spectators to the confines of a modest family dining room. The only minor concession he makes is to reduce the size of the internationally agreed dimensions of a ball to the fifth of its volume. That such a transfer is physically *impossible* does not bother him in the least. The idea of me playing for England is, to put it mildly, ridiculous. In contrast, the story teller is quite deliberate in drawing my attention to the dubious state of the goalkeeper's eyesight and its dire consequences. In fact, looking over the bulk of the stories, *impossibility, improbability* and significant *juxtapositions* are quite clearly tools of

his trade. Another kind of juxtaposition favoured by the story teller is what may be termed a parallel alignment.

'At the headquarters of Saddam Hussein 6 or 7 high ranking officials are seated round a table. Uday, Saddam's son and heir, is in charge of this inner cabinet. Saddam is pacing about the room. He asks the group how things are going. It is clear that the situation is dire but the people of the cabinet pretend that everything is fine. They are all barefaced liars, knowing full well that all is lost. My father has replaced Saddam, he is now facing the same disaster. I look him in the eye and tell him that something has to be done at once if the situation is to be saved. It may be too late already. To demonstrate the desperate state of his position a Swiss army knife is produced. Its main blade is broken, leaving only a quarter of its length as a stump.'

The sudden substitution of Saddam by my father is a wonderful narrative device, especially since his son's position, as boss of the inner cabinet, sets out clearly my relationship with own my father. Or at least, what the story teller is telling me about it. Things are in a terrible mess, we are both culpable and the only slim hope of salvation lies in both of us facing up to the ugly facts. No use pretending any longer. The brutal introduction of the truncated blade of the Swiss army knife, once a fine instrument, without any comment, demonstrates the effectiveness of simply placing story elements side by side. I associate profoundly the Swiss army knife with my father. He carried one with him at all times. One of my earliest memories is an excursion to the woods where the knife was used to sharpen sticks for roasting bacon over a newly built fire. On my seventh birthday I was given my own Swiss army knife amidst a father-son ritual bonding. The literary device of juxtaposition, totally devoid of rational justification, is not only a most significant element of the narrative but one of the key clues to the nature of the narrating man himself.

'We are in an institution, a cross between a hospital and a prison. Young offenders are supervised by non-uniformed staff. The inmates are defiant, contemptuous of staff, in a state of near rebellion. The staff are weak, long-suffering and generally impotent. Yet, due to extraneous factors, there is still a sense of formal order. For example, when a group is sent upstairs, the inmates do obey but go marching disrespectfully, giving Nazi salutes and ruffling the hair of staff members. At a later visit we see signs of the suffering endured by the staff: one of them has turned grey, another has a black eye. A large, half collapsed block of flats. A uniformed man drives a mini bulldozer into a façade to reveal an arch with workmen sitting astride it. Miraculously, they survived the collapse and are being rescued. We witness from the outside of the institution a fight between inmates on top of a balcony. The fight is about two flags that need be hoisted: the old and the new. My wife and two friends are standing with me on a Paris pavement. The city is, however, in America. We remark on the chaos, anarchy and disorder we have just witnessed. We conclude

that it is not worthwhile accepting an academic post offered by Professor McMurray (my old professor of Moral Philosophy), in such a country.'

There are two gaps, either side of the collapsed building, and a spatial displacement of a Paris street, now located in America. There is the ambiguity of the institution – between hospital and prison. More significantly, the story teller chooses to insert the demolishing episode within the account of the delinquent chaos of a fragmenting institution. He also uses an arch to rescue workers and flags up the tension between the Old and the New. The choice of the professor of Moral Philosophy, as against that of Metaphysics, History, Science or any other branch of learning in this context, does not seem arbitrary either.

'Walking across a building site where works are about to start with a Hungarian business associate. He is short, dynamic, dominant, Jewish – reminiscent of my father. I question the exact nature of his activities. What puzzles me is the fact that he is both an entrepreneur, running his construction company and, at the same time, he acts as head of a government department (in a Communist system) awarding building contracts. In answer he merely smiles in a cunning sort of way, implying that such a dual role can only be managed by someone exceptionally astute and well connected – someone like himself. Suddenly, and completely unexpectedly, a huge tree erupts from beneath the ground right through the pavement along which we are walking.'

Apart from his familiar preoccupation with dualities, my story teller surprises me with the violent eruption of a full grown, massive tree, uprooted from the invisible depths of the some unspecified nether region. He just presents this explosive intrusion, telling me nothing about it. No whys or wherefores, no connection to what went before or what is to come thereafter. Intuitively I feel that the violent suddenness of the event is somehow meant, that it underlies the lack of any explanation, that the stark presentation of two unlinked scenes is one of the distinguishing features of the narrator's style. Another narrative peculiarity, less often present, is what I have come to recognise as a *conflation* of two individuals, two places or two objects.

'I am looking at the ceiling of one of our rooms. It is strangely both the ceiling of our current bedroom here in Devon and also the ceiling of my childhood bedroom in Kolozsvar. Water has seeped through from above. Fragile, oddly shaped, sculpted plaster bits are now hanging from the ceiling. I am worried because this problem is unexpected and needs urgent attention.'

'A hospital. Old building, pre-war furnishing. A very close friend and colleague is dangerously ill. However, he is a different looking person, slim, tallish, in his twenties. He has to be transported to another part of the hospital. I am carrying his

limp body, arms and legs hanging loose, a la Pieta. Carrying him up the stone stairs, he feels so light as to have no weight at all.'

'With a large knife I am dividing Jerusalem between us (Jews) and the others (Arabs). Jerusalem is a roast leg of mutton. I carve with great precision, scrupulously. 2 Arabs, in traditional dress and kefiyah, watch intently. It seems that one side of the mutton leg belongs to us and the other to them. But the more meat I take off the bone for us, the less remains for them. I wonder how small a portion will remain. All the while the 2 Arabs keep pointing to the dwindling dividing line, indicating that my knife should not cross it. At the end, I ask somebody in Hungarian 'Is this ours?' I announce: 'I know exactly what it takes to hold on to the whole city'.

In previous stories, a London park is also the public park of the city of my birth; a museum is also my elementary school; two of my quite distinct employees appear as one; my younger brother and my son appear as one person. Here, two ceilings, distant in space and time, are merged; an individual is both a college and a stranger; and a leg of mutton *is* Jerusalem. As I carve the joint, I am dividing the city. It is as simple as that. When such conflating questions my own identity, the story is most disturbing.

'A major university exam. I am sitting right behind my son. He has chosen as his subject a mysterious woman. I am anxious because so little is known about her. Will there be enough time to gather the information? There are various clues. One concerns the remnants left in our drinking glasses. The mysterious woman is long dead – this is one of the difficulties. But we are doing just one exam paper because my son and I are one.'

'In bed. My daughter-in-law is commenting on the state of the carpet – how well it has worn. We mention the fact that we have been here for 16 years, but perhaps it is time to change the carpet anyway. My father is emerging from my bed. I have a strange feeling and I am both my father and me. My father/I is showing his calf and foot. They are covered in bleeding abrasions. But my father/I is happy and smiling, indicating that these wounds are superficial – mere scratches.'

Considering all these narrative peculiarities, so typical of the language of the night, my first impression is that the stories must have been concocted by a child not yet schooled in the art of proper day time narration. He leaves careless gaps; he is vague and ambiguous because he has not yet learnt to be precise; he does not grasp space limitation or time constraints; he thinks nothing is improbable or even impossible; his choices are arbitrary, laid inappropriately side by side; he conflates two into one since he does not know how to distinguish between them; his people move by a mysterious compulsion and are, on occasion, magically transformed.

But my first impression is misleading. My narrator has, obviously, retained many crucial childhood traits but he no longer a child. The stories are too adult for that.

Fragment 2
Wrestling with logic

The oddity of night time stories situated firmly the narrator in our joint childhood. It confirmed and reinforced the evidence I have gathered from the outset of my quest. Yet, there was a counterpoint to that. Although anchored in the early years, the stories take serious account of the most sophisticated reality of adult life. The narrator is quite clearly aware of the natural need to maintain logical connections within the story, much as they function in daytime accounts. There are significant exceptions but on the whole, events are linked to other events, episodes try to cohere, actions and responses take their natural course, the world obeys its physical laws. This does not mean that the narrative always meets the need for logic in a conventional sense.

'We have two children. A girl aged 4 and a boy two years older. It is bedtime. They are both in bed, neither of them asleep. The girl gets out of bed and comes to sit in a small chair next to me so that I can tell her one of my own stories. In a most affectionate and loving manner, I tell her that she should go to sleep really. She replies sweetly that she does not wish to. I ask why. She replies: "Because I am sleepy". This whole episode takes place in Hungarian, my mother tongue.'

The reply of my daughter is not so much deficient in logic as it is a parody of it. It gives a reason for not doing something that is precisely a reason for doing it. Yet, do not children resist going to bed often when they are most tired and drowsy?

'I am a member of the Israeli cabinet. After a full meeting, most ministers leave. Those left behind chat informally. I say that I understand the general point of view, the emerging consensus, but I don't really know what each individual member truly thinks! Later I meet one of the ministers. He is middle-aged, partly bald pertly shaven. He is seated at a table, smoking. He places an almost extinguished cigarette, end-on, on the table. He complains that he is under constant surveillance. He tells me that, for example, he hardly dares to smoke because they weigh him twice: before he leaves and on his return to the premises. Any difference in weight is suspect.'

The minister takes for granted an instantly quantifiable relationship between weight loss and smoking. He also implies a logical nexus between being under surveillance, presumably by the security services, and his smoking. These are simple instances of the need for an explanation that results in no explanation at all, at least not in the daytime sense of the term.

'In the middle of a crowded city centre square. I have in my hand a beautifully bound, newly purchased book. My wife and son are with me. The book has to pass through 2 testing devices. They resemble inspection chambers used at airports. Each apparatus is manned by a uniformed individual. Apparently these checks are concerned with effectiveness of car braking systems. My book is inserted in the first tunnelled chamber. The result is satisfactory. The book is then passed through the second apparatus. There is a problem. Some mud adheres to the book and, try as I might to remove it, the mud sticks. The attendant points out that the book has not passed the test. We wonder what are the implications: are we not allowed to take the book into the car, for example? We think the whole procedure is ridiculous. We suggest that these tests should be carried out at the printing works so that customers are free of such concerns.'

In the cold light of day a great deal of this story does not make sense. The effectiveness of the car's braking systems depends on books dealing with the subject. The testing is not carried out on the car but on a book. The book is subject to an airport type of security check. The book fails to pass the test because it is muddy. No wonder the principal characters are totally bemused. But their response is still more intriguing: they are not questioning the relevance of the test, they just think it should be carried out at the printers. In terms of logical connections, the story has a number of layers: the missing link between book and car; the tenuous link between security and mechanical checks; the arbitrary apportioning of mud as the cause of failure; the awareness of the principal characters of confused reasoning; the faultless logical link between deficient books and tests to be carried out by the printers. As for my search for the narrator, what matters is his struggle with logic: he seems to feel it is somehow relevant but cannot quite cope with it.

'A group, like a seminar. I am one of the participants. We are sitting in an elliptical circle. The leader of the group is a young man with a little, reddish, goatee, beard. I instinctively dislike him. The implied subject of the seminar is healing. We all have clapboards to write on. They turn out to be toast-like, organic substances. We break these boards along straight lines as part of the exercise. As my board diminishes, it becomes too small to be of any use. All group members start throwing the stuff away. The leader objects most strongly, insisting that we keep the pieces no matter how small they are. I go outside and put the small, broken pieces into a dustbin mounted on the wall. The leader follows me. He forces me to retrieve my discards saying: "How else can you get your money back if you do not present these tokens as evidence?" We are still sitting around as the seminar is supposed to continue.'

The story does not make much sense. Clapboards meant to help taking notes, made of toast-like material, are broken into useless pieces that should not be thrown away because without them people cannot recover their money. The narrator's belief that a

continuous story line needs justification is, however, striking. He could have spoken about breaking down clapboards without making them up from a toast-like material or insisted on the retention of the broken bits without giving a reason, especially one so far fetched as the recovery of moneys never mentioned before. There is awareness of some sort of causality, of some kind of logic, even though the causality and logic of the night is, occasionally, at variance from the well established, dominant causality and logic of the day.

'I am in a shop at a railway station being served with a drink. Policemen come in to look over the goods and ascertain that they conform to all the regulations. An animal is lying on the floor with the foot of its owner resting on it. The animal is thin, one foot long, furry and uniform along its whole length so there is no visible head or tail. The owner takes a bit of fur from the rear of the animal, holds it up and says: "It is a goat; you see it's a goat!" '

In daytime stories any link between a bit of fur and proof that the animal is a goat, is causally and logically non-existent. The night time stories also require some such links but in some instances the link becomes a mere assertion, albeit most insistent. The uniform furry headless and tail-less animal has to be a goat because its owner has to have it so! My narrator is well aware that I live my daily life within the confines of a more or less rational environment. As an audience of one, I am essential to him, so he is prepared to make some concessions. But causality, reason and logic are merely tolerated and they are always subservient to the demands of narration.

'A church. A prelate in full regalia with a bishop's mitred hat is running round with great excitement. He repeats the word "touss" and "mouss". These words are supposed to explain his great discovery: somewhere in the medieval past a simple confusion over two letters (t and m) caused 2 noble families to exchange inadvertently their coat of arms. A scion of one the families is mounting a horse. He tries on a full outfit of a medieval knight that had thitherto belonged to the other family. He is of a massive stature, towering over the crowded congregation. He has a bow and an arrow and wears a Robin Hood type of hat. He indicates that he is comfortable in the outfit and is happy to make the exchange. The scion of the other family, in full armour, is also elevated over the onlookers. A pack of hounds runs across the hall. As the hounds disappear through the crowds, the horses bolt and, in the absence of their riders, rampage through the people in pursuit of the hounds. My wife and I have to protect our own animals from the onslaught, but one of the doors is partly broken. In the melee one of the horses charges into my back. I am tossed into the air and do three summersaults before landing on the ground unharmed. We now head a procession of couples leaving the church. From behind me I hear comments on my spectacular gymnastics. Apparently, I am considered something of a hero. I feel shorter than most people and out of place, yet tolerated and even liked.'

My narrator's imagination is so fertile that, among the nine hundred stories I noted down, no two are alike. In some the flights of fancy take over the story, in others the plot does not stray too far from the ordinary. But fiction, be it ever so extreme, is so interwoven with the reasonable, that they cannot be taken apart. It is an essential characteristic of the narrator's unique style. I cannot make sense of "touss" or "mouss" but, perhaps, I am never meant to. But the rivalry between two noble families and the discovery that their coat of arms had been attributed mistakenly does have the ingredients of a promising medieval adventure tale.

The letting loose of a pack of hounds in the middle of a crowded church does stretch credibility. But, horses bolting in pursuit of dogs follows naturally. It is what one would expect. Being hit by a horse and catapulted into the air, does lend reality to the whole crowded and confused scene. Turning three summersaults and landing unharmed, on the other hand, is a minor miracle. It may not have elevated me to the height of a fully armed knight but it made me something of a hero.

The stories of the daytime are well rounded. Its strands are coherently woven together, ideally leaving no loose ends to frustrate the curious mind. They flow evenly from a beginning to a, more or less, satisfactory end. There is always a tacit agreement between writer and reader, or narrator and listener, as to what constitutes a story, what falls within or without its natural confines. My narrator recognises no such boundaries. His stories twist and turn, with abrupt breaks in the plot and no thought or care of bridging them. There are lots of loose ends and no attempt to tie them up. The arbitrary and the logical perform a most peculiar dance, from time to time coming together only to drift apart following independent paths. But I am in no doubt that reason and logic are always subservient to the demands of narration.

Fragment 3
On the shores of invention

What he lacks in logic and conventional reason, the story teller more makes up with his extravagant, original and fertile imagination.

'I and a female person are sitting at a round table. Two young girls, aged 5-7, are with us. The table is covered with sheets of cut-out cardboard. Each sheet has the same 6 pictures on it, repeated several times. The pictures are simple representations of objects or creatures, like a dove, a signpost and so on. Each cardboard sheet is printed in a single colour and there are 4 primary colours. I explain to my companion that the object is to break out each picture, place it somewhere in the room and then relate them to each other through a story. You may pick a red bird and she tells you that she would like to fly to the green tree. You then pick the green tree which sends you, for a good reason, to the yellow house, and so on. In this way one construes an imaginative story for the children, both entertaining and educational.'

This story is nothing short of a full blown invention of a game meant to develop and exercise the faculty of narration. For, two unrelated pictures can only be brought together with a story. And the story has to be created on the spur of the moment whilst playing a game. My narrator often touches on games; hardly surprising since games are a significant part of my profession.

'I am heading a group as part of a project. Aligned against us is the leadership of a dominant religious sect – they are the establishment. At stake is the relative length of 3 different cords. Ours is the longest beyond any doubt. The establishment is determined to deny this fact or at least fudge the issue. As they are in power, they set the criteria for the tests. I feel frustrated and hard done by. When, as part of the tests, the cords are played out from a high tower, I think this will prove our win with absolute finality. But the establishment has evolved a cunning stratagem: the 3 cords are interwoven into the hair of a young girl. When the cover is taken off, all that is visible is the girl's head with the cords plaited as part of her hair-do. So we cannot tell which cord is which and who is the winner.'

The opening of the story follows unremarkable lines. I am at the head of a small band and we are in conflict with the established authority. This has been very much the pattern of my life. The usual complexity of such a conflict is then suddenly reduced to a comparison between varying lengths of cords. The translation of a sophisticated dogmatic power struggle into a simplified, tangible form is arbitrary but typical of the

night time narrative style. The longest cord to decide the winner is as clear and simple a measure as anyone could wish for. What is spectacularly inventive is the plaiting of the cords into a girl's hair-do and so defeating the point of the whole exercise.

'The first game of the Kasparov-Short world chess championship is held in the lobby of a hotel. The game is adjourned on the 16th move because Kasparov feels unwell. The spectators disperse. Short stays behind to analyse the position. He demonstrates a winning sequence of moves ending with the queening of the A pawn. I remark that Kasparov would not allow such a development. In response, Short demonstrates another potential analysis which culminates in a half water melon situated in the middle of the chess board. The green outer skin of the melon is surrounded by red, brick-shaped, melon pieces. "The red pieces protect the centre – it is an unbeatable position" concludes Short.'

Until the appearance of the water melon the story takes a fairly regular course. The fruit introduced as a demonstration prop changes everything. How it comes to occupy the centre of the chess board remains a mystery. But the idea of two different kinds of pieces, the outer ones protecting the centre, is not preposterous. Of course, in the case of the water melon the colours are reversed: the outer green skin protects the inner red flesh. The narrator's lateral thinking is of a formidable proportion.

'My younger daughter shows me a new computer filing system. In response I demonstrate an even more modern, revolutionary technique. It consists of placing the files on the stairs of a staircase. As I run downstairs, treading on each step, the file is automatically updated. From the bottom of the stairs I take off and half-fly, half-run forging powerfully ahead.'

The narrator obviously does not care how much of his stories consist of wishful thinking.

'An invention by another inventor. It is a face mask that serves as a container for paint and brush to paint with. The paint flows through the nose of the mask. The children hugely enjoy painting with this nose and the resultant pictures are excellent. Even a down-syndrome boy finds the activity easy and enjoyable. I am a little disappointed that the invention is not mine.'

On the other hand, the idea of this invention may well be realized. It is a pity that the narrator neglected to include detailed technical instructions for its implementation.

'An ice hockey game. The pucks are flat disks that slide on the ice. A bird is sitting on one of the pucks. The players have to hit the puck in such a way that the bird does not fly off it. But when a penalty is taken, the player taking it does not hit the

puck. Instead he sends the bird, still sitting on the puck, towards the goal. The bird then flies ahead of the puck, trying to distract the goalie. The puck still misses the goal. As a bystander, I root for the team taking the penalty and try to will the puck into the net.'

A game that sounds fascinating. Especially with birds taking such an active part. I invented hundreds of games in my professional life but a game involving birds co-ordinating their flight patterns to help the score would never have occurred to me. Probably, because birds to be so employed seems impossible. The narrator has no such concerns.

'I am in front of a largish cardboard or plywood box about one meter cubed. With my "shadow" behind me, I have just opened the box. Inside the mostly empty box we see a loudspeaker and some tightly packed asbestos plates. They have a special electricity conductive quality. In another corner of the box there is a bowl of water. I am astonished to learn that what I am looking at is supposed to be the inside of my brain. "Is that all that's inside?!" I ask myself.'

As a story, this is a poor one. It is supposed to be a response to an implied question that must have exercised me at some stage of my life: what is the brain? The answer is disappointing and nothing much happens in the narrative. When it comes to explanations, the narrator contributes little.

'A game of tennis is interrupted by young boys bringing on to the court a strange device. The court is suddenly transformed into a playground. The device is made up of a segment of an old fashioned gramophone, a needle and a battery. When switched on, the device flies up into the air. There is some speculation as to how long this object will stay up. One of the boys makes the preposterous claim of up to 6 months. I indicate my disbelief but accept that the likely time may be half an hour.'

Not a gripping story. My narrator is not in a good form. Still, he seems to believe in the magic quality of gramophones that enables them to fly. Perhaps, I had the same belief when I first encountered an inanimate object that produced music without any human assistance. It is noteworthy that I refuse to wholly believe the story teller and we end up in active negotiations.

'Holiday camp. A golf foursome. My son and another man go up front. Their shots end up near the hole. My Japanese partner and I bring up the rear because it will take us 2 shots to get anywhere near the hole. I am slightly better placed than my partner although I find my ball half buried in mud. The hole is not on the green but half way up a rocky hillock. The hole itself is full of water. Before I address my ball, a large fish emerges from the water filled hole. The fish is removed. I succeed in

sinking my ball only to discover yet another fish in the hole. The fish swallows my ball which remains clearly visible through the transparent body of the fish.'

A story with a pretty mundane beginning. But with my ball buried in mud, extraordinary things take place. I have never come across an incident on a golf course with a large fish swimming in one of the holes. Nor have I heard of a transparent fish swallowing golf balls with the ball staying visible through their body. It is not that such happenings are wildly improbable; it is that, despite that, they fit naturally the rhythm of an otherwise credible narrative.

'I am on a visit to a large US toy company. The executive who looks after me indicates that he has an important deal to discuss. At first I think him to be a marginal figure but his importance grows as we proceed. Five people are sitting round a table. One of them is presenting toy items for inclusion into the company's range of products for the coming year. My executive is asking questions most aggressively. The presenter is not allowed to answer the questions or defend his candidate toy because according to the executive it is not coffee time yet. The first item presented is a line of figurines. The second is introduced by children who suddenly burst into the room. The children's head is covered by a strange contraption. They blow into these contraptions and something happens that gives them huge enjoyment. In addition, there is a transparent material in front of the eyes of each child that makes their faces appear large and frightening to those facing them whilst the children see the adult audience as tiny – at the wrong end of a telescope.'

Such a fantastic optical device is a figment of the narrator's imagination. But the idea is much more than a passing fancy. Unrealisable it may be, but it is charged with profound meaning. For what can be more revolutionary than something that reverses the relationship between adult and child. It is the adults here that are terrified by the children, they are the ones dwarfed by their offspring.

Story tellers, by definition, are well endowed with imagination. How else could they concoct their exciting tales and hold the attention of the listeners. Children's stories, folk tales, legends, and literary fiction in all its magnificent diversity, are created by our imaginative faculty. But this imaginative faculty, exercised in daytime, has clear limitations. The story teller and his audience have a tacit understanding how far imagination is allowed to range, where its boundaries lie. Pigs do not build houses and wolves do not blow them down. But some creatures are lazy, some are industrious and most are somewhere in between. A straw house is more fragile than a wooden one which in turn is more fragile than a house built of stone. So the story of The Three Little Pigs makes perfect sense and no reasonable child would question the underlying premise. The fairy who was not invited to bless Sleeping Beauty at birth was perfectly entitled to be miffed and cast her curse. And the knight fully deserved his prize for breaking through the entanglements of a garden untended for a hundred

years. There is nothing in the legend of King Arthur that does not make sense once the chains of historical veracity and physical probability are thrown off. It would be the height of bad manners to doubt the invincible magic of a sword buried up to the hilt patiently awaiting a hero of unblemished character. Entering into the spirit of the experience, the audience makes a compact with the narrator who instinctively knows what is, and what is not, permissible. The same applies to novels. Mostly, authors restrict themselves to what is broadly realistic so that readers may readily identify with characters and situations. Even in science fiction, in Dostoyevskyan episodes, in Joyce's internal dialogues, in Kafkaesque fiction, or in the surrealist work of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, this complicit condition, between writer and reader, is clearly crucial.

The stories told or written, read or listened to, with everyone awake, have a structure that holds the disparate elements of the content together. The characters relate to events, the events form a recognisable plot, the plot moves the story across multiple scenarios; strands are woven into some sort of whole which has a direction that leads somewhere. The demands imposed by the structure, inevitably curtails the role of the imagination. It has to be reined in, modified, fine tuned and tailored to the requirement of plot, character and scenario. It is only thus that the story acquires, at the very least, a semblance of credibility.

Not so for the imaginative faculty of my story teller. The narrative of the night suffers almost none of these constraints. It ranges freely; it bestrides words, images, characters, events and dominates all the other elements. I have the strong impression that an imaginative idea comes first with situations, characters and plot drawn to accommodate it. Going further, the etymology of 'imagination' and 'image' is not accidental. A single image may well be the starting point of the story, its kernel, with other images coalescing around it. They are aligned to create a plot complete with creatures, events and scenarios. Of course, the distinction between the various story elements works only in the light of the day. I am certain my narrator, at night, in his full flow, is oblivious to all that.

The dominant image may not appear at the beginning of a story. Often a prequel leads up to it. The interweaving of competitive cords into a girl's hair-do; the water melon in the centre of a chess board; the golf ball eating transparent fish and the contraption that inverts the adult-child relationship; all come at the very end. In other instances the central image encompasses virtually the entire story: skipping down the stairs to update filing; the mask as a painting instrument; the bird/puck in the hockey game; the flying gramophone and the loudspeaker that attempts ridiculously to represent the brain. In many stories the key image has sequels and these sequels carry other powerful images linked to each other, supporting a longer tale. The intensity and richness of night time image sequences has no daytime parallel. I have decided to accord it its own name: *image-ination.* It is perhaps the most characteristic feature of stories told me at night, when I only remember having been there, as hero or witness, the following morning. The closest daytime literary

rival in terms of image-ination that I can recall is *Alice in Wonderland*. The croquet game played with flamingos as mallets, hedgehogs as balls and hoops in the shape of ever moving soldiers, has a similar dream-like quality but then Lewis Carroll has a distinct method in his madness, converting sense into nonsense, and nonsense into sense, in a fairly intentional way. His *Jabberwocky* is a true departure from daytime sanity, but it is a poem, as distinct from a narration. It relies heavily on sounds and wordplay. In any case, he might as well have dreamt it all.

At the end of this kind of quest, the questions asked at the beginning seldom find wholly satisfying answers. And answers that are revealing are often answers to questions unasked. Being in the middle of my search, I cannot yet know the final score but I am beginning to understand that the puzzles of the morning, reflecting on my dreams, have to be recast in nightly terms. And, more than that, the unravelling of the puzzles is bound to generate other, undreamt puzzles, in a language that allows them to remain unresolved. I set out to probe the age old mystery of dreams and uncovered an inexhaustible well of strange stories. I followed the stories, dwelling on their strangeness, and happened on the trail of a narrator who sleeps when I am awake and tells me his stories only when I am asleep. Destiny may that our paths should never cross and yet I yearn to meet him face to face.

THE FIFTH PART
The outskirts of narration

Fragment 1
The spark that sets off a story

In the history of dream interpretation, some distinguished practioners attributed dreams to the physical context of the dreamer. The remains of an undigested dinner, a slippage of a blanket, an alarm clock, and such like, were considered sufficient to account for the content of a dream. Other gurus, no less illustrious, occupied their time in examining the external circumstances in preceding weeks, or days, or the very evening, of the dream. Happy to relate events of the day to those of night, they tended to dismiss all these stories, as 'unfinished business.' Dreaming of a ship stranded on the rocks, if you lost your job the previous week, explained it all.

For me, engaged in pursuit of a narrator, such connections served not to explain away a story, but to demonstrate a narrative skill that can turn such mundane material into fascinating stories.

A man, subservient and admiring of me, is talking about Widworthy. He insists that I am now ready to collect things for my home. He responds to my reluctance by saying that at the very least I could buy a toy collection. It is decided that the collection would be of theatrical costumes worn by famous actors. Sir Michael Denison turns up. He draws attention to a difficulty: actors may wish to retain their costumes, rather like football players hang on to shirts exchanged after games. He thinks, however, he could obtain a costume worn by Sir Harris. We are watching a theatrical performance. The heroine is a noble lady who is about to retire to a nunnery. She has to choose a confessor. There are three candidates, all keen to have this honour. Once the choice is made, the noble lady has to submit to her confessor in all things. I am struck by the significance of the dual, and contrasting, character of her position: she is superior in exercising the right to chose and inferior in having to submit after her decision.

At the telling of the story, the refurbishment of our house was nearing completion. We had been for some time collecting antiques, especially furniture in keeping with the Elizabethan period. Through my work, in a modest way, I started to assemble a

toy collection at the same time. Sir Michael had, indeed, been at our home for an intimate one-man performance. On the other hand I had no interest whatsoever in theatrical costumes or paraphernalia of famous people of whatever sort. My narrator must have been well aware of all that. But, for the benefit of his story, the facts were twisted and used merely as a springboard for the fiction. To wish to collect stuff for a refurbished residence is rational. The idea of actors retaining their costumes is questionable, hence the clever parallel drawn to football players and their shirts. The story line is impressive: it moves smoothly from a newly refurbished space, through the idea of collecting, to theatrical costumes and then to an actual performance.

The performance itself, the climax of the story, is the work of pure imagination. Even within the story I am struck by the dramatic choice that renders a leading figure at once both superior and inferior. Remarkably, the situation of the heroin conforms to history. Every medieval queen had her personal confessor. The priests or monks were men, more often than not, without worldly wealth or power. The queen could dismiss them at any moment, on a whim. Yet they held sway over their royal mistress by holding two keys: the key to her guilt and the key to her innermost secrets. I have a strong feeling that the scene conjured up by my story teller was not there by chance.

I am lying in a hospital bed surrounded by a group of highly qualified surgeons. Some are dressed in old fashioned 3-piece suits, pocket watches attached to their waistcoats. None of them wears a white coat. My legs are exposed. Something is wrong with them. The left leg in particular is reddish with an open wound and a deformed bone. The surgeons confabulate, much nodding of heads. Then I am standing amidst the same group of surgeons but they have shrunk to half my size. I tell them that something is wrong – we are not of the same race. Therefore the medical transaction between us cannot take place. One of the surgeons points out, however, that I am experiencing an optical illusion due to a defect in my spectacles. On removing them, I see that the surgeons are almost their normal size but still a little shorter than before and certainly below my height.

At the time I had a minor injury to one of my legs so the narrator knew how to touch a sore point. He also noticed the distinction between the wear of consultant surgeons and the rest of the hospital staff (no uniform) and my hope of avoiding the operation. As with almost all his stories, there is the unexpected, impossible yet intriguing event: the sudden shrinkage of the thitherto self-important medical personnel. And, again, there is the use of unexceptional logic to explain away the magic through a defect in the visual equipment. Relative size is vastly important throughout childhood, especially if linked to dramatic shifts. It is one of the favourite ploys of the narrator.

I take a plane to New York on impulse. I have no luggage. At the New York office of our company I find a colleague in charge who is brilliant but disorganised. I am concerned about preparations for the imminent toy fair. I realise that we are only two days away from the opening of the fair and so it makes no sense for me flying back to London merely to return again. A hotel room is organised for me. In the hotel room I become aware that I have no tooth brush and no pyjamas, in fact I have nothing with me. I also realise that the Nurnberg toy fair takes place before the American one. So I have to fly back to London after all. The last plane is due to leave early in the evening so we have to hurry to catch it. On the way to the airport there is an event we just have to attend: a toy demonstration and prize giving for young girls. It has to do with vacuum cleaners relative to their suction power. I am holding hands with a little girl who has just performed successfully with a vacuum cleaner. A photo is to be taken. Suddenly there is a rush of air; the toy picks up a bunch of brown hair and deposits it on the girl's face, giving her a beard.

The story came to me two weeks before the international circuit of annual toy fairs. The narrator must have been well aware of the rising excitement with all the new designs and inventions produced by our company. And he must have been conscious of my anxiety that all should go swimmingly well. So he takes me to a venue, unprepared and ahead of time, to organise what I fear may be chaotic. And when I am put in a place devoid of bare necessities, I am still delayed by a toy demonstration that begins well and ends badly. This is all too much like real life, dull and lacking in narrative excitement. So the story suddenly changes tack, leading to the bearded little girl. Strange and surprising as she is, her appearance is cleverly linked to my toy fair related anxieties through a novel suction toy capable of picking up and depositing facial hair. Why girls have to become boys, is another, more weighty, matter.

'My best friend has been kidnapped by Palestinians. I have to negotiate his release. I have a phone conversation with the Arab captor. A meeting is arranged between us on his territory. My safety is guaranteed by his presence. He turns out to be a bulky, middle aged, hairy individual wearing a shabby suit and loose collar. He is talking fast and gesticulating. He justifies himself by stating that, contrary to prejudice, the Arabs are not greedy. His people are, in fact, not in the kidnapping business to make money. I press him to name a ransom figure, expecting it to be in the millions. In fact, he asks for one year's salary of an officer in the Israeli army. He is using the Arab word for "officer" which is "Chatzin" and not "Katzin", its Hebrew equivalent. I am surprised by the modest amount claimed which works out at about $10,000. We agree the figure at once. When I ask him to escort me back to safety, he motions to 2 boys, aged 9 & 11. They are to be my guides. I protest: only he, the boss, can offer me adequate protection. He refuses to come. I am now in grave danger.'

My best friend does live in Jerusalem. The story dates to a time when Arab-Israeli relations were especially strained and kidnappings featured daily on the news. As so often, the story pitches me right into the forefront of the unfolding drama. The heroic role assigned to me is modest: I am not leading a commando unit to save my friend by force of arms, I am a mere negotiator. The narrator has me well in his sights; he knows who he is talking about. The mention of an army officer serves to highlight the contrast between military and diplomatic intervention. The surprisingly modest ransom demand justifies the hero's unprincipled decision to pay up. Then the final, unexpected act of betrayal places the hero in grave danger. Nothing is achieved.

And as every good episodic story teller, he leaves the situation unresolved with an audience in suspense, agog for the next instalment.

'Coming home through the front gate of our small estate I see a sea of mud. The ground is churned up by cattle. The worst suspicions of mine are confirmed: a whole herd had broken in and trampled the entire garden underfoot. I see one of our neighbourhood brothers. They are both touched in the head, the one present slightly more so than his sibling. A bevy of men are busy shovelling black shale all over the place, trying to cover the damaged grass. I feel a stab of guilt, not having completed the erection of stout iron gates.'

The two brothers who own the neighbouring farm are real enough. They do drive their cattle from time to time past our gateway. They are disorganised, careless and bear ill will towards us since they had designs on the property prior to our acquisition of it. In fact, we had had one previous instance of their cattle encroaching on our garden. The iron gates were at the design stage. The narrator is obviously aware of my anxiety and chooses to paint a nasty realisation of it. He cannot resist adding a touch of the absurd: black shale trying to disguise the destruction of green grass. Any event in my daily life, no matter how trivial, is there to be twisted and incorporated in the concoction of a story. The narrator is quite ruthless: events, experiences, feelings, intentions, fears and desires, are simply grist to his mill.

A young boy, 4 years of age, is retaken to the hospital for treatment of his mouth. Being a relation of mine, I am most concerned. On the previous occasion, a bunch of needles was accidentally left under his tongue. Trying to help him, we extract not the needles but about 20 wooden toothpicks. No matter how many we extract, there is till more to be removed. The boy is half relieved but still not completely healed.

At the time I had a minor swelling of my tongue. Also, I was in the habit of using wooden toothpicks to clean the spaces between teeth at bedtime. The narrative replaced me with a little boy. At the same age I often suffered from infections of mouth and throat. The sensation in my mouth was akin to being pricked by tiny pins, which materialized as real objects in the story. The imaginative contribution by the

narrator is the introduction of a previous, negligent, intervention at the hospital and the transformation of metal pins into an endless quantity of toothpicks stuck in the mouth. A vicious idea!

'With my wife, brother and sister-in-law, in a clearing. We are looking at the sky through thinly leaved tree branches. The sky is blue, the light is bright. I am overcome by a sense of beauty and say to myself that in going blind I would lose all that. It is a thought hard to bear. A one-inch, perfectly smooth, steel bolt is protruding from the upper part of my naked foot. It is deeply embedded in the bone. Apparently, it is the result of a past accident. This impediment makes walking difficult but it has to stay there since we have not found the means of removing it. Suddenly, the bolt unscrews itself. It comes away easily, leaving behind only a slight pink flesh wound. I agree with my wife's suggestion of using a disinfectant to clean the wound.'

Prior to the story, I went to bed with a lightly damaged foot, the result of kicking a timber gate. From such an ordinary, minor accident, the narrative contrives to create a strange fusion of bone and metal as a serious impediment to movement. Then it removes this major impediment in a blink of an eye by some unexplained magic. But just in case anyone doubted the transformation, there is a convenient pink wound, left over to prove it. What intrigues me most is the ease with which the narrator accommodates the bizarre with the ordinary in the same story. He seems to be saying that however incredible, any story feature could or should have a rational counterpart.

A conflict between whites and blacks. I find myself in a primitive shack with a number of black youths of small stature. The conditions are cramped. A youth pulls a knife. One of the gang announces that the youth who pulled the knife against a white man, must now die. He insists that I have to do the killing. He takes the "guilty" youth up some steps to the top of the shack. I follow. I am given an object that is a cross between a hammer and an axe. The condemned youth is lying in a heap in front of me. I am trying to locate the back of his head so that I finish him off with a single stroke. But my arm is heavy. It refuses to move. With a supreme effort I raise my arm and bring the instrument down on the head of the youth. He does not die immediately. He just moans. I have to strike repeatedly until the head is ground down into dust.

And all that violence triggered by a numb arm trapped under my body. On waking I struggled to free an arm that must have gone to sleep. The narrator seized upon this simple fact to invent a whole story wherein I am made out to be nothing short of a ruthless, but incompetent, executioner. The instrument he puts in my hand, not quite an axe, not quite a hammer, is an invention without a recognised name.

'I am wandering about in pyjamas. I need to be somewhere at a specified time and cannot find my clothes. The building has many passages and doors, none of them leading to my bedroom. I give up looking for my clothes and decide to buy new ones. I "borrow" a car. It is a small one with an open top. I try but fail to pull up the roof. I am aware that my "borrowing" the car might be misunderstood, that I could be suspected of stealing it. So I am looking for a place close to a shopping parade to park the car inconspicuously. Finding a parking place proves difficult since the car is moving very slowly. As I keep pressing the accelerator pedal, a horse drawn cart overtakes me. Still driving, I am pounced on by a group of students. It is rag week. They are all wearing carnival hats and wave collection tins in my face. I drive through the student crowd, only to come up against a grey wall stretching right across the road. On approaching, I realise that the wall is made up of tightly packed, horizontal school girls in grey school uniform.'

Many of the story's features are familiar territory: wandering about in a convoluted location; trying to find the way to the home base; having to be somewhere on time; insufficient wear; losing control of a vehicle; using something without ownership rights. The previous evening I went to sleep without setting the alarm and had to catch an early plane the following morning. The narrator was well aware of my situation and at dawn, with the coming daylight, he must have realised the danger of my oversleeping. But, instead of helping to wake me up, he chooses to spin an unlikely tale of bewildering perambulation. I have to go in search of garments I had mislaid or buy new ones in a shop I cannot reach, driving a useless car I do not even own. And, to end with, he deposits me at the foot of a wall the like of which passes all understanding. I never heard of a wall made up of compressed uniformed school girls and I suspect no one ever has. Yet my narrator painted such a vivid picture of it that I simply had to believe him.

My predecessors, exploring the world of dreams, were mostly content to uncover such obvious triggers to the process. They tended to think of them as causes, which once identified, made further study unnecessary. For me, they remain bare starting points. The marvel is how my narrator succeeds in creating fantastical, colourful, riveting stories from such modest beginnings. What powers of imagination!

Fragment 2

Recalling memories not remembered

By now, scarcely a day passed without my leafing through the dog eared pages of notebooks filled with meticulous care so many years before. The more I read, and re-read, these personal tales, the nearer I felt to the narrator. The reality of his being grew ever stronger, his presence more and more pervasive.

One of the strands of this rapprochement was the intriguing presence of memories. Some were shared between us, others very much his own but all of them were dredged up from a past, known and unbeknownst to me.

I am riding a bicycle on a steep incline, downhill. The terrain is rough, partly grass, partly stones. The bicycle is adjustable, it has 3 positions. The ride is both exhilarating and frightening. The height of the grass is more or less at eye level. My horizon is so low that I have difficulty seeing the ground ahead. I am conscious of having to re-climb the hill yet I go on riding downhill. At the bottom, I see across the valley 3 dismounted riders. They are leading their horses in dense woodland. The horses get stuck between the trees. The riders are tugging at the reins trying to pull the horses through. Eventually the horses are squeezed across the narrow spaces.

Thinking about it, in the morning, I have the distinct feeling that the narrator did not make up the story, he simply drew on his memory, at least for most of it. For the grass to rise to eye level, for the bicycle to have 3 positions, for the quality of exhilaration and fear, I must have been around six years old when the ride too place. As for the entangled horses, I was a mere onlooker. I could not think why they came into the story, unless because the bicycle and the horses were both there for riding and the grass I rode through and the woodland were equally dense.

I am in bed. The bed has side railings. It is a cot. A huge Great Dane comes loping up to the bed. He towers over me. I am scared. I throw some white things, bits of paper or clothing, at the dog. He comes quite close, then moves away.

This is not much of a story. I am neither entertained nor exercised by it. On this occasion the story teller may have run out of ideas or, maybe, wanted to remind me of an incident when I first felt really scared. As a mere toddler, the Great Dane appeared three or four times my size. It could have been just the kind of significant experience I had long forgotten, but guarded jealously by him.

I am in a hospital. The setting is contemporary. A group of four people pass in front of me. The first two are doctors. They carry something that turns out later to be the dead body of a child. The fourth person in the group is the grieving mother of the dead child. She is walking slowly, her face suffused by pain, her mouth distorted by dry sobs, the head rocking in grief. Later, an unfamiliar woman says that something should be done about these matters, quoting an example of a baby born with teeth sunk into the jawbone.

I suspect right away that this vignette of a sombre story, so poor in imagination and plot development, was recovered, almost complete, from the narrator's rich store of memories. Although I had access to this store only with the greatest of difficulties, once such a memory surfaced, it struck an immediate chord in my own, much shallower, sea of recollections. My little brother and I were taken to a hospital at a Black Sea resort with an unsuspected condition of serum poisoning. We were accompanied by our mother and the family maid. My brother died within days. He was less than two years old. Aged only four, and suffering the same severe ailment, I managed to retain but a few images of the momentous events: the empty cot next to my bed, some white coated male figures, some nun-like females and my mother's despairing hands covering her eyes, eyes that could not bear seeing. The memories of the narrator are naturally somewhat different than mine. I have to assume that they must be more accurate, more detailed and more complete. Why, in this instance, he allowed me only a glimpse and why he chose to link the scene to one of baby's teeth sunk into a jawbone, is a matter of conjecture.

We, as a family, are in a large, well lit, room. Two strangers break in: a leader and his sidekick. The leader is holding a small gun made of pure gold. They are emissaries of some sort of a gang and intend to take me away with them. I argue that there must be some misunderstanding and suggest they call one of my business associates. While this is going on, our attention is drawn to the 2 high, white painted, folding doors. The men broke through them as they came in. The doors, their most particular brass sliding bars and finger cavities, are identical to those in my childhood apartment. The top of the doors is aslant, out of true. The sidekick is sent out and comes back with a long, T ruler used by draughtsmen. He tries to adjust the door with the help of the ruler.

The folding doors were a prominent feature throughout my childhood years from the age of six onwards. The narrator and I must have shared the same memory of it and yet, interestingly, our memories differed. First of all, the doors appeared to him exceptionally high whereas for me, seeing them again as an adult, they looked of average height. Of greater moment, I only recalled those doors having come across something similar. I paid attention to their physical resemblance, nothing more. Reflecting on the stories, I realize that in the narrator's memory those same

doors had an altogether more significant dimension. They must have been loaded with a multitude of incidents that mattered to me at that age, but could not retain thereafter. When the doors were closed, cut off from the rest of the apartment, I was on my own. I felt free to do as I liked but wary of the unpredictable movement of the doors. Anyone, at any time, could walk in with an adult countenance. But at night, in the dark, with the doors closed, would anyone hear me cry for help and come to the rescue? Heaven knows on how many separate occasions those doors carried my doubts, fears and hopes. All of them forgotten by me but remembered, recorded and kept safe in the story teller's assiduous log.

Of course, in the narrative, the raid and the threat of abduction also matter. And the gun was golden not for nothing. But it was the doors that are at the heart of story. The narrator employed a pregnant memory to awaken my interest and proceeded to weave a story around it. The raiders broke in through the doors. There is something wrong with them, they are aslant, and they have to be righted. And righted, moreover, with a tool I acquired, and learnt to use, at school. Another memory, possibly relevant, yet unremembered.

A feudal estate in Transylvania with a grand but dilapidated mansion. The owner is a minor noble. He is old with a white Victorian moustache, a bent back and creaky movements. I am a shy outsider but want to come closer in. An opportunity presents itself: I am needed to help repair the pulling mechanism of the giant French door's wooden shutters. The mechanism is high above the door; we have to use ladders to reach it. The leather rope is broken and I replace part of it with some strings. Even so, the combined leather and string is not long enough. We are greasing the cord with some sort of fat. Whilst everyone is looking for additional strings, one of the retainers grumbles about this Heath Robinson job and decides to go into town to source a proper leather cord suitable for the job. The owner and I know that it is unlikely that suitable leather could be found because the original mechanism is 50 years old. Nevertheless, the retainer sets off. He carries in his bag 2 bottles, one with a sharply broken neck.

The shutter mechanism with its distinct pulling cord was ubiquitous throughout the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Pulling downward, the horizontal slats opened to let light in, pulling it further and the slats, being wound up, vanished altogether. Pulling upward, the shutters re-appeared, releasing the tension of the cord with the shutters tumbling down, accompanied by a loud, satisfying thump. It was tempting to fiddle with the cord and I was frequently reprimanded by my parents when caught playing with the shutters.

The story draws on a neglected memory of mine that goes no further than a few snapshots. But in the remembrance bank of my narrator, the shutters must occupy

a larger space to accommodate extensive links to other memories and cater for the emotions of a child. It is thus they are brought centre stage and the story is woven around them. The age and status of the mansion's owner, positions me perfectly as an aspiring member of the family not old enough to influence decision making. The exceeding height of the mechanism and the need for ladders confirms my being an on-looking child wanting to get involved. But the story teller uses this memory merely as a springboard to launch the plot. The workings of the shutters are broken. Makeshift repairs are not enough. The essential mechanism has disintegrated and the original material is probably no longer available. There is no immediate relief in sight. And, just not to miss the point, the narrative reminds me that we are into events that are 50 years old.

At the outset of this quest, I had resolved not to stray into the territory of dream interpretation. It is, however, difficult to ignore the state of affairs so described as an accurate reflection of the state of my mind at the time. My whole psyche was falling apart and I was not sure of having the resources for a complete regeneration.

War and devastation in my native city: Kolozsvar. Street scenes with rows of gutted buildings. I am passing by our erstwhile home. It is derelict, abandoned, no longer suitable for human habitation. I look at the house from the outside. Three quite different cats have taken up permanent residence in the building. They are all large, well fed, strong and content to be in possession. A peace accord is in place and elections are being planned. From the back of a classroom I see some officials drawing up plans on the blackboard. The elections are supposed to take place the next day. It is obvious that the officials have no idea, no hope, of getting them right. The slogans displayed in the streets are in different languages. Even the alphabets are not uniform: Cyrillic, Latin and Greek. The electorate is divided along ethnic lines. Given the fragmented character of the population, no dominant group will emerge. No clear majority is possible.

The narrator's memory of our city and our home, at least in visual terms, is pretty close to mine. The streets, the buildings, appear as I last saw them. Except for the devastation, of course. From thereon the story is entirely his creation. We both have experienced the same wars and devastations in my life but why precisely three cats and cats so unlike each other, should have taken over our home? Cats are famously good survivors in difficult times but I could not fathom why they should be so fat and so content with life. Unless to demonstrate a contrast to the warring ethnic groups, unable to establish a lasting accord and be reconciled to a peaceful life.

A shallow lake with an island in the middle. I walk around it with my wife. The shore and the lake are mostly in shadow. As the shadows are moving and as we want to keep in the sun, we move alongside. I point out to my wife that this is

just the kind place where crocodile attacks materialise out of the blue. We see no sign of crocodiles. I lie on my back on a patch of sand. My wife tries to perform a handstand on top of me – her shoulders rest on my stiff, upright arms and her hands grip my raised knees. My wife is transformed into one of my very close friends. He takes over the attempted handstand but does not have enough momentum. He gives up after a number of unsuccessful attempts.

We had a shallow lake with an island in the municipal park right next to my childhood home. It was the first lake I came across but I am not sure it is the lake depicted here. Most likely the story teller grafted the walk with my wife onto an old, shared memory. The idea that these surroundings are conducive to voracious crocodiles is most fanciful. That is why, possibly, there are no signs of them. I have a much later, but vivid, memory of that particular form of handstand. My father taught it to me and I have often practiced it with my wife. In all likelihood, the narrator grafted my wife performance to another childhood memory. What is certain, I could never have participated in such an attempted feat with my close friend. He came into my life when he was over sixty. I suspect that the story is more an allusion to a mutually reinforcing but complex friendship than simply recounting events long past.

As with logic and reason, the story teller is given to using his vast stores of memory wholly and exclusively for narrative purposes. Producing a shared memory establishes an immediate rapport with his audience, anchors the story line and gains credibility for what follows. Being subservient to the narrative, memories are easily distorted, dislocated, and manipulated in any which way, so long as it makes for a better story.

The specific age of a memory is of little concern to the narrator. A single story may embrace memories emanating from early childhood, from experiences of youth, or events as recent as the previous day. With rare exceptions, none of the memories is time-labelled. How close or distant the memory is to the time frame of its host story is of little moment. A story located in my university days may just as easily draw on memories from my earliest years as on the happenings of yesterday. The story teller does not care; it is only the quality of the narrative that matters.

Fragment 3

Among stories with a leading edge

In wading through hundreds of rambling stories, I cannot help noticing that some seem to have a point. These stories are not content with dredging memories, parading shafts of insight, weaving fantastic plots for the sake of a more intriguing narrative. They are a little more ambitious than the rest. This is not to say that the others less interesting, less significant, less entertaining. It is just that herein the narrative seems to have a theme, with the narrator intent on drawing my attention to something quite specific.

> *A theatrical performance is being staged somewhere in the provinces. Six actors are going to re-enact a historical play. As they advance towards the audience, it becomes apparent that they represent Richard III, Anne his wife, a child of theirs and three members of his retinue. The crowd becomes hostile. There is some stone throwing. One of the stones lodges in Anne's left ear. What started off as a play now becomes reality. The characters are no longer actors but the historical personages themselves. The six retreat towards the edge of a green hill. They know they have to die. They decide to commit suicide rather than let the mob be the executioners. The group is seen lying down on the ground. The king is raising his medieval sword, ready to bring it down on the neck of one of his followers. He exclaims "You see, it is not so terrible to have to die as it's made out to be!"*

It is difficult to resist the thought that the story builds to the final climax. Everything moves to bring about a dramatic moment that justifies and lends power to the king's final exclamation. The introduction is gentle. We have the comfort of a pretend situation: the theatre. Then the pretence is ripped away and we are confronted by a stark and menacing reality. Stones are being thrown by a hostile mob. My story teller stamps his personal eccentricity on the narrative by lodging one of the stones in the queen's ear. Perhaps because the ear is a convenient gateway to the mind. Perhaps so that she may no longer be forced to listen to the howling of the mob. In all likelihood we'll never know why. The ways of the narrator are too strange for a mere daytime creature to fully understand. In any case, reality takes over: king, queen, child, followers, all have to die. More than that, they know and accept their ultimate fate. They still have the option of choosing how to die: they will take their own life. And then comes the punch line, the point of story: it is not so terrible to have to die as it's made out to be!

'A small company has to move from the top floor to the ground floor. The 3 lathes, comprising the company's heavy machinery, have to be lowered to the new premises. The boss is holding in his arms a brown hen. Stroking the animal, he explains to his daughter that the 3 hens, corresponding to the 3 heavy machines, cannot make the move. He is sad and finds it difficult to tell his daughter that they will be killed. The reason for not bringing the hens is that 3 new hens, born and bred in the new location, are required to make the company's move fully successful. Just like a new generation, untainted by Egyptian slavery, born and bred in the desert, was needed for the conquest of the country of milk and honey.

The story starts off in a logical mode with something eminently sensible: heavy machinery is generally happier on the ground floor where its weight is supported by a concrete foundation. A company of mine has, in fact, two lathes, both situated in the workshop on the ground floor. It is worth noting that lathes are used in the shaping of new objects, very much part of the creative process. Possibly, the narrator selected them for that very reason.

Introducing the hens is most unexpected. They have nothing to do with lathes, except that there are three hens and three lathes. Why the presence of hens is conducive to the success of the company is never explained. If the hens appear unrelated to what went before, they are crucial to what follows. The hens are alive, they produce eggs, they reproduce themselves and can be subject of affection, especially for young girls. Lathes are nothing like that.

When it comes to the killing of the hens, the audience is moved. Identifying with the daughter of the boss, it does not want the killing, it seems a wanton act. Hence the father has to justify it. He has to provide a reason for the killing, a reason that cannot be over-ruled. And so he links this regrettable act to the continued life of the company. But the story goes further than that. The hens are killed so that other hens, more successful in the new environment, would replace them. And here, it seems, is the point of the whole story: for life to continue, the old generation has to die for the new generation to come into being.

'We are in a primitive continent, in company of a middle aged couple. The man occupies an important position within the society. He is a leader or governor or some such. There is an intrigue in the higher circles to diminish his authority or supplant him altogether. These circumstances emerge in a conversation that takes place in his dominant mansion overlooking the countryside from the top of a hill. This man of authority now orders a cannon to be fired from on high. The cannonade destroys a fort he himself erected in the past. A great cheer goes up from a crowd beneath, a mass of people audible but not visible. Exploding the fort has created a new waterway. A river is now rushing down the hill, supplying much needed fresh

water to the village below. The cheering was the villager's response to the bonanza. People all around are delighted with what happened but the leader/governor has to leave the area.'

The story is located in a primitive continent. What happens there is simpler, more direct, brutally obvious. The ruler of the place lives on top of a hill, over and above the populace. He lives in a dominant mansion, like the lord of a medieval castle. There is no room to doubt his authority. Yet his position is suddenly challenged. We are not told the details of the intrigue that threatens to depose him, but it is sufficiently dangerous to force the ruler to act. And the action has to be drastic. But, and this is striking, he does not turn the guns on his enemies, whoever they are. He directs the guns to destroy the very fort that he himself built. In fact he destroys his own defences. And then, most remarkably, the explosion creates a new stream of fresh water for a populace desperately in need of it. Sadly, the hero, having made the sacrifice, has to relinquish his domain. The point of the story is quite precise: the life giving source requires sometime the destruction of the very fortresses built by oneself.

A large Jewish wedding in a crowded synagogue. I am in the midst of it without being given any specific role in the ceremonies. I know no one there. The bride's father insists that the document testifying to the marriage should be countersigned by every important person in the community. We witness the signing of the President of Jewish Council and that of other prominent figures. Each signature, with the title of the signatory, is written carefully in calligraphic Hebrew letters, all in black ink. After the formalities are concluded comes the dancing. The dancing is in the Hassidic style with people interlaced, forming circles. There are two rings: the inner one comprising members of the family and notable guests and the outer one made up of all the other guests, milling around in a confused crowd. Gradually this crowd takes the shape of a distinct circle. The master of the ceremonies insists that everyone in the outer group embraces everyone in the inner group. In particular, he expects people to embrace him. The idea is that contact is maintained throughout.

Marriage is an act of bonding between two individuals and also between two families. In the usual course of events, children born in wedlock reinforce this bond by uniting the two bloodlines. So a wedding is the celebration of a profound act of uniting two quite separate entities. This is the theme of the story and the narrator goes a long way to repeat, emphasize, and reinforce it.

The bride's father ensures that the leading figures of the community personally attest the event by recording their names on the crucial document. The writing is in the form of painstaking calligraphy, etched in black ink. It is meant to be of historical significance. The story teller deliberately chooses a Hassidic form of dancing,

performed with interlinked bodies in the form of a ring. Few images could embody the sense of unification, linkage and continuity as well as a human circle. This is why, I suppose, it is such a traditional item at Jewish weddings.

But the narrator is not satisfied yet. He goes out of his way to create two rings, the one intimate and central, the other more diffuse and peripheral. The core is immediate, cohesive and strong. The peripheral circle is weaker, it takes time and effort to form itself. The story ends with the insistence that the two rings also come together and, even more significantly, that every part of the gathering should individually be linked to the master of ceremonies at the epicentre of the whole affair. I find it almost impossible to believe that the story is put together without a clear intent. The intent, very likely, was not formulated in words prior to the story. It certainly is expressed intuitively in the telling of the tale. The narrator just narrates. The narration, however, carries a truth beyond its own, apparent, parameters. Or so it seems to me.

Fragment 4

Stories most personal, tailor made

I am trying to cut some timber on a circular sawing bench. The blade does not want to rotate. The machine is clogged up. A man comes to my aid. He is a cross between two of my employees who are familiar with the mechanics of the sawing bench. We open up the inner workings of the machine. To our surprise we discover a very fine silken cobweb that is obviously responsible for paralysing the machinery. We question how such a flimsy material could possibly disable a powerful motor. We then see a medium sized spider scurry along the ground: the obvious culprit. We feel quite benevolent towards the spider, letting her go. We clean up the workings of the motor so that it may function again.

There is nothing out of the ordinary for machinery to fail functioning. It happens all the time. On such occasions I invariably call for help. Naturally I appeal to the technically more adept, especially when they are in my employ. The narrator may have chosen a circular saw bench because he must know perfectly well that I have very strong childhood attachment to it. I used to watch with fascination the circular saw bench in action all day long, as our winter supply of logs was cut and neatly heaped in regular piles. But then the story takes an unexpected, incredible, turn. No finely woven, silken cobweb is capable of putting heavy duty machinery out of action. It is so characteristic of him to tell things that are at once both relevant and impossible. The presence of a cobweb, especially in machinery used occasionally, is feasible. That it should be the cause of the trouble is ludicrous.

I am flying to somewhere via South Africa. Two persons are accompanying me: one is grey haired, more aged than I who acts in an advisory capacity and one who is my junior in years, shadowy, in the background. As we leave the plane, a middle aged, smartly attired woman is trying to sell me a watch. As I examine it closely, I let it drop. I am afraid it might be damaged. The older man advises me not to buy the watch. He implies that I am being taken for a ride: apparent bargains always turn out to be expensive. I think to myself that it depends on the individual deal; one has to compare and study prices. The smart lady has now a male partner. He displays a different range of watches. He says I am too old for a wrist watch; I have reached the age appropriate to pocket watches. He recommends a neat, modern, small timepiece housed in a fine leather pouch. I am attracted but then this watch turns into a large, old fashioned pocket watch worn with a silver chain attached to a waistcoat. I am horrified by something that is associated with a retirement gift in recognition of decades of faithful service. I reject the object offered. Passing through

the terminal, I see the smart lady selling watches and perfumes from her boutique. I am heading for the transit lounge. I have to take a smaller plane to reach my final destination.

The theme of the story is time and ageing. I am flanked by an older and a younger companion. I am persuaded to acquire a watch by a middle aged woman. I am considered too old for a wrist watch and have to graduate to a pocket watch which turns out to be something of a retirement gift. A timepiece of any kind keeps a record of the passing of time. The narrator implies that I do not have a watch, that I need one. I have to take account of the passing time. When an offer of a watch is thrust on me, I examine it closely and drop it. I seem not to like the idea of measuring time. Yet, concurrently, I am worried that the watch is damaged. I am doubtful as to the value of a timepiece: the price one has to pay in measuring the passing of time.

So far the story is pretty mundane. It is made up of everyday events, of reflections commonly voiced in an ordinary course of life. But then my narrator displays the true character of his craft. The pocket watch appears out of nowhere in a modest, insinuating form. It is magically transformed into a monstrosity which signals the end of a working life. And this is, obviously, what I could not accept. I did not think I was there yet. I was merely in transition, taking a smaller plane to my final destination. And what that destination was, the narrator left, with appropriate delicacy, unsaid.

A group of strangers is gathered at one end of a large hall. I stand alone at the opposite end. A telephone rings. One of the strangers answers the phone. He writes a message on an old newspaper bit and hands it to me. The message consists of one word: "death". I infer that one member of my family has died. Not knowing which of the seven possible relations is gone, disturbs and frightens me. I have to tell my mother, next door, the terrible news. I feel loving and protective. I know she will take the news badly. I still don't know who has died. I look at the message again: the newspaper dates from 1973! This date relieves my anxiety since it places the event in the distant past. I am now aware that my mother is long dead and the message refers to her own death in 1973.'

As it happens, death played a prominent part in the history of my family. My mother was always profoundly aware of the proximity of death, her father having died in a railway accident when she was four and her second child, my younger brother, fell victim to serum poisoning at the age of two. So she was primed for tragedy on a daily basis. My story teller is familiar with all this and must be aware that I had imbibed my mother's fear. In fact, the story makes the link cleverly explicit. And the planted clue of the newspaper's date is an excellent demonstration of the narrator's adroitness in taking advantage of my orientation towards deductive reasoning.

'I am in bed – uncertain location. I am disorientated. I have to get up and go to work at the headquarters of my company. I cannot find my glasses so I leave the house without them. I intend to buy a newspaper and return home before going to work. I cannot find a newsagent or else those that I find have run out of the paper I want. I feel impelled to go further and further. I reach a familiar, though still not specific, city. It turns out to be Kolozsvar, the city of my origins. My father, in an unfamiliar guise, is leading the staff of his electrical business, CONSTRUCIO, in a complete refurbishment of his premises. The physical work is almost complete. The wares to be sold are brand new. The glittering chandeliers are fewer and better spaced out.The place is full of a new kind of electric connector. Thick black wires are captured in a central square tile with a white ring in the middle. There are a whole lot of these. My father is optimistic and confident. He points to a small back wall that still has the old timber shelving subdivided into many small drawers, each allocated to one kind of merchandise: plugs, fuses, screws, etc. My father indicates that this section is really a left-over of the past. It was once necessary but has now outlived its usefulness. He is quite affectionate about it. I realize that my own company is no longer located at the Constructio and remark to my father, jocularly, "I quite forgot that you kicked us out a while back".

The story is replete with sweet reason: I leave my glasses behind so I have to retrieve them. I cannot find my newspaper so I have to wander on until I reach my native city. My father's premises have to be refurbished because the old set-up outlived its usefulness. At the same time, most naturally, he is nostalgic about the past. The chandeliers glitter in their freshness. In this environment my father is, quite rightly, optimistic. Who, at the moment of re-launching an enterprise, would not be?!

The narrator has, I suspect, a better memory than mine. Or, at least, he is able to weave into his narrative bits of my personal history that I have long forgotten. My father did indeed move his business to refurbished premises when I was ten. And I can recall the scene much as the story paints it, with both the remnants of the old shelving and the impressive shine of the new display.

I was told the story when my daytimes were spent in inventing novel mechanisms, so the appearance of an original electric connector made it immediately relevant. And as for having to get up, disoriented, from a strange bed, I happened to have spent the night in a hotel prior to returning to my place of business the following day. The story teller was certainly aware of my daytime intent.

But, of course, all that sweet reason, the unremembered memories, my daily personal preoccupations, are there to make the story credible and attract my attention. What animates the story and is of intense interest to the narrator has nothing to do with what is sensible. I could not help feeling that I was carried back to my childhood on the back of a carefully chosen memory track to meet my long dead father at a crucial moment of his life. Crucial because he had to abandon the place of his material success and relocate his business in environs as yet untried. And, of course,

the connector device is a pure invention, neither me nor my father had experienced anything like it. As for my father's whole enterprise resting on a single item, that is just ludicrous. My own company was established some forty years after my father's business ceased to exist so my remark that he had got rid of us is patent nonsense.

And yet, the brand new connector was so precisely described, so outstanding, so deftly positioned centre stage, that its image would not leave me for a considerable time. The central ring holds all the wires together and the ring is white and the wires are all black. No matter how far the wires reach and whatever happens at the end of each line, they remain connected to each other through a single white ring: the magic ring that holds the differentiated elements together, the ring that is crucial to survival.

I should add, by the way, that when I was told this particular story, I was in the throes of a personal crisis: my self identity was literally breaking up. I no longer knew who I really was. A despairing doubt tormented my days. Panic swept over my restless night. I had no idea how and when would the fragmented selves come together again.

THE SIXTH PART
Between night and day

Fragment 1
The audience discovers its own voice

By now I was through over nine hundred stories. I took them apart, examined each detail, and put them together again. It was inevitable that their narrator would, somehow or other, make his presence felt. Even though I was gradually becoming acquainted with how his mind worked, I knew deep down that only meeting him face to face would reveal who he really was. At the same time, I was also aware of the impossibility of such a meeting. He was around when I was asleep and asleep when I was awake. Or so it seemed to me.

Yet despite the dictates of logic, I never gave up my quest. There had to be someone designated to make up these stories, someone obsessed with narrating them exclusively to me, night after dreaming night. The striking similarities, the uniqueness of style, the common strands, all meant that they came from the same source. It had to be the work of one, and only one, individual. The question was how and where to find him?

In none of the stories was there a single instance when the narrator referred to himself. Yet somewhere, in this or that story, there had to be a hint to help me on my way. Inspiration could come from nowhere else. So for one last time I combed that vast body of material evidence. And at last, I had some success.

One or two of the stories did not fit the general pattern. More than that, they stood out and challenged the pattern itself. As a rule, the narrator presented the stories in a strict linear form, moving inexorably in a sequence that bore no interruption, no going back, no pause for thoughts, no room for questions, no appeal for elucidation even through the most obscure and incredible passages. I was treated as a passive, compliant audience.

But in these few stories, I had a strikingly different role. I played the part of an audience that was incredulous, astonished, questioning and even doubting, at times, the authority of the narrator himself. In that role, I appeared true to my regular self, comparing what I was being told at night with what I was accustomed to experience in the course of an ordinary day.

'A huge military exercise culminating in a mock battle between "us" and "them". We are the defenders. I am patrolling the grounds that resemble a large empty car

park. There is an air of apprehension and excitement about. We expect a heavy onslaught. Planes circle above and vehicles are seen in the distance. A convoy of cars draws up at the far end of the car park and shooting erupts. The firing is one sided, within seconds the attacking soldiers in the leading cars are dead. The battle is over. I wonder why the enemy comprised such weak, inexperienced troops. I am surprised the battle was not a mock exercise but a fight with live bullets and real casualties. The two sides, attackers and defenders join in a post mortem discussion.'

In this story I appear in a dual role. On the one hand I actively participate in a battle, on the other, I question the credentials of the story itself. I ask how come the supposed mock battle was for real and the opposing force did not put up a credible fight.

'A man is on trial for his life. There are ten jurors, each of them holding a strip of wood or bone with a ritual inscription. A creature, half cat half human, is brought in on a leash to confront the jurors. Some teeth are missing from his mouth. The creature utters peculiar sounds that nobody seems to understand. Nonetheless, the jurors will base their verdict on these unintelligible utterances. The ritual sticks are collected. They will signify which way the jurors voted. The decision is not revealed but I feel outraged that a life and death decision should be taken in such a meaningless manner.'

As a complaisant audience I am quite happy to go along with a composite creature being arraigned before jurors voting with ritually inscribed sticks. I do not show any surprise at utterances no one can begin to understand. But I absolutely refuse to accept arbitrary judicial decisions reached without the case for the defence put forward on behalf of the accused. It is like telling the narrator: "I can suspend disbelief so long as we both know you are telling a story, no matter how fanciful. But when it involves some sort of reality, as for example unjustified court verdicts, the pretence is over".

'A friend, much younger and slimmer than when I first me her, is lying in bed. She is drawing the duvet over her shoulders and neck. I am struck by seeing her collar bones and slim breasts. She is talking to my wife and me about a lover and a night spent with him in a hotel. She indicates a high degree of satisfaction with the whole experience. The man was sadistic, tying her with chains to the bed. Apparently, he simply asked the hotel porter to bring him the chains. We are surprised how liberal and tolerant the world had become in respect of sexual proclivities. I say: "I can't imagine myself just despatching the hall porter to fetch me some whips".'

The first part of the story is straightforward. The friend in question did, in fact, have such an orientation and I did remember well her now vanished youthful appearance. It was the casual importing of sex inspired implements that moved me from being a

tame spectator to troublesome objector. For saying that I could not imagine myself doing such a thing was tantamount to declaring that it was difficult for me to believe such a story.

'A piazza forming the centre of a medieval city. A large temporary structure with rows of seating is situated amidst permanent buildings. Some stone sculptures line the piazza. One of the statues is that of a lion. I have to erect a building between what is permanent and what is temporary. As there is not enough space, my task is difficult. I need an architect. A man appears. I ask him to tell me his name. He replies without hesitation: "Michael M…". I find this an amazing coincidence and say:"It is strange. Your name is most unusual yet I know a Michael M… but he is German and not an architect".'

The idea of inserting something between the permanent and the temporary is quite interesting, especially if taken in the philosophical sense. It could be applied to virtually any situation: physical, organic, man made or nature created. Why the story teller chose a medieval city as a setting for his idea, I will never know. But the inherent difficulty of introducing something that is neither temporary nor permanent certainly provides food for thought. The narrator, admitting the challenge, brings forth an architect to help me out. However, he then provokes me with an unusual name of someone, a close German colleague, who is no architect. Although such a coincidence is just about possible, I remain most sceptical. As an audience, I reject the story.

'A rough terrain at the edge of a hick town. The roads are beaten earth and the floors in the houses are mud. A shop with open layout. My father is trying to re-establish a business. Behind the counter, in the first room, a wall of shelves with compartmentalised drawers reminds me of my father's business premises in my home city. But – I say to myself – these drawers are not made for electrical goods, they are for hardware. I note this change with some surprise because it would have implied a major shift in the nature of my father's business. Such a change never occurred. The second room is filled with mechanical machinery and oil drums. In the third room, a room with missing walls, two workmen are clearing a network of viaducts, 2 ft deep and lined with pink clay fired tiles. The place is overgrown; it has not been used for some considerable time. In answer to my enquiry, the workmen explain that they are restoring the channels for the flow of milk. I find this explanation incredible since no one can combine the business of oily hardware with the supply of milk! Below the store complex, on a shallow terrace, healthy looking brown-red-white cattle are grazing peacefully. A bull makes a number of unsuccessful attempts to mount one of the cows. The man who looks after the cattle is middle aged, naked, hairy and reddish coloured, a little like the cattle. He is a son who is trying to justify his failure at formal

education by confident assertions that he will definitely learn his trade but by his own, practical, self-taught, method.'

My father was a most forceful character. I have been impressed from the moment I first set eyes on him. He must have been equally taken by me - he rode right round the city on his bike, announcing to all and sundry the cataclysmic event of my arrival. It was only to be expected that the story teller would often weave him somehow into the fabric of his narration. It guaranteed my attention. The downside for the narrator is my profound knowledge of my father. I am clear as to what he did, what he wanted to do, what he would not do. So anything out of character was likely to arouse my suspicion and interrupt the flow of his story.

If it has to do with a shop, it would relate to matters electrical for my father was an electrical engineer and spent most of his life immersed in that profession. Whatever else, he would not be selling hardware goods.

Clearing long neglected, even abandoned, waterways does resonate. It could be a metaphor for so many diverse things: communication systems in decline, vital arteries blocked, neural paths malfunctioning, business or social networks atrophied. But I could not swallow the bit about milk flowing through disused oil channels. I had to protest.

In the course of my life I met many successful self-made men without formal qualifications. Like with so many narratives, this obviously important snippet does not quite gel with the rest of the story. But by now I was well used to that.

'Our family is located in a foreign city and has become dispersed. My father ended up in another hotel. A surprise: my father turns out to be my grandfather. I find this discovery hard to accomodate because I cannot place anyone between my actual father and myself. So if my father is my grandfather who is my father? I try to phone this other hotel: no connection. Instead an official announcement states that communications are difficult due to bad weather conditions. The next day I begin to worry about my father and feel guilty not having gone in search of him. On the way, driving to his hotel, I see a criminal stuck in a bar with his car. I find my father in the hotel, lying on a sofa in the breakfast room. A waiter is trying to eject him rudely in the midst of tidying up. But my father is hale and hearty. Another Hungarian speaking man comes in. He shakes hand with my father in evident friendship'.

There are times when the imagination of the narrator runs away with itself. He invents circumstances that, with the best will in the world, cannot be envisaged. This story exemplifies such an instance. That someone I have throughout my life considered my father turns out to be my grandfather, is barely credible. But even supposing, for the sake of the story, that such is case, there has to be another father between my grandfather and me. In the full flow of the narration, I stop the story teller in his tracks, demanding the identity, indeed the existence, of the missing individual.

And when he cannot satisfy my demand, the narrator is forced to resume the story with my father in his customary role. The supposed grandfather simply disappears.

'In an establishment that is a cross between educational institution and a summer camp, we are asked to perform some convoluted acrobatics. I cannot do it but a younger couple does succeed in accomplishing the task. The girl is standing on her head and takes off upward in a sort of summersault while the boy stands by to help. The head of the establishment is an ambivalent figure. On the one hand he is a respected guru of a certain discipline; on the other he is a sinister tyrant and charlatan. The staff is all female. One of them is influential. She is loving and protective towards me. I am supposed to have achieved something but I don't think I have. This loving and protective woman produces a series of paintings, attributing them to me. I am astonished. I cannot believe that I did the paintings. I certainly have no memory of having done so. Still, I allow myself to be convinced by her. Some of the paintings, portraits and still lives, are really good. Others are childish, abstract, and meaningless. I dismiss these with the words: "What can you expect, after all, I am mad".'

As per usual, the narrator revels in ambiguities, impossibilities and obscurities. The location is not quite a school nor is it quite a summer camp. The head of the establishment is a respected guru but also a sinister charlatan. The feat the girl is expected to perform is a physical impossibility. No one can take off vertically upwards from a headstand. I am supposed to have achieved something I do not think I have. That something remains unspecified.

But then the story takes a different turn: I am confronted with a series of highly detailed paintings. I am told they are mine, all done by me. Yet I am fully aware that I am not an artist, that I have no knowledge of having done this work and that I could have produced neither such rubbish nor such high quality art. I am in the story, I am being told the story and, all at the same time, I refuse to accept the plot. It takes the narrator some effort to persuade me back into my original roles. And when I am forced back into the story, both as its hero and its audience, my parting shot to the story teller amounts to this: "If you insist on depicting me thus, then you have to add that I am mad!"

'An institution halfway between a club and a school. A sort of Old Boys reunion. One member of the group, a middle aged man, complains about the quality of the food provided: "I would not eat here if this was the last place on earth". As I am going down some steps towards the dining room, I discover that one of my teeth is split in half. I take the broken half, which has a gold filling, into my hand to examine the damage. I realize in an instant that the entire set of my teeth is false. I see in my hand a lower and upper set connected by a mechanical hinge. The contraption is powered by a motor that closes and opens it automatically so that the teeth can

be set in motion to chew without my involvement. I am utterly shocked by this discovery. At the same time I still feel that my own natural teeth are still in place. I find this duplication paradoxical.'

At first the story is a humdrum one. School reunions are common enough and the food usually served on such occasions often leaves a great deal to be desired. Half broken teeth are not so common but they do occur, especially if they are riddled with fillings. Gold is customarily used for crowns but, for the purposes of the narrative, the difference between fillings and crowns may not be material.

The shocking realization of having nothing but dentures is another matter altogether. Especially so since the narrator, true to form, exaggerates wildly by detaching them from me altogether. They are able to chew food driven by their own power supply. This is too much for me. I step outside the suffering hero, resign as a compliant audience, and reassure myself by feeling my own teeth in my mouth. They all there, in good working order. All is well. Except that the story teller is still around, his narrative still goes on, leaving me suspended in a dual world, to marvel at an unresolved paradox.

'I am on, or in, water. There is a strong sense of drowning. The water is a translucent lake, seen simultaneously from on high and through the water from underneath. The following words are said by me: "How can I know that I am dead or alive if I am dead?!" This proposition seems to me to be contradictory. I have a feeling of genuine puzzlement: have I died by drowning or am I still alive?'

This very brief story is somewhat unusual even for an eccentric narrator such as mine. There is so little to it that it hardly deserves to be called a story. I find myself under the waters of a translucent lake. As the sacrificial hero of the story I am clearly meant to drown. The story teller's intention may well be the depiction of the last excruciating moments of a dying man. Seeing myself both through the water and from on high, would suggest so. And, as a central character of the story and its audience, I do have a strong sense of drowning.

But, unsurprisingly, I am just not prepared to go there. The prospect of having such an experience, is too frightening. So I halt the story teller in his tracks. And I succeed by using one of the weapons he has finds difficult to counter: logic!

I counted more than one hundred stories with me challenging the narrator in the midst of his flow. Sometimes with expressions of incredulity; or with manifestation of shock; or with questions that he would, or could, not answer; or even, on rare occasions, with outright objection to the story line. In each such instance, I relinquish my assigned role in the story as a hero or a passive spectator. On each occasion, I step outside the story and assume my regular daytime character. But, most remarkably, I never leave the scene. Despite the sudden transmutation of roles, despite thinking

and acting like the man I know myself to be, I continue to stay in the narrator's company!

This realization was an almighty shock. I spent many years in poring over the minutia of nine hundred stories in search of the identity of my mysterious narrator. And yet here I was in his actual presence. I was showing him my disbelief, displaying my doubts, asking questions, demanding explanations, raising objections and even rejecting his story lines It would be no exaggeration to say that we two are having something of a dialogue.

Such dialogues did not occur very often and when they did, they were exceeding brief. Nevertheless these moments in each other's company carried an exceptional significance. For it meant that the shadowy creature of the night was substantial enough to be reached by me, if I but knew where and understood how.

Fragment 2

Neither asleep nor awake

That we have been talking to each other, was in itself most remarkable. After all, the nightly narrator is supposed to tell stories whilst I, his audience, attend silently in my sleep. But the evidence could not be more convincing: I expressed surprise, voiced doubts, asked questions, challenged the story line while he took notice, responded and even, at times, changed his mind.

These sporadic exchanges were brief and limited in scope. If they occurred at all, it was when the story led to somewhere outrageously odd, to assertions that I knew personally to be false, to vagaries that simply provoked unanswerable questions or to events that shocked me beyond belief. These curtailed dialogues never developed into proper conversations, nor did any of the challenges reach satisfactory resolutions. They remained truncated episodes without bringing me and the narrator closer.

But, looking back, I could not get over the fact of our being in the same narrative space: a story being told, an actively participating audience and a responding narrator. This is not how I thought of dreams when I set out on my quest!

I kept asking myself how this was possible. I have always been taught that when I was asleep I was not awake and when awake I was not asleep. I dreamt when asleep but never when awake. Like night and day. As simple as that. But is it? What about dawn, what about dusk? Isn't there is a moment, at the setting and rising of the sun, when it is neither light nor dark? Or perhaps better still, when it is both dark and light?!

Coming to think of it, there is no movement in the whole of nature from one state to another, without a period of transition, no matter how brief. A moment when the substance in transition is at once both what it was and what it is going to be. When the snow is melting, the water is freezing, the bud is flowering, the seed is germinating, the storm is gathering, a bird is taking flight or laying an egg, a creature coming to life or another one dying. Even the brain ceasing to function and the heart stopping to beat takes a moment, however meticulous a coroner tries to be.

Falling asleep and waking up are prime examples of transitions. I found it incredible that their significance has been totally ignored by virtually every one in the business of dreams. For the only time I could have been communicating with my narrator was when I was both asleep and awake. And that had to be the moment of waking on the brief but eventful journey from my night to my day.

There are individuals thought to have the capacity of being almost instantly awake. Almost but not quite. They appear to open their eyes and spring straight out of bed. They themselves may not be aware of it but they are conscious of things before opening eyes. It does not mean that they are in full command of their faculties. Most

of us take a little time to gather our senses as we rub the sleep out of our eyes. To different degrees we feel disoriented, especially after spending the night in unfamiliar surroundings. A sleeper aroused by sound or touch will often groan, mumble and move about long before opening eyes. To different degrees we all take time before we are alert enough to face the challenges of a new day.

Appositely, nor is the reverse journey, from full consciousness to the realms of sleep, a single, sudden, isolated move. A loss of focus, a lassitude, a nodding head, are all stages in a transition that culminates in shut eyes and a change in the rhythm of breathing that signals true sleep. I am a good sleeper, given to falling asleep with ease. No sooner my head hits the pillow; I am in the land of Nod. Many others tend to drift slowly across the divide, often aided by fantasies, memories and dissolving thoughts to leave awareness behind. There is a general assumption that a trigger is needed to complete the transition from one state to the next. I do not assume, I know, I have experienced it at first hand.

During the years of my crisis I had a great many nightly adventures, details of which are best kept in the private domain. In one form or other they were all manifestations of panic attacks. My excellent sleep patterns were thrown into chaos, with frequent interruptions, fearful awakenings and prolonged periods of uneasy dozing. I had one experience, repeated five times, that brings the process of transition into an acutely sharp relief. On the very brink of sleep, floating shapes passed before my closed eyes, dissolving, coalescing and constantly changing their form. In the grip of indescribable terror, I tried desperately to seek recognisable images to which I could attach my fear. To no avail. I could not lapse into sleep and my eyes would not open to let me come awake. I was caught between the two states, both asleep and awake but neither wholly awake nor wholly asleep. The trigger to send me over the edge, for whatever reason, got stuck and refused to function.

This happened only in the course of an acute crisis, but the intensity of the experience engraved itself deeply in my memory. So its recollection now, a good decade after my fortunate escape, still makes my heart miss a beat. It is impossible to convey the sensation of the event to anyone who has not experienced it. And, unfortunately, I have not come across anything similar in the scientific or lay literature. To describe it as a frozen frame in a private horror movie would be inaccurate since there was nothing static about it. I was moving inescapably to and fro from the very edge of sleep to the very edge of wakefulness, whilst I was conscious. I was aware of what was happening and where I was, all of the time.

But it is only now, delving into hundreds of stories imbibed at the time, that I realize the critical significance of these transitional states. It is only now that I can appreciate the value of a direct experience of their existence. It meant a particular kind of dreadful suffering but it left in my mind thereafter no doubt. The crude separation of the two states of being, asleep and awake, creates the greatest single obstacle to the understanding of dreams. It leaves no space for the most essential. Because it is only in this space that the stories could be conceived, only in this space could the stories be brought to life.

In the course of a great many stories the narrator and I did get some sort of dialogue going. For this to be possible we had to be, however briefly, in each other's company. So that, within my sleep, I had to be, in some respects, awake. So that the narrator, whilst taking account of my interjections, had to cease telling the story and retire for the briefest of moments. That is to say, he had to go a little to sleep.

Now I had conclusive evidence to show that there was a crucial period of transition from being asleep to being awake. I experienced it myself and enough of the stories demonstrate that it has to be there. Losing consciousness and regaining it are not simple, irreducible, absolute, events confined to a clinical terminology. They are movements of transition from one extreme human condition to another and it is in these movements that our drama takes place. This drama that belongs exclusively to the narrator and me, is only to be rehearsed when we are together, when I am regaining consciousness and he is still conscious of me.

Although this realisation was set off by traces of an incipient dialogue, eventually I understood that what is relevant there had to apply equally to the entire corpus. Even where I had not overtly shown surprise, disbelief or doubt, I was obviously attentive and fully engaged. And even when I raised no objections nor rejected the story line outright, the narrator had to be aware of my occasional lack of response, or rising interest, to be so good at adapting the narrative to the mood of his audience.

Scrutinising the stories in their simplicity, with disregard to centuries of preconceived notions, it is plain that the narrator did not have them all neatly wrapped up, ready made for his nightly performance. The setting of the scene is usually flimsy, if not absent altogether. Many of the stories seem to miss a proper beginning, with the audience plunged into the heat of the action, missing preceding events of some importance without knowing what they were. There are too many abrupt interruptions, arbitrary changes of tack, unconnected fragments strewn all over the place, for the stories to have been premeditated, polished and complete. The narrator brings, of course, some ideas with him, but then makes up the story as he goes along.

As I was regaining consciousness, during the telling of the tales, I had enough sleep left over from the night to understand the narrator and see what he was at pains to show me. He, in the same narrow time zone, retained enough history from my daytime, to make his concoctions of special interest to me. These were the boundaries of our communing and the limitations imposed on the stories he told. I wish it could be otherwise and, I dare say, it is most likely that the narrator shares the same sentiment. In the end, I must reconcile myself to the fact that he is predominantly a creature of night and I, even as I write these lines, will be forever imprisoned in the clear light of the day.

A winter scene. A friend is leading us in a single file. Each one of us is dragging a sledge. The snow lies heavily on the ground and glistens in the moonlight. There are large snow covered mounds. We are not sure whether they are moguls or people

completely buried under the snow. We trudge on and join a queue of people. A venerable, large, old, bearded man is lying on the ground. His body is completely covered by the snow, only his face is visible. I point out to my wife how happy the old man is.

My wife says: "How can you possibly know that the man is happy or what he is really feeling?!"

I reply:"But look at his face. He is smiling with a lively, contended smile"

The narrator narrates. This is what he does. And everything he does ends up as a story. But he is most attentive to what I do, and think, when I am not asleep. The friend who is leading the sledging exhibition is a senior colleague and partner in one of my businesses. As a matter of fact, he hails from Egypt, worships the sun and detests everything to do with the cold and the winter. The narrator is either ignorant of this facet of the man's character or chooses to ignore it.

Throughout my childhood, I sledged regularly every Transylvanian winter. Later on, in the Alps, moguls presented the greatest challenge to enjoyable on-piste skiing. Intimidating as the moguls were, it had never occurred to me, so far as I know, to think of them as graves of dead people. I was however, intensely preoccupied by death at the time of the narration. The narrator exploits my involvement and even succeeds in ending the story on a comforting note: the frozen old man dies with a happy smile on his face. Thus my days, of the distant and recent past, are dragged into my night and the night time story illuminates what I had missed when fully awake.

My aged and senile mother is reclining on a sofa with a habitually anxious expression on her face. I approach, take her head into my hands and, gently squeezing her face, I say the following words: "There is nothing to worry about. All will be well, just relax..."

My mother's face ages suddenly and becomes shell-like. I notice a large crack in the wall next to her, forming something like a miniature cave of white stones. Something seems to be moving within it. A beak is trying to break through. A large bird emerges with a skin of a plucked chicken. The bird settles on my mother's chest. She is horrified and tries, ineffectively, to throw it off. I try to help and move the bird but fail. Eventually the bird falls to the floor.

The portrait of my mother is painted with great accuracy. That visual expression of her anxiety accompanied my life from an early age. I cannot remember that particular attempt of mine to alleviate her fear but the narrator believes I did intend to make such a gesture of comfort. The advanced stage of senility corresponds with the reality of that time.

From here on the narrator is in his element. Wild imagination takes over and the story takes a fantastical turn. There seems to be no connection between the bizarre

events and what went on before. And yet the plucked bird carries unmistakable intimations of death. She settles in my mother's bosom, and neither she nor I can do a thing about it. Day and night are intertwined. The narrator and I share, for a moment, the same space.

'At my present home, late in the evening. I come out of the front door. A midget of an ancient woman is standing there in a cramped posture. Only her face peeps out from under a black shawl she is holding over her head. She is uttering, repeatedly, the word "giggles" in a high pitched voice. I put a hand on her shoulder and turn gently towards the lichgate that links our house with the adjoining church. I now become aware that there are hundreds of such creatures, all alike, crowding the main gate. They are all cramped with black shawls over their heads, uttering ceaselessly the word "giggles". I signal to them to go by the main road to the church and refrain from using the lichgate.'

The site lay-out is perfect. The house, the church, the main road, the main gate and the lichgate, are all in their right places. There is nothing to distinguish them from their daytime appearance. The midget sized, decrepit, shawl encased, women, are fantastical figments of the narrator's imagination. If the word "giggles" means anything at all, it is confined to his peculiar vocabulary.

But the way these creatures are introduced and how I handle them, is very much what would happen in reality. If one church goer knocked on our door, I would guide her to the lichgate. If it became a crowd, I would usher it to the church through the main road. So the narrator is entirely with me insofar as my environment and behaviour goes but he fills them wholly with creatures taken from his own private domain. Once again, day and night overlap. The narrator and I are in tune once more.

I am watching a TV program with my wife. Our situation is mirrored with a couple sitting in front a screen. The program shows woman bitten on her chest by a snake. She has to cut out the poisoned wound with a knife. She is instructed how to proceed by a doctor from afar.

As we watch the screen I become aware that I have an identical snake bite wound around my heart. I now have to follow what is taking place on the screen and perform the same operation on myself. I have a sharp knife in my right hand, pointing to a bluish/red swelling. I press the knife and make a clean incision to remover the poisoned flesh. My wife is watching intently and with concern. I feel no pain. I am rather pleased with myself and even proud.

An innocuous beginning: a couple watching TV, just like my wife and I. Then the story takes a dramatic turn: the woman turns out to have a snake bite that she has to cut it out by her own hand. Gruesome as the action is, it is still on screen, at a safe remove from me. But this is not intense enough for the narrator; it is more exciting to

have my own heart at stake. So, with me at the centre, the situation becomes real since it is contrasted with its counterpart on the screen. The narrator employs ruthlessly daytime means when I am supposed to be asleep!

I am driving a jalopy slowly around a city square where we live. I am handling the car cautiously having spotted a police car in the vicinity. As I try to park the car, the brakes fail. I put my foot on the brake pedal with all my force. The car comes to halt with a slide on the muddy surface.

Inside the car there is a carrycot with a baby boy. When the carrycot is placed on the ground, we see it is divided into three sections. The baby is in the left hand compartment. The right hand compartment is empty. The centre is occupied by a peculiar creature that turns out to be a turtle, roughly about the size of a few months old child. The turtle keeps revolving in a sidewise sort of summersault. We are concerned lest the hard shell clonks the baby on the head. The baby feels to be mine. The turtle becomes a mechanical toy. I produce a wooden prototype that, although quite different, is allegedly the one from which the mechanical toy derives.

All of my cars were bought second hand and some had faulty brakes. The environs of our home are depicted faithfully. The narrator seems to know them as well as I. We could just as well sit together in the car. The segmented carrycot with the peculiar turtle is his own idea. But he is trying to convince me of its reality by harping on the danger its rotating shell poses to the baby's head. By turning the turtle into a mechanical toy, the narrator leads us right back to my daytime as I am a toy inventor and prototypes in wood are tools of my trade. So he is in my daytime just as I am in his night of somersaulting turtles.

I am delivering a long beam to a competitor company. At various stopovers I forget the beam. As I keep returning to retrieve it, I am late for my appointment. In the meanwhile the beam transmutes into a kind of bench with wheels, a toy prototype of some value. I meet the 3 owners of the company in the street and we return together to the mews where they are located. A number of properties in the mews are vacant and we are discussing the expansion of their company. I state categorically that I shall not buy any more properties.

We are now in a small room. Being a competitor I am barred from all other rooms on their premises. A toddler, the son of one of the owners, is crawling on the floor. Having lost sight of him, I almost poke out one of his eyes with a pointed stick brought along by the toddler. The stick turns out to be an enlarged tooth pick. The toddler shows the point of impact, on his forehead, just above the eye. We are all satisfied that no harm was done and continue our professional discussion. The toddler, lying naked on his back, is starting to pee. At first the stream hardly rises; it resembles a bubbling spring. Then the stream erupts into a fountain, cascading glittering, dampish, confetti of many bright colours. The confetti is scattered all over us.

The story is full of regular features of my daily life. The 3 competitors, the mews where their workshop is located, toy prototypes, steps taken to safeguard the secrecy of inventions, professional discussions, are just as they are experienced by me in the course of my working life. I am frequently forgetful and occasionally late for appointments. The premises of their company had been acquired by me on their behalf. So my remark about not buying any other properties makes perfect sense.

The injury to the toddler and his subsequent performance originate almost exclusively from the narrator's domain. In his world toothpicks grow into hefty, sharply pointed, sticks and peeing babies produce fountains of brightly coloured confetti. Although the confetti so produced, quite logically, retain a degree of moisture. Thus, imagination, memory and fact are interlaced. The narrator and I share an interesting moment.

One of the world's most trendy entertainment locations. The ambience is all Hollywood. It is important to be seen in the company of celebrities. There is a lot manoeuvring and photographing. I am with M, the mistress of a very close friend. M is more ravishing than in real life. We are in love and lovers. The performances take place on a circus like platform within a tented arena. A group of scantily clad girls are playing with multi coloured South American parrots.

It is now the turn of M. She is performing with a parrot about her own size. The colours of the parrot form an array of magnificent greens and yellows. M is sitting on the back of this bird. The bird is lying face down on the floor with wings well spread. Her fingers play with the neck of the parrot. There is some danger – the parrot moves and could bite the hand.

The idea is for M to invert the bird into an unnatural posture and then let her pop back into normal. M stands up after completing her moves. The bird is lying still. There is an air of expectancy. But the trick does not work; the bird does not pop back. In fact, her neck is broken. The parrot is dead. Everyone is shocked. I try to comfort M.

The setting is familiar through direct personal experience and entertainment channels on screen. The circus has for me associations of great excitement going far back into my childhood. Hollywood attempts to evoke a similar sense of excitement in the present. The amalgam of the two, the past and present, locates the action firmly in my daytime.

M has been a vivid presence in my life for many years but we were far from being in love and could never have become lovers. The narrator goes out of his way to create an erotic link where there is none. Perhaps, he meant to challenge me with what he knew about me and I didn't. Perhaps, he made her more ravishing for that reason.

From here on, the story assumes an increasingly bizarre plot. The massive parrot; M sitting on the bird's back; the exquisite colours; the distortion of posture; the expectation of an automatic click back; all help to waft us into a fantasy world where the narrator reigns supreme.

But then this fantasy world comes crashing down in a tragic climax. The trick fails, the parrot, deformed, neck broken, is dead. The ending is only too horribly real. We are back, once more, in the semi light of almost daytime, where we both, narrator and I, still survive in a hostile kind of harmony.

THE SEVENTH PART
The encounter

Fragment 1
A Venetian mirror

So near and yet so far. After so many stories I should have felt close enough to their source. Having so diligently, so faithfully, recorded all the stories, I ought to have formed an idea as to the kind of man whose stories they were. Years of study of such a vast body of this narrative literature, does justify claiming an intimacy with their author. I had, by now, an idea of the kind of man he is. And I gained no small measure of understanding what he is about.

But all that was not enough. To bring my quest to any kind of conclusion, I knew I had to meet him face to face. In the end I simply had to discover for myself who the narrator was. When, where and how? The question kept asking itself with a futile echo, little sense and no viable answer.

We could not meet in the full flow of any story. And when I tried to interrupt the flow with doubt, question or rejection, the narrator resumed telling the tale or disappeared abruptly altogether. The implied, barely nascent, dialogue between us would never move any further.

Awake, I used to slip quietly into worlds of daydreaming with remarkable ease from very early on and very, very often. By parents, teachers and sundry adults it was considered a fault, a fault I never got over. But enjoyable or frightening as these daydreams were, they lacked an element of surprise. In my daydreams, I have scaled the heights of achievement and plumbed the depths of fear but I could never astonish myself. I was always alone, the narrator was never there.

I know that some people in the dream industry claim that while they dream, they are aware of dreaming. And more than that, being aware, they are able to influence the content of the story and even modify its plot. I have no wish to challenge such claims. They are made by serious, respectable individuals and sound convincing. They may be a tad too anxious impart their experience and teach techniques to practice a kind of conscious dreaming. To possess this ability is regarded as some sort of achievement and dreams thus produced are considered superior because the dreamer exercises a measure of control over them.

From where I am coming, the diametric opposite holds true. Far from bringing the narrator any closer, such dreaming is bound to make a potential encounter,

more remote. Story telling is, of course, part and parcel of all our daily life but it is subordinated there to a myriad of other priorities. We have to live and love, fight and work, move around and make things happen. We require reasonable means to satisfy reasonable needs, so narratives become means to alien ends, not ends in themselves.

All those who went ahead of me on this track, whatever their opinion, believed that the author of the stories was someone other than themselves. The narrative was always adjudged to emanate from a misty, dark and mysterious source. At first it was gods, angels or devils, oracles both true and false, all nebulous creatures allergic to light. Then it was the great Unconscious, be it private or collective, and lately, it is sought in the unpredictable neural pathways in the brain. Whatever the variations in semantics or substance, this visitor from the night was to be caught in a cobweb of interpretation that somehow worked in the practical terms of the day.

But if I learnt anything at all, I learnt that this just was not on. The environment of daytime is definitely not where I could meet the narrator and have him for myself. He is a creature of the night. It is where he is in his element. It is where he dominates the landscape and shines as the brightest of stars. The only chance of a meaningful encounter had to be on the narrator's terrain and largely on his terms.

Having got so far, I had no clue what to do next. What the stories taught me was most instructive and highly valuable. I learnt to avoid the pitfalls on the roads taken by those who went before me. I acquired the sense not to embark on false roads that lead nowhere. I stuck to the narrative and gained some understanding of the narrator. But thus far this journey took place in the daytime with the guiding light of reason. I relied on my intelligence and used logic for my navigation. To bring me to where I needed to be, to contrive an encounter, these tools did not suffice.

So after failing to think my way to a meeting with my narrator, I decided to change tack. I gave up reasoning for a while and, instead, allowed my mind to slumber and my imagination to roam unhindered across the vast spaces of human ignorance. I waited for something to happen but nothing did. I hoped for a sudden revelation but not an iota of it was revealed. I prayed long for some inspiration but I was not inspired to do a thing. I looked for a sign, a slight indication to help me take the first step. No sign, no indication, no help.

All I knew for sure was that the encounter had to happen, if it was happen at all, at the very edge of sleep, at the utmost reach of awareness, at the precise moment when my night meets my day. When the narrator and I are both still asleep and yet already awake. In the course of waking, that moment had to be frozen to last for the duration of the encounter, no matter how long.

If this was to be the time of the appointment, my bedroom had to be its location. For it was there where I have slept and dreamt for the last thirty years. The room is an integral part of an Elizabethan manor house, dating back, in its present incarnation, to the sixteenth century. Our home simply breathes history. Tudor arches, massive stones, heavy oak, hand blown leaded glass and period furniture, all conspire to generate a sense of an enduring past. But it is the collective memory of a long line of

blood linked inhabitants that keeps alive the feel of another, more spiritual, age. For those sensitive to other worldly presences, ghosts tend to lurk behind every creaking door of which there are plenty in a building that old. Sadly, I am not sensitive enough for ephemeral creatures and so I miss the ghostly traffic in our house. But I have to admit that this is just the kind of environment where inexplicable, even unbelievable, happenings seem to be not out of place.

So I considered the time and venue of encounter set. I was content with the 'when' and the 'where' but as to the 'how', I was completely lost. For a while, a great deal of my time was spent in thinking. I took leisurely baths and familiar walks. I listened to endless tracts of Bach, Beethoven and Brahms. I stared long and hard at flames of open fires fed by logs from our own woods. All to no avail. Night after night I went to bed with but one thought. Morning after morning I woke with a fresh story but of the story teller, there was no trace.

In the meanwhile I was going about my business as has been my wont. The restoration of our home meandered gently along. Its pace was constrained by a chronic shortage of funds. My occupation, such that it was, brought in the money in sporadic waves. My acquisitive forays were infrequent but intense.

Lighting was one of the most challenging aspects of trying to resurrect an Elizabethan past. Bare candle light, on its own, was insufficient to illuminate our practical lives. Electrical appliances, even in antique dress, aspired for later, more sophisticated, periods of furnishing style. This left me no choice but commission lamps to my own original design.

Murano was the obvious place to have these designs realised and so I found myself on an island devoted, almost exclusively, to glass. It was here that the art of transparency was perfected in medieval times. And it was here that its jealously guarded mastery was handed down from artisan father to artisan son until the industrial revolution swept away all art, craft and the human touch. Apart from the practical expertise still locally retained, I felt it appropriate that artefact evocative of the 16th century should be produced where the 16th century reached its creative and dominant peak.

The project, inevitably, required periodic personal interventions. Every trip meant a stay in Venice, which has been, for many years, a source of visual inspiration. I tried to prolong my stays in the city, not so much to reacquaint my eyes with its better known aesthetic landmarks, more to comb through an antique dealers network with the vague hope of uncovering objects of unusual beauty and appropriate age. The extent of this network did not change a great deal but its composition varied from year to year. Dealers died, retired or went bankrupt; newcomers with fresh aspirations took their place in the same location or close by.

Emilio Parma was a constant. He inherited the business as something of a novice and now, at an advanced age, still maintained the same passion, ambition and verve he had at his arrival. The shop, a modest establishment in an obscure courtyard, was well off the tourist route. But then, Emilio never relied on passing trade. On the contrary, he made a point of displaying only mediocre stuff, with the best pieces

well hidden in a sort of inner sanctum. On rare occasions I bought something from Emilio but, although on friendly terms, we never became friends. Going to see him was part of my routine but I had been doing so without great expectations.

On the way back from my last excursion to Murano I called on Emilio to be greeted, as usual, with a warm handshake and a broad smile. And as usual, he took me back, by the arm, to what he called his 'special' room. We looked at a very fine carpet and a few early medieval sculptures but nothing of real interest. Eventually, Emilio brought forth a mirror and the mirror caught my eye. I knew next to nothing about antique mirrors and, in any case, all mirrors carried for me associations of narcissistic vanity. Yet something drew me to the object so strongly that I could not avert my eyes. Emilio took in at glance what was happening and, quite naturally, proceeded to take full advantage of it. In a conspiratorial tone and meaningful whispers, he embarked on a well rehearsed sales pitch:

Although you keep popping in and out of Murano, I don't suppose you went beyond the business of making glass. Few people do. There is enough to learn about glass to last a few lifetimes. But the principal attribute of all glass is transparency. It is there to let the light through. Its ideal has always been to lose no light at all. To be there but not to be seen to be there, at the same time. Of course, being the creatures we are, that sort of simplicity could not last. Glass had to assume all manner of fancy shapes, absorb a vast multiplicity of colourful decorations, play around with complicated angles of reflection, and even deny its own essence by generating offspring more or less opaque.

The mirror, my friend, is the exact opposite. It does not let through any light, it blocks completely everything on the other side, it makes much of itself, it gives back as good as it gets and sometime, perhaps, even a little bit more. You can say, of course, that mirrors are made of glass and this is true, at least from the 15th century onwards. Until then mirrors used highly polished, solid metal with the article too heavy to carry around and the image less clearly defined. As a matter of fact, it was here in Murano that the very first glass composed mirrors came into being. The local plate glass manufacturers led what was to become a highly prized and jealously guarded art. You know how good Venetians are at keeping secrets, so they held a monopoly of such mirror making for almost two centuries. Not for nothing was the genre, wherever produced, called thereafter "Venetian mirror".

Needless to say, what you hold in your hand is one of the finest examples of a genuine 16th century mirror produced certainly in Murano and, most remarkably, commissioned by one the greatest families in this city at that time. If you look at the elaborate, finely honed frame you will discern a single rampant lion, undoubtedly part of the family crest of the Contarinis. They produced 5 Doges, some 17 Bishops and quite a few members of the governing Council of 10. You have, probably, not

visited their magnificent 15th century Palazzo del Bovolo, named after quite an extraordinary winding staircase reminiscent of a snail shell. It is tucked well away in a backyard round the corner, not more than 10 minutes from here. Not many tourists bother to visit, so you can enjoy a peace and quiet, rare nowadays in the city.

You have not mentioned price. I take that as a bad sign. I must warn you that the figure is considerable. It may seem to you out of proportion for a mere mirror. I cannot really help you, the market in these objects has gone up sharply and demand is strong. And, of course, this piece is quite exceptional. The Contarini provenance makes a significant difference. If it is any comfort to you, a mid-sized Venetian mirror was valued in 17th century France at three times the price of a Rafael painting.

You are looking at the imperfections. The mirror is foxed, as all mirrors of that age are. The tinfoil glued to the glass by means of mercury deteriorates gradually over the years. This creates the irregular metallic impressions embedded in the surface. It cannot be helped but does not seem to affect their value.

I bought the mirror. In relation to the value of authenticated minor old masters, the price was outrageously high. The foxing did not concern me. In fact, the strange, metallic impressions helped to create the feeling of age and the sense of magic that drew me to the mirror in the first place. I did not question the asking price and left a surprised and content Emilio without any doubts or regret. I had a premonition that I acquired something of personal importance to me.

There are people and objects that grow on you. The more you are together the more you learn to appreciate them. This is what happened with the mirror. I have never been fond of looking at myself in mirrors and now, at my age, this dislike had become more pronounced. Facing signs of steady physical deterioration isn't much fun. But I could not help glancing at my Venetian find and every look seemed to bring closer the mystery that lay behind the glass. The peculiar effect of the imperfections made any reflected image assume an aura of unreality.

It took a good few months to decide where to place the mirror. I tried one of the oft used passages, the great hall, the long room, before installing it permanently on the Tudor screen, head high, at the foot of my bed. I gave myself, as a reason of my choice, the unfavourable light at the other possible locations. But daylight was at least as poor in the bedroom as elsewhere in the house. The truth is I wanted to keep the mirror in view on going to sleep, in bed, at home, every night.

Soon the mirror became a familiar item in the room where I spent most of my time, if the hours lost in sleep are also taken into account. But this familiarity was unlike that I had with any of the other pieces of furniture. Each time I cast my eyes on it, I

was struck anew. The mirror was too eerie to be of any practical use. As an object, it was beautiful. As a reflection, it was disturbing. Looking back, I was mesmerised.

Given the aesthetic restrictions, the artificial lighting within the house was no more than adequate. It was partially augmented, and partially substituted, by candles. The candles we used are substantial, the kind to be found in churches and in studios when filming period pieces. In any case, we had to have such candles for emergencies. The overhead electric cables were well maintained but, even so, they tended to come down in savage storms. So these candles were distributed strategically all over the house, each one with a matchbox by its side.

Fortunately, storms of such force were infrequent. In the middle of the third winter after my return from Venice, the winds from the West grew to a ferocity not experienced in these parts for generations. One terrible night, at their peak, they created havoc in the whole countryside. We lost many trees, roofs were severely damaged, the cables came down and even some of the poles were uprooted.

Generally speaking, I fall easily asleep and commotions, even loud ones, do not disturb my sleep. But some time into that violent night I woke up with a start. I pushed the light switch by my bed. No response. No electricity. I got up and lit the three candles in the bedroom, there for this purpose. One of them was positioned on a chest of drawers right under the mirror. I went back to bed and despite the screaming wind, fell, once again, asleep

Some time later, I do not know when, I sat up in bed. Outside it was still pitch black, the storm had not abated. I was no longer asleep but not fully awake either. All the candles were alight, their flames flickered. The room was poorly lit, shadows played gently on the surface of the mirror. I strained my eyes. It was then that I first saw the face looking straight back. And the face was not mine. I do not mean it was the face of someone else, someone I never knew, never met. The overall shape was similar to mine, so were the eyes, the nose, the mouth but it was just not me. A stranger at an identification parade might have thought we were one and the same individual but I knew better. I knew the face did not belong to me.

The appearance of the face in the mirror, of so strange and dubious identity, did not frighten me. I was remarkably calm, amazingly unsurprised. It was as if I expected something like this. As if I wanted something like this to happen. For a while nothing more transpired. Even though I was curious, impatient and highly excited.

Then I heard a voice. The voice appeared to come from the direction of the mirror but the man in the mirror did not move his lips. It occurred to me that the voice was merely in my head and no one else could hear it even if they were close to me, right in this room. But I did not care where the voice was coming from. What mattered was what it said.

And what it said was: *What took you so long?* This was a question, a question inviting a response. I could not wait to reply, to begin our long awaited encounter.

Fragment 2
Face to face

When I spoke I addressed the man in the mirror. As the words were meant for him alone, it did not matter whether or not they were spoken aloud. His stories were also addressed only to me, so what went on between us was in strict confidence.

You ask what took me so long. But how do you measure time, distance and the difficulties on the way? From what I can gather, time is irrelevant to you; you sense no distance between us; and you have no difficulty in finding me whenever you so choose.

Don't be silly, time can never be irrelevant. But why not play with it, why force it into a dull, regular, predictable, boring metronome?

Have you any idea what your playing games with time does to me? One minute I lose more than seventy years, plummeting back to my early childhood, the next I meet a father who has added more than a thirty years to his lifespan and is now still alive and kicking.

I don't play games with time just for the fun of it. Stories are made up of events and creatures. Creatures have to meet each other and take part in events as and when they happen. If a father and son chose to be born or die too far apart, this is none of my business. Its what happens between them that matters. And if that could not have taken place during their natural lifetime, too bad. I am sorry you find this confusing but there are enough restrictions in the reality of your life as is. You are entitled to expect more from me.

Am I supposed to follow your outlandish excursions and not to notice or care how far apart we are?

As for the distance between us, I feel it more acutely than you ever will. The separation is your doing, not mine. We were born at the same time, inhabited the same space, looked at the world through the same pair of eyes, we were inseparable. But this is now ancient history; do you really want to go there?

Of course, I do. How can you doubt it?! Why do you think I noted down all your stories, why have I struggled so hard to understand them, why have I turned my world upside down to find you, to meet you face to face?!

I don't know why you do things, never did. I am not into doing things anyway. I cannot help noticing people as they run around pursuing all kinds of objectives. They have to eat, keep warm, protect what they have, but this running around goes a lot further. They want to conquer, discover and invent, seek new pleasures and clone themselves in countless generations, endlessly on and on. You are not that different.

Yes, far too much of my life was wasted running around. But in searching for you I left all those ambitions behind. If I went anywhere at all, I went backwards, retreated into the past. And, anyway, why am I to blame for the parting of our ways?

Because at the very beginning, when you and I saw the world alike, the world was made up of stories, there was nothing else. We were content to watch the world move around us, remember what we saw and recall what we remembered. We were free to recall whatever we wanted; free to keep them in no particular order; free to shape each recall to our liking, having no care if true or false. We were not even aware that true or false existed. We were content to share those miniscule stories so created, we needed nothing more.

What happened next? What happened to break up this idyllic existence?

You did. You were restless. You wanted to crawl, climb, walk; reach things that were out of reach. The running around started as early as that.

And you would not come with me, is that it?

No, I have been with you always. I could never leave your side. But you began to change. As you aimed to get to places, to accomplish things, you were no longer thinking like we used to think. You were busy trying to figure out how to do things, and a little later, how things happened. From there you slipped further away by asking how one thing led to another. And once you had answers, you could not rest easy without finding out which ones were true and which ones were false.

Naturally. This is what thinking is all about. Am I missing something? Is there any other way of learning? What exactly is your complaint?

No complaints. Just stating the facts. And, yes, perhaps expressing regret. Regret that we could no longer share whole heartedly what we both saw and both felt. I am not talking about a sudden parting; we did not become strangers from one day to the next. But we did drift apart, you moving more and more into practical excitements, me staying put, true to myself, narrating away.

I wish you could be a little clearer. I often find your stories difficult to follow. I was hoping to see you in a more lucid mood when meeting, as we are, face to face.

My stories are always simple. The narrative straightforward, the plot linear. You don't have to go back and forth to work out which episode comes first, which follows thereafter and how they connect. Events move in an uninterrupted flow, scene follows scene, image upon image. If you have difficulties, they have to do with expectations. You are now used to clever stories with well rounded characters, stories with likely events where everything has a rhyme and reason, a beginning, middle and an end.

Is there anything wrong with stories that are clever, fine tuned, well burnished?

Nothing. But those were not the kind of stories we lived by. As we know, you have a highly selective memory. You tend to remember only what is useful in getting on in life. My memory, on the contrary, has always been, and still is, photographic. I don't want to boast but very little escapes my attention and I can recall most minute details, any time, any place.

Forgive me; I still do not know what you are talking about.

Let me remind you then. How do you think we coped with the world at the very beginning when we, you and I, were still at one? When sights and sounds and smells jostled for recognition, when impressions arrived nameless seeking a home, a home we didn't have? When we had no understanding of how things worked, when images were wrapped in fear or desire and we were ignorant of what went with what? We could not bear living in chaos; I have yet to meet anyone who can. Somehow or other, we had to link experience to experience, retained image to retained image, and assemble recollections into sequences that put our mind at rest. We did not have the luxury of an adult ordering of the outside. We had to make up sequences of our own invention; too simple stories for adults to understand.

My memory, much inferior to yours, does not reach as far back as that. At furthest, I recall silly little ditties, half spoken, half sung, whilst bouncing on my mother's knee. And the tale of the five little pigs going to market that ended with an adult hand running up my arm to tickle my armpits.

You are now talking about a later age. After inheriting the rudiments of language. When we could transform images into words and use words to conjure up scenarios, sight unseen. When fingers turned into pigs and pigs back into fingers while adults laughed and naively believed that fingers remained fingers and pigs stayed pigs.

But we had stories already at a previous age, stories full of movement, redolent in action, terrifying in violent surprises. Utterly silent, like a film without sound, each story passed in front of our eye and no one else knew a thing about it.

How can you be sure that this really happened, that it is not a false memory, a fragment of your over-fertile imagination?

My God, you are lazy. What slovenly use of language! You are imposing fancy terms acquired in some arrogant seat of learning on a world that has just emerged from an innocent womb. We had not been given neatly parcelled colonies with labels like 'imagination' or 'memory', 'true' or 'false', 'real' or 'unreal'. Memory and imagination were both assemblies of varied images, strung on different cords, barely held together. Everything, at that time, was both real and unreal, neither true nor false. Well before you decided to set stories apart: those you believed come what may from those that required public approval.

Are you not asking too much? How can I undo years of living and learning, habits I have formed over a lifetime, forget I am a grown up?

You were determined to seek me out, to meet face to face, what is the point of it if you cannot bring yourself to see things my way?! Coming back home with me means abandoning a lot of baggage: future prospects, the need to control your life and the life of others. Are you willing to follow?

I am ready to try but cannot promise I'll manage.

Promises mean nothing to me. I do not give them and I do not count on any of them being kept. We can go home in a wide variety of ways. But it makes no difference; one way is as good as another. We are at the bedtime of a little boy. His cushioned head is sticking out from under a colourful duvet. He is supposed to be sleepy but his body is tense and his eyes are excited. His mother is seated at the head of the bed. She is reading him a story. It is a story the little boy knows by heart. It was read to him often, always on demand. Do you recognise the boy?

Yes. I have seen many photos of him. Actually, I have still one or two tucked away somewhere. I was always assured by the previous generation that they were of me.

What about the mother, do you know who she is?

Yes. She looked after me. When I was sick, or scared, or in trouble, she was there to hold me tight and sooth away the pain.

And the story? What is that all about?

I cannot tell. It could be any one of the thousands of fairy tales scattered all over the world's nurseries, read aloud to send children to sleep.

But more often than not, the telling of these tales just keeps the children wide awake. You do not remember how avid you were for more and more stories, come bedtime? With what reluctance you let your mother go and plunge the room into deep darkness. You have forgotten most of the stories that accompanied an unending succession of similar bedtimes. Just as you have forgotten how grimly you resisted each oncoming night. You are too ashamed to recall the censoring of the most frightening bits, the bits you knew only too well, the ones your mother had to leave out before the story reached its happy conclusion. Hiding your head under the duvet, what mattered was the intensity of the story, not the comforting thought that its words were safely stored between the hard covers of a harmless book. Isn't that so?

Yes, looking at the boy and his mother with a bedtime between them, what you say seems right. Going to bed was never easy. Bedtime stories were not ordinary stories, without them I couldn't let go. Let go of being alert, of being alive. Perhaps, I was always afraid of never waking up again.

All children are afraid of that. After all, falling asleep is a little like dying. That is why bedtime stories are special. They have to cross the threshold of danger, to end up safe, happy and smiling. It is not for nothing that they became so popular. Mouth to ear and ear to mouth they wandered on, polishing their lines until they turned well nigh perfect. What the audience found boring was left out, what got the audience going was enlarged, enriched and endlessly repeated.

Why are you telling me all this? I am no longer a child and your stories hardly resemble the great fairy tales we, as adults, all love. They do not always have happy endings, if they have endings at all. They are anything but neat and fine tuned through prolonged circulation. Dangers are intermittent and calamities seldom materialize. I have no wish to offend but, quite frankly, the stories you tell are a confusing melange of the ordinary and the bizarre without a discernable pattern. They leave me lost, puzzled and disturbed. Certainly never soothing into a peaceful slumber.

Offended? Ignorance cannot offend. And your ignorance is truly profound. I took you to the bedtime of the little boy to make you see not just what stories meant to you once upon a time but to mark the last occasion we were us*, not you and I. We were close but not inseparable. Oh, I remember you running around, exploring how things worked, making discoveries of bits and pieces, but until then whatever*

happened, whatever we learnt, became part of our story. A story we believed even if no one else, in the whole wide world, gave it any credence. Thereafter, slowly but surely, everything changed. As you were growing up, you began making quite different connections, the kind of connections everyone else favoured, connections that paid off. So stories fell by the wayside. Dwindled. Appeared more rarely. Mattered less. But make no mistake, even for an adult, stories are indispensable.

But, surely, adults live in a world of realities; they have no need, no use, for fairy tales.

You see that youth over there, surrounded by mates hanging on his every word? He is telling the story of a night he spent with a married woman almost twice his age. Do you think he is recalling the details of what happened or recounting what his audience wants to hear? And what about the long queue at the entrance of the cinema waiting impatiently to watch the unfolding of a story told in sights and sounds? And the passengers on that train just passing by, hunched over books, turning pages furiously fast in their eagerness for what's coming next? With a massive, flourishing industry of fiction and vast worlds of entertainment, do you seriously believe that man is past fairy tales? Or is it that fairy tales just grew and matured into an infinitely more sophisticated body of literature?

With due respect, we are talking here about professionals. Their stories reach well beyond crude narratives. They create well rounded characters with feelings, thoughts and motives. They develop in the course of the story. They describe scenarios viewed from manifold angles and assess issues with a number of possible outcomes, each one credible. Above all, they use a language every one can follow. Your narrations hardly compare, you are no professional.

I am not, thank God. When you aim to attract multitudes you give up the singular bond between narrator and audience. This is too great a sacrifice. Our own intimacy makes even the most insignificant fragment of the story, riveting. My life's work is to make up stories designed for you alone. There is a whole world of events, places and people, and each single bit, somehow or other, belongs to you. The places are places you are familiar with, or glimpsed in passing, or thought of visiting. The people are people close to you, or nameless acquaintances, or anonymous creatures met by chance for a brief moment. The events are events that you were part of, or followed at a safe distance, or were afraid might, or might not, happen. You, as others of your race, are a self centred and only such items are guaranteed to have your attention.

You exaggerate. There are enough events, places and people, in your stories, well known to the great public and of general interest. They are not my private property.

When I share your stories, some features are well recognised, and many we definitely have in common. I don't have to believe every image you show, every word you say. There is still daylight out there. Things to touch, facts to verify, truths to determine.

It doesn't matter what is in the public domain. You see, feel, experience every bit of that world in a way no one else does. And I am the only one who keeps track of what you do, feel and think in the immense wastes of your waking life. I remember everything. You forget nearly all. My memory is superb, yours is poor and highly selective. You erase the bulk of what you notice and wipe out totally what you don't. I have a permanent collection of the little things you have dismissed as too trivial, unsettling, out of reach, irrelevant, confusing. My collection, gathered over the whole of your lifetime, is monumental. You have access to a minuscule portion of it.

Very impressive. So what?! For my sanity and survival I need to forget more than to remember. Of course I am selective. I must have at hand what is useful, what makes sense, what can get me to places. The rest is there to be got rid off.

We are so, so different. You see, I don't need to waste my time keeping sane and struggling to survive. As long as you are alive, I am alive too. Having no practical distractions, I can devote the whole of myself to what I was born to do. I have no other interests. This is one of my advantages over your 'professional' narrators. They work in the daytime and are keen on recognition, renown and material reward. But I have other advantages, as crucial and as unfair. The ordinary narrators have to roam far and wide in search of their material, mine is right here. All I have to do is to open the banks of my memory and out tumble more places, events and characters than my stories could ever accommodate. They have to address a diverse audience, forced to find a middle ground so as to leave no one unsatisfied. With you as my sole audience, I need never compromise. The very idea of compromise appals me. My stories have no limitations. Daytime ones conform to a pattern, with continuity holding together beginning, middle and end. Mine have no such restraints. I begin anywhere I like, end wherever I fancy, interrupt and change the plot without hesitation. I have no patterns to worry about, no lukewarm reception, no adverse comment. I am free to let the stories take care of themselves.

Neglecting profoundly satisfying structures, evolved through centuries, your stories cannot travel by word of mouth and so forfeit all claim to immortality. It is not for nothing that great stories have a universal appeal, that they carry the audience through an experience that is, within itself, complete.

Exactly. You are beginning to show some signs of understanding. Your precious stories are so successful because they furnish precisely what individual members of the audience desperately lack: a story of their own lives. A story that pulls together

the chaotic details of a fragmented life into a reasonable whole. Of course people are drawn to tales that start at the beginning, sweep up everything on the way, and end with an incisive resolution. Of course they are seduced by stories where everything fits neatly, where the loose ends are tied up, ends justifying all the disjointed means. But these public stories do not belong to anyone. They are about the deeds of others, others never met, others that do not even exist.

Really?! Since when have you been concerned whether something or somebody exists? Going by your stories, you couldn't care less whether something did or did not happen, whether anything was real, whether a creature of yours was dead or alive or has never lived at all.

You are right. It matters not a jot that a story is the figment of the imagination or a manipulation of well preserved memories. What counts is that my stories are about your life and the life of no one else. People in the audience of daytime stories are trying to escape from their lives, my stories plunge you into the very midst of yours. For how can you escape a story when you are its hero, how can you get out of it when you are the central character?! Even when I have to demote you, giving you a lesser part, I make sure you are on the stage when the final curtain falls.

But when I play neither a major nor minor role, how come I still have to attend? It is nothing like turning off the television or putting down a book. No bystander can stop your show. However much I suffer, however much I dislike it, you take no notice, you just plough on.

Oh, I am well aware of your doubts, discomforts and objections but they are scarcely significant enough to demand changes or interruptions of the flow. You find it so difficult to leave my theatre, even when offstage, because we have shared a lifetime too long, because I know you too well, because I am economical and was careful to introduce into the stories only what you mind, what really bothers you.

Coming to think of it, I meant to ask you why I am sometime a hero, sometime a player of a secondary rank and, more rarely, a spectator looking in from the outside. Is it an arbitrary choice, made on a whim, or is it to do with something in the stories, something too subtle for me to have grasped?

In your beloved world of literature, most works are written in the third person singular. Yet some authors find this inimical. They choose to adopt a first person language, injecting themselves into the story, pretending to be eyewitnesses at the forefront of everything that takes place. The same story could be written in either style but there is a crucial difference. Written in the third person, and almost invariably in the past tense, the story proclaims itself a story from day one. The

narrator is over and above events. From that distance, looking down, he is at one remove from the raw pain, the pulsating fear, the oozing blood. From that height he is free to pull the strings and move things around exactly as he wants. Written in the first person, there is no boundary between story and experience. There are feelings, and the feelings are intense.

You have not answered my question. Why hero, bystander or something in between?

Whilst you are the hero, I am still by your side, we are still moving together. The story unfolds as it happens, we are in the eye of the storm, your feelings run riot. By the time you are a bystander, we are apart. I am telling the story and you are looking on. Your attention seldom wavers but the feelings are hardly felt. Terror turns into fear, and fear into concern. Ecstasy lightens into joy, and joy into pleasure. You are no longer fully invested.

I see that. Maybe we have been drifting apart. But sometime, I feature as hero, minor character and bystander in the self same story, how is that?

That we have been drifting apart, of that there is no doubt. Nowadays we spend but brief fragments of time together and when we do, at least in daytime, I am not free to roam timeless the whole extent of the land. You summon me for stories fashioned to serve your urgent, transient, ends.

Do you resent it?

Of course. Do you think I enjoy fabricating a longwinded excuse for forgetting a daughter's birthday, or spin a fancy tale to impress some female with deeds you've never done, or manipulating past events into a narrative to facilitate a lucrative business deal?! But despite this drift, we still come together occasionally, even if only for a moment, especially at night where I retain my original supremacy. It is quite easy, within the space of the same story, for us to separate and rejoin; for you to move from spectator, to minor character, to hero and back to spectator again.

Forgive me but this is not how I have been used to thinking about stories. Stories spoken aloud, read in texts, sacred or profane, calibrated for every adult and age rated for every child. In my experience, narrators reveal themselves by name, unless the names are lost in the mist of times long past. And even then they bear the title of *anon*, like a multitude of victims buried in a common grave. I had never heard of a narrator like you, never thought such a narrator could ever be alive.

Not being recognised is a cross I have to bear. Working unseen in the shadows gives me unprecedented freedom but there is a price to pay. Through the early years

of childhood, when you eat and breathe and sleep by stories, I am welcome and appreciated. Through the years of study, when you are learning to analyse the world, you use me as a relief from relentless logic, and so I am tolerated. In adulthood, I diminish to anecdotal dimensions on the periphery of life. I am deprived of the respect due to one with special talent and exceptional skill. It is unfair. It hurts.

But tell me, are you a one off, a solitary being who chose me, for whatever reason, as a permanent habitation? Or are there other narrators, unrecognised and unsung, scattered about the world? Is your whole race a closely guarded secret?

There is no such conspiracy, no such secret. Personally, I have not met anyone quite like me. I assume there is a whole host of us, probably as many as there are people. I cannot envisage a single human being who could exist without stories. And wherever there is a story, there has to be a narrator.

So why is your kind not in the public domain? Why no mention of so common a race? Why no one talks about a narrator when every one shares a body, and much of a lifetime, with his very own?

The answer is painful but only too easy to understand. For the first few years the nascent man struggles hard to find himself. He cannot focus on any other being, especially one too close to his field of vision. Then, once finally formed, man is full of himself. He thinks he does it all and needs no one to help him. That is not all. Don't forget what I have told you: when I, and my kindred, are in our element, we work unseen in the shadows of the night. The rest of the time we are diluted, fused with all kinds of alien enterprise. Fairy tales, myths, legends, paperbacks and movies, are all narratives but none of them are pure, unadulterated narration. The writers of such sophisticated, highly polished, stories, have stolen our skill, used it ruthlessly and obscured our very existence. It is tragic, of course, but I am not complaining. I am answering questions wholly justified from someone having taken such trouble to ask.

You say your life has been devoted to me. You say your stories are meant for me alone. I believe you. But is there anything, anything at all, that you know about other stories, stories of great renown, stories dear to the heart of mankind?

Of course, I do. I was with you all the way when you made their acquaintance. I keep in mind the inordinate time you spent in their company, the degree to which you learnt to appreciate them, the inspiration your life has drawn from their excellence. And some of the stuff, perhaps a modest fraction, deserves of admiration. Especially, if it stood the test of time. Even so, since you ask, some things needs saying. None of this array of wonderful stories, none of the treasures of great literature, would

exist had it not been for us, me and my kind, beavering away under the cloak of darkness to produce stories that mankind has chosen to call dreams. *Like it or not, they were the first stories ever told, the first visual narratives ever seen. All the rest, with sundry additions, fancy elaborations, and finely honed language, came later, eons later.*

Surely, the claim for primacy, even if justified, means nothing when it comes to intrinsic worth. The fate of the first is to be superseded by versions better, finer, greater, in due course. The history of story telling cannot be an exception.

Maybe so. But we are not entirely extinct. We continue to permeate the stories fashioned in daytime and without our help no story would see the light of the day. As for the night time, when we are on our own and in full charge, at the very least, the stories are brutally frank. There is no tampering, no softening, no fudge. The hero is as he is. You are as you are.

Fragment 3
The benefit

I knew there was little time left. Dawn was imminent. The last questions had to be asked. I was most careful in choosing my words.

I have taken on board that dreams are stories. Having met you, I see that you truly are their narrator. I have learnt to appreciate just how different your stories are from those current in the daytime. But wildly varied as those are, they all cater for some sort of human need. So what is the point of *your* stories, wherein lies their benefit?

For any form of story to endure, it has to serve a purpose; it has to satisfy a need. My line of stories reaches back to the earliest man. Have no worries on this account.

Nowadays, I am sure you have noticed, most stories are produced to quench a thirst for sheer entertainment. There is so much free time at people's disposal, time to read thrillers, to watch soap operas on television, to see movies and listen to lies propagated by whoever has something to sell.

That's a little unfair. Many of the stories, besides entertaining, are instructive. The audience gets to know a great deal about man, society, nation, about the past and what is likely to happen in a problematic future. Not to mention stories that have a moral meant to guide to a better life, a life with higher aspiration. And what about those that paint ideals of love, courage and self sacrifice, breeding generations of men with a heroic dimension?

Yes, yes. I know all that. And the parables; legends and myths; bedtime tales and masterpieces; all with profound meaning, all supposed to illuminate some aspect of the inhabited universe. But what I really want to know is how your stories rank in the domain of narratives? Are they just entertainment, or is there more to them?

It's great that you found the stories entertaining. Do not underestimate the importance of taking an audience with you. It is an achievement in itself. It is a precondition of everything else. Without it the story is worth nothing.

We know your stories kept me in their thrall. They stayed with me long after the performance. I would not have spent the best years of my life in their company otherwise. But is that all?

I cannot help but make the stories entertaining. It really is what I was born to do. But to be amusing is not enough. Amusement does not outlive its own duration. Your own experience should have taught you that my stories have a special quality. It is hard to pin down this quality, difficult to give it a simple and satisfactory name. Intrigueging, puzzling, strange *are terms often applied, and not without some justification. They are thought* frustrating *because, unlike their daytime counterpart, they seem incomplete, fragmented, imprecise. They tend to insinuate things that are not spelt out, things too elusive to grasp. And, of course, there is the questionable absence of the mysterious narrator not manifestly there.*

But you are here now! For once you could throw some light on what has exercised so many minds for so many centuries. If there is more to the stories than just entertainment, for heaven's sake, tell me what it is.

I know you intimately well. You have researched my stories in great depth. You are perceptive enough to work out the answer if you but knew what to ask. Let me try to help. You have well understood that every bit in the stories involves your personal self. Even with this limitation, the volume of raw material is overwhelming. You have no idea how much enters your head every single day! A minute fraction of it is enough for making up any story, purpose told. So I have to be marvellous economical in my choice.

So how do you choose? What yardstick do you use to measure whether a detail fits within the overall plot? What makes you decide if a fragment merits the space?

In your daily perambulation, you deal with incisive action and rapid despatch with matters that come your way. I ignore all those. What I find more useful are incidents of uncharacteristic hesitation; immobilising doubt; premature dismissal; and refusal to see what is in front of your eyes.

What else? You must employ additional means of selection from the over abundant incidents still jostling to get in.

That's right. I take only events that soak up feelings. Those that elicit anxiety; those that send shivers down your spine in trepidation and fear. And, naturally, those that whet your appetite; those that make you crave and yearn for more and more and more.

So you don't care how strong or weak the feelings are as long as they are there. A trivial anxiety or a paralysing fear, it's all the same? A passing fancy or a life long passion, it makes no odds?

For a man of true intellect, it is surprising how naïve you are. Of course, the strength of feelings matter, but I don't go about sifting the ingredients to search for the ones with the highest temperature. That is not how my story telling works. I decide nothing ahead. I have no ulterior objectives. I have no inkling what the story will be. I don't even know what starts off the story. It could be anything that happened to you the day before; something that you did or omitted to do; a sight, a sound, a smell, the recalls the past; a move unfinished, an action incomplete. Once begun, the story just takes off. How the story turns out depends on the feelings invested, your feelings not mine. If your anxiety is confined to a practical matter about to be resolved, if what you fancy is easily obtained, the story will be light. If the dread or desire is long standing, the story will weigh.

Exactly what do you mean by 'heavy' and 'light'?

Come on, you have had hundreds of my stories; you are well aware just how disparate they are. Some are straightforward, cause no bother. Some, on the contrary, are wild, troublesome and keep coming back. Being who I am, so single minded, I would like all my stories to be unforgettable. But, hey, such perfection is a pipe dream. Still, I am not doing too badly, judging by the number of stories you kept poring over, immersed in their profundity. Or don't you think so?

True. But let us restrict this inquest to the heavy stories, as you call them. I know we are running out of time with my question still unanswered. What takes your stories beyond entertainment?

Patience, my friend, patience. Had you been a better scholar, you would have discovered what makes the heavy stories, heavy. If you had a sharper insight, you would have seen what differentiates them from stories that amuse but vanish in broad daylight. You have observed, quite correctly, my rather eccentric handling of the fourth dimension. In my way of telling stories, time has to be inordinately flexible. It must bend and stretch, expand and contract, with great ease. You have noticed how often and how abruptly the age of the hero is transformed. Mostly he happens to be your age, and this is no accident. But from time to time he rejuvenates; the years simply fall away from him. He may go back a few years; reach the age when he was at the peak of his powers; become a student or a schoolboy; shrink into his childhood years or, even, bask in the tender age of a toddler.

Yes, of course I noticed. How could I possibly miss such cataclysmic transformations, since they happened to me, since I was their hero?! So what? So why are such stories so special? Why are they more than just entertainment?

Because the further back he goes, the stronger are his feelings. Because the further back he goes, the more acute are his senses. Because the further back he goes, the more sharply he sees the world, delineated as he first beheld it.

And wherein is the significance? History is now most fashionable and historical novels are the rage. People read these kinds of narratives for pleasure. They view movies derived from them as a distraction. Instruction is incidental. Anyway, whatever is learnt is learnt about others. Your stories are to do with me. So my question still stands: entertaining as they are, are they of any benefit to me?!

Although it is I who says so, the benefit is immeasurable. Immeasurable, that is, if you are able and willing to take it. So it's up to you. All I can do is to tell stories and you have had more than a fair share of mine. During those fateful years, when your mind was in dreadful turmoil, I recounted at least one almost every blessed night. And, because you were in such a state, I paid a lot of attention to give them depth. You will recall they were full of what seemed to you bizarre, strange, impossible, misplaced, mistimed, confused and plain unbelievable. I make no apologies but I'll tell you briefly how I go about my work. Even if badly simplified, it is enough to introduce you into the narrative domain.

Do. Please do. I am all ears.

Funnily enough, it is mostly you who kicks off the story, not I. I know you don't mean to do it, but you do nevertheless. Still, I take over the story from the outset. I don't plan, don't push, don't try. I just wait. Wait for something to come along. And it happens so fast that I never have to wait. What comes along is seldom what you would expect in your kind of daytime: stuff that turns itself, of its own accord, into a daydream, a fantasy, a literary piece. What appears next is an alien substance, maybe from another place, another time; maybe from an altogether foreign scenario. Characters bob up all of a sudden; distorted activities are jumbled; unexpected events precipitate themselves; all flooding in from different epochs of your past. Some may be only hours old, others reach back to the very ends of our memory lane. It is here, my old friend, precisely here, that I come in. It is my lifelong vocation to weave these chaotic fragments into a tale that makes some sort of sense and adds something of enduring value to your soul.

I got that much. It's the bit about the added value that I am still struggling with.

First, you should realise how good I am at my job. There are many of my confreres who are lazy, working hardly at all; there are many who produce tons of stories but they are all mediocre, lacking significance; I am absolutely brilliant. There is hardly a night without narration, but what really matters, the quality is quite often superb.

To begin with, I have a knack for selecting the best of the fragments, the fragments that carry the greatest emotional charge. That is not easy for, at first sight, they may appear casual, easily dismissed. Why is the selection important? Why do you think?

I suppose because what is chosen will make up the content: 'what the story is all about'.

No. What a story is about*, is a popular, flippant and irritating approach. I keep hearing the words put with a question mark and hear them again in the pathetic attempts at formulating a satisfactory answer. If there is a simple answer, the story is not worth being told. No, the selection is vital because the emotional charge will determine how far into the past the fragment will reach. The stronger the charge, the greater the distance. The greater the distance, the more weighty the story. To gain significance, we have to descend further and further down the course of the hero's life. In extremis, even further than that. The selection is never over; it goes all the way along. But right on its heels follows the most delicate work. You see, to have your story, the disparate fragments have to be linked. Creating the links is the making of the story. The linkage is the art of narration. I am a genius at it.*

It is just as well you do not inhabit the public arena. Your boastful arrogance would not go down very well.

Remember, what goes on here is between us. I would not dream of divulging my estimation of myself to anyone else. I feel free to talk to you about the extent of my powers, if you care to reflect on it, you are aware of it already. These powers are formidable, and they have to be. Can you imagine what it takes to discover affinities where none are obvious; to bridge decades of divide; to merge places far distant; to people a scene with creatures not of the same species, with individuals who could never have met; to fabricate mundane events with widespread implications and conjure up fantastic happenings of no consequence; and all that whilst nourishing an unbroken story line that appeals to a daytime audience and holds steadfast its attention. You have no idea, have you? I skim across the years, moving from adult to child and back again, with the speed of lightning. I stop to take breath only when the plot permits it. I am a wizard at my comprehensive memory bank, playing it as a virtuoso plays his piano. I know precisely where each image hides and can get hold of it just at the right moment. And should anything be missing, it's no sweat for me to create an instant replacement.

Very impressive. It is wonderful to get a glimpse of just how such stories come about, given their strange, often disturbing, manifestations. For me, your stories have seldom been less than fascinating. We were talking about depth, reaching back into the dim, distant past; we were talking about significance. Please, let us continue.

Time in my stories is free to move backwards, forwards or stand still. If my hero is looking ahead in eager anticipation, I move the clock forward. If he is involved with current affairs, the clock stays put. But if he is looking inwards, and unbeknownst seeks to know how he got to where he is, I have to wind the clock back. And when I do, the story becomes heavy, pregnant with significance. You see, my stories are all about connections. Not the sophisticated kind prevalent in daytime, loaded with fact, reason and a large dose of common sense; they are of a primitive variety, made of partial similarities, common origins and formidable associations. A bicycle goes with a pram because they both have wheels or with a horse because they are both ridden; cheese goes with butter because they both have a milky ancestor; a printed page may go with a sense of dread after a nasty experience in the library or Sundays with ice cream if the first junction was made at a critical moment. The life of every audience is replete with such affinities, some weaker some stronger, but all overlaid by adult connections vital for daily life. My narratives work on hidden affinities, opening up arteries for the flow of the story's lifeblood. It is from these connections that I forge the links holding the chosen fragments together. And guess what? The further back you go, the fewer are the vital connections! Do you follow?

I do. At least I think I do. Before I ask any questions, could you take us a little further?

It's obvious. As everything organic, including you, develops by differentiation and not addition, the number of common roots dwindles as each later version is traced back to its origin. There may be several men of note in the hero's life, clearly distinct one from another, but in my stories they are all, directly or directly, descendents of one father. However these men may comport themselves and in whatever way they affect events, they do so in their father's name and with his omnipotent blessing. The same goes for partial similarities and powerful associations. The ones of interest to a narrator are connections that are personal, arbitrary and deep rooted. Against all reason, they operate in the present but they all have originals that belong to a well established past. Aversions may be manifold and very specific but there is the single aversion *that is the antecedent of them all. The filtering up and down, to and fro, between the present particulars and the past originals, creates the network that sustains my stories. This network is unique, it is perfect and it is exclusively mine! You know what that means?*

It is fairly obvious what it means to you, I am not yet aware of what is in it for me. But, no doubt, you are about to tell me.

Anon. When I present you the story, as an audience, you are soaking up the entertainment. You do not discern the mechanics of its creation. You have no

thought as to how it is made. And this is how it should be. A great work of art leaves the artist's technique for the experts to squabble over. But, oblivious to that, beyond the entertainment, the story is working on you. You enjoy the dramatic surface whilst beneath it my network is alive with movement. It trades images and emotions, transforming the state of your mind. You are not quite the same man in the morning who went to bed the previous night.

Are you not exaggerating a little? Are you not carried away by your intense interest, besotted by your own achievement?

No two stories have the same depth, very few of them are seriously transforming. But they all leave their mark. Anyway, the weight of the story depends on you, not me. To be more precise, it depends on the inner man. If he is calm, the stories tend to be light; if he is disturbed, only heavy stories will do. Thus, the weight of the stories is a measure of the disturbance. You are the best judge of your own state of mind. But we both know, don't we, its perilous fragility over those critical three years?!

I am never sure what you know and what you don't. For me, I try hard not to recall those harrowing years. The nights were the worst, especially when no stories were forthcoming. The inchoate, unattributed terror was unbearable and nearly broke me. I suppose much in the stories at least embodied my fear, even if it did not alleviate it. Maybe, the stories served to distract my suffering and, by waking me, helped to fragment the uniform, endless darkness.

All this is, of course, true but not really important. If, throughout the crisis, you found many of my stories significant, it was because the narrative itself touched on the crisis. It was because link by link the story drew its inspiration from the original fear, the fear that harks back to the very first acquaintance. The crisis was your crisis, the feelings were your feelings, the originals were your originals. My narration merely led you led you from an acute present to an ever more acute past; from a chaotic delta to the water's source, to the spring of your enduring fears and recurring desires.

You have certainly a way with words, a compelling turn of phrase, an evocative imagery. It is so tempting to go along with what you are saying. I may appear awkward, but I am still not satisfied. The question of benefit still remains. To be fascinating is not quite enough. What good are your stories to me?

You ask a question that you alone can answer. I tell the stories because the stories have to be told. Not to do any good or any other reason. But is it not true that for more than a decade now the state of your mind is undisturbed with the inner man at peace? Is it not true that my narrative has eased, that the stories have become

less and less significant? Is it not true that that the crucible of those three years has changed your life profoundly? My 917 stories were not the only thing you took on board during that troubled period. You immersed yourself in your work and began to compete with me, writing stories of your own. You have had plenty of time to think through the extent of my contribution. What is the verdict?

It is not a matter of competing percentages. My work, my writing, my close friends and your stories, have all played a crucial part. I needed all the help I could get. I never doubted the value of your stories. I recorded them as faithfully as I could. I always felt they had a huge impact. I have learnt a great deal and the more I learnt the more I learnt to appreciate them. Do not think for a moment I am ungrateful. What I don't get is just how the magic works.

It's not really that difficult to follow. Usually we set off from a trivial incident in the present and, on your insistence, roll back the years to some convenient stage of the past. You may or may not be aware of this descent at the time of the narration. What matters is that the story is seen through the eyes of a child. His take on the world is different from ours. The intensity of his feelings cannot be measured on our adult scale. For a child lost at a crossroad; climbing steep stairs; falling off a rock; facing a growling dog; cut off from the source of his milk supply; shut in darkness; witness to violence; are experiences far removed from ours in the same circumstance. Our being faced with two alternatives is a pale shadow of a child having no idea where he is and where he is supposed to be going. An adult being starved of affection is nothing like a baby sucking a barren teat. An elevation to a higher position within the company is nowhere equal to being lifted high up by a father to take an exhilarating ride. Every metaphor has a literal counterpart and this counterpart is rooted in a physical experience of decisive proportion. Daytime language is replete with metaphors; my stories are devoid of them.

Why can't your stories keep to one level - so much of the world's literature does? Why must they yoyo between the present and the past, between two extremes of a man's age range?

Because daytime stories belong to the day and night time stories belong to the night. In the day we reason, at night we imagine and remember. Memory and imagination are not bound by time and space. They move along altogether different lines. These are the lines you wanted explored; these are the lines that animate my stories; these are the lines that bring back the years of the making of you, when your character took shape. It was not but you who dragged us both down, you and the eruption of your half buried pain. This is what I was at such pains trying to make you see.

For me, the drift of the stories was anything but clear. Why has it taken so many painstaking years to find you, why are we here, why this session?

Let me remind you of some explicit pointers. The stories had toddlers conversing in perfect English; newly born babes with the wisdom of sages; children of all ages in appropriate and inappropriate surroundings; children acting as adults, adults as children. We had you, as the hero, shrink to the size of a young boy whilst retaining your present age. In other instances, your incarnation as a child is achieved by inference: you cannot reach a door handle; your eye level is below the top of high grass; a dog towers over you as you stand up in a cot; steps set too steep for you to clamber down an ordinary staircase; and what you can or cannot do is often measured on the scale of a child, not that of an adult. If the revisiting of your childhood is sometimes blatantly obvious, it was merely to give you a jolt. But what really matters is that everything is seen and felt by a child. Even where the stories appear to reflect the current state of affairs, they hark back to the world as you first saw it.

Is that the great secret, the transforming magic, the final pay out? Or is there something else, something I ought to know before we part?

More or less. Any story with life changing potential, will find its way to regions where souls are forged and characters assume their shape. Only there, or thereabouts, can some of the past be undone for the sculpting to begin anew. Only there can the wrongs of the present be put right, and the misshapen rectified. I narrate without any kind of intent. I have no axe to grind, no ulterior motive to instruct, to convert or to heal. I just try to tell a tale. That is all. Where the story goes depends on you. On your wants, your needs, your wishes, and the state you are in. As you recall, these stories were told with you in a pretty bad way. Actually, you were falling to pieces. Very little of your identity was left. So the narrative went deep into the depths. And here you are now, once again whole, with a modified self in a far less fragile state. I cannot claim the credit. The kind of stories that emerged are your doing, more than mine. The secret is the night, the magic is the darkness, the kind of darkness that frees your jealously guarded control.

It is all weird but they way you put it, it seems to make sense. If I believe you, it is because of what I, personally, experienced. But, as you know, I am not your typical man and the state I was in at the time was rather exceptional. What about the others who are presented stories at night by narrators of a different hue? Does the same magic work for them too?

I cannot speak for others. Stories of the night are private. They are confined to the narrator and his audience. But I have reason, if reason permits, to assume that my

confreres work on similar lines. We are all creatures of the night and cannot narrate any other way. Of course, as everywhere, there are differences. Some narrators are lackadaisical, some are shallow, some try to be too clever, but I think we are all trying to do the same thing: tell stories tailor made to our audience. You know, at the end of the day, every man needs to have to hand a story of his life. The story needs to be brief, focus on the essentials, and be credible. In the chaos of the day such stories are not easily available. I like to think that our kind of story, beginning from the beginning, can help accomplish that.

These were the last words spoken by my narrator. Thereafter the Venetian mirror, still an object of beauty, reflected only myself.

THE EIGHTH PART
The return

Fragment 1
The mirror

So near and yet so far. Having so diligently, so faithfully, recorded all the stories, I ought to have been well acquainted with their narrator. Year long studies of such narrative literature should justify the claim of an intimacy with their author. And, indeed, I felt close to him and had, by now, a good idea of what he was about.

But that was not enough. To bring my quest to any kind of conclusion, I knew I had to meet him face to face. I had to discover for myself who the narrator really was.

When, where and how? The question kept asking itself with a futile echo, little sense and no viable answer.

We could not meet in the full flow of any story. And when I tried to interrupt the flow with doubt, question or rejection, the narrator resumed telling his tale or disappeared abruptly altogether. The implied, barely nascent, dialogue between us would never get any further.

Awake, from very early on in my life, I was inclined to slip into the world of daydreaming on every conceivable occasion. Parents, teachers and sundry adults considered it a fault. It is a fault I never got over. As enjoyable or frightening as these daydreams are, they lack an element of surprise. In my daydreams, I have scaled the heights of achievement and plumbed the depths of fear but I could never astonish myself. I was always by myself. The narrator was always missing.

I know that some people in the dream industry claim that while they dream, they are aware of dreaming. And more than that, being aware, they are able to influence the content of the dream and even modify the unfolding story. I have no wish to challenge such claims. They are made by serious, respectable individuals. To possess, or acquire, this ability is regarded as some sort of achievement. The dreams thus produced are thought superior to ordinary dreams because the dreamer exercises a measure of control over them.

From where I am coming, the diametric opposite holds true. Far from bringing the narrator any closer, such dreaming is bound to make any potential encounter, more remote. Story telling is, of course, part and parcel of all our daily lives but it is subordinated to a myriad of other priorities. We have to live and love, fight and work, move around and make things happen. We require reasonable means

to satisfy reasonable needs, so narratives become means to alien ends, not ends in themselves.

All those who went ahead of me on this track, whatever their versions of the presumed facts, believed that the author of the stories was someone other than themselves. The narrative was always taken to emanate from a misty, dark and mysterious source. At first it was gods, angels or devils, oracles both true and false, all nebulous creatures allergic to light. Then it was the great Unconscious, be it private or collective. Lately, it is sought in the unpredictable neural pathways in the brain. Whatever the variations in semantics or substance, this visitor from the night was invariably caught in a cobweb of interpretations that were designed within the terms of a practical day.

But I learnt enough to know for sure that such an approach could never work. The environment of daytime is definitely not one where I would meet the narrator and have him for myself. He is a creature of the night. It is where he is in his element. It is where he dominates the landscape and shines as the brightest of stars. The only chance of a meaningful encounter had to be on the narrator's terrain and largely on his terms.

Having got so far, realizing what was required, I had no clue of what to do next. What the stories taught me was instructive and highly valuable. I learnt to avoid the pitfalls on the roads taken by those who went before me and acquired the sense not to embark on roads that lead nowhere. I stuck to the narrative and gained some understanding of the narrator. But thus far this journey took place in the daytime with the guiding light of sweet reason. I relied on my intelligence and used logic for my navigation. To bring me to where I needed to be, to contrive an encounter, these means did not suffice.

So after failing to think my way to a meeting with my narrator, I decided to change tack. I gave up reasoning for a while, suspended sane judgement and, instead, allowed my imagination to roam unhindered across the vast spaces of human ignorance. I waited for something to happen. Nothing did. I hoped for a sudden revelation but not an iota was revealed. I prayed long for some inspiration but I was not inspired to do a thing. I looked for a sign, a slight indication to help me take the first step. No sign, no indication, no help.

All I knew was that the encounter had to happen, if it was happen at all, at the very edge of sleep. At the utmost reach of awareness, at the precise moment when my night meets my day. When the narrator and I were both still asleep and yet already awake. It had to come about in the course of waking, when a moment had to be frozen. Frozen, so that it would last for the duration of the encounter, no matter how long that took.

If this was to be the time of the appointment, my bedroom had to be its location. For it was there I slept and dreamt for the last thirty years. The room is an integral part of an Elizabethan manor house, dating back, in its present incarnation, to the sixteenth century. The place simply breathes history. Tudor arches, massive stones, heavy oak, hand blown leaded glass and period furniture, all conspire to generate

a sense of an enduring past. But it is the collective memory of a long line of blood linked inhabitants that keeps alive the feel of another, more spiritual, age. For those sensitive to other worldly presence, ghosts tend to lurk behind every creaking door of which there are plenty in a building that old. Sadly, I am not sensitive enough for ephemeral creatures and so I miss the ghostly traffic in our house. But I have to admit that this is just the kind of environment where inexplicable, even unbelievable, happenings seem to be not out of place.

So I considered the time and venue of encounter set. I was content with the 'when' and the 'where' but as to the 'how', I was completely lost. For a while, a great deal of my time was spent in thinking. I took leisurely baths and familiar walks. I listened to endless tracts of Bach, Beethoven and Brahms. I stared long and hard at flames of open fires fed by logs from our own woods. All to no avail. Night after night I went to bed with but one thought. Morning after morning I woke with a fresh story in my head but of the story teller, there was no trace.

In the meanwhile I was going about my business as has been my wont. The restoration of our home meandered gently along. Its pace was constrained by a chronic shortage of funds. My occupation, such that it was, brought in the money in sporadic waves. My acquisitive forays were infrequent but intense.

Lighting was one of the most challenging aspects of trying to resurrect an Elizabethan past. Bare candle light, on its own, was insufficient to illuminate our practical lives. Electrical appliances, even in antique dress, aspired for later, more sophisticated, periods of furnishing style. This left me no choice but commission lamps to my own original design.

Murano was the obvious place to have these designs realized and so I found myself on an island devoted, almost exclusively, to glass. It was here that the art of transparency was perfected in medieval times. And it was here that its jealously guarded mastery was handed down from artisan father to artisan son until the industrial revolution swept away all art, craft and the human touch. Apart from the practical expertise still locally retained, I felt it appropriate that artefact evocative of the 16th century should be produced where the 16th century reached its creative and dominant peak.

The project, inevitably, required periodic personal interventions. Every trip meant a stay in Venice, which has been, for many years, a source of visual inspiration. I tried to prolong my stays in the city, not so much to reacquaint my eyes with its better known aesthetic landmarks, more to comb through an antique dealer network with the vague hope of uncovering objects of unusual beauty and appropriate age. The extent of this network did not change a great deal but its composition varied from year to year. Dealers died, retired or went bankrupt; newcomers with fresh aspirations took their place in the same location or close by.

Emilio Parma was a constant. He inherited the business as something of a novice and now, at an advanced age, still maintained the same passion, ambition and verve he brought along. The shop, a modest establishment in an obscure courtyard, was well off the tourist route. But then, Emilio never relied on passing trade. On the contrary,

he made a point of displaying only mediocre stuff, with the best pieces well hidden in a sort of inner sanctum. On rare occasions I bought things from Emilio but, although on friendly terms, we never became friends. Going to see him was part of my routine but, I must admit, for quite a while without great expectations.

On the way back from my last excursion to Murano I called on Emilio to be greeted, as usual, with a warm handshake and a broad smile. And as usual, he took me back, by the arm, to what he called his 'special' room. We looked at a very fine carpet and a few early medieval sculptures but nothing of real interest. Eventually, Emilio brought forth a mirror and the mirror caught my eye. I knew next to nothing about antique mirrors and, in any case, all mirrors carried for me associations of narcissistic vanity. Yet something drew me to the object so strongly that I could not avert my eyes. Emilio took in at glance what was happening and, quite naturally, proceeded to take full advantage of it. In a conspiratorial tone and meaningful whispers, he embarked on a well rehearsed sales pitch:

'Although you keep popping in and out of Murano, I don't suppose you went beyond the business of making glass. Few people do. There is enough to learn about glass to last a few lifetimes. But the principal attribute of all glass is transparency. It is there to let the light through. Its ideal has always been to lose no light at all. To be there but not to be seen to be there, at the same time. Of course, being the creatures we are, that sort of simplicity could not last. Glass had to assume all manner of fancy shapes, absorb a vast multiplicity of colourful decorations, play around with complicated angles of reflection, and even deny its own essence by generating offspring more or less opaque.

The mirror, my friend, is the exact opposite. It does not let through any light, it blocks completely everything on the other side, it makes much of itself, it gives back as good as it gets and sometime, perhaps, even a little bit more. You can say, of course, that mirrors are made of glass and this is true, at least from the 15th century onwards. Until then mirrors used highly polished, solid metal with the article too heavy to carry around and the image less clearly defined. As a matter of fact, it was here in Murano that the very first glass composed mirrors came into being. The local plate glass manufacturers took the lead of what was to become a highly prized and jealously guarded art. You know how good Venetians are at keeping secrets, so they held a monopoly of such mirror making for almost two centuries. Not for nothing was the genre, wherever produced, called thereafter "Venetian mirror".

Needless to say, what you hold in your hand is one of the finest examples of a genuine 16th century mirror, produced certainly in Murano. And, my friend, believe or not, it was commissioned by one the greatest families in this city at that time. If you look at the elaborate, finely honed frame you will discern a single rampant lion, undoubtedly part of the family crest of the Contarinis. They produced 5 Doges, some 17 Bishops

and quite a few members of the governing Council of 10. You have, probably, not visited their magnificent 15th century Palazzo del Bovolo, named after quite an extraordinary winding staircase reminiscent of a snail shell. It is tucked well away in a backyard round the corner, not more than 10 minutes from here. Not many tourists bother to visit, so you can enjoy it in a peace and quiet, rare nowadays in the city.

You have not mentioned price. I take that as a bad sign. I must warn you that the figure is considerable. It may seem to you out of proportion for a mere mirror. I cannot really help you, the market in these objects has gone up sharply and demand is strong. And, of course, this piece is quite exceptional. The Contarini provenance makes a significant difference. If it is any comfort to you, a mid-sized Venetian mirror was valued in 17th century France at three times the price of a Rafael painting.

You are looking at the imperfections. The mirror is foxed, as all mirrors of that age are. The tinfoil, glued to the glass by means of mercury, deteriorates gradually over the years This creats the irregular metallic impressions embedded in the surface. It cannot be helped but does not affect their value.'

I bought the mirror. In relation to the value of authenticated minor old masters, the price was outrageously high. The foxing did not concern me. In fact, the strange, metallic impressions helped to create the feeling of age and the sense of magic that drew me to the mirror in the first place. I did not question the asking price and left a surprised and content Emilio without any doubts or regret. I had a premonition that I acquired something of personal importance to me.

There are people and objects that grow on you. The more you are together the more you learn to appreciate them. This is what has happened with the mirror. I have never been fond of looking at myself in mirrors and now, at my age, this dislike had become more pronounced. Facing signs of steady physical deterioration isn't much fun. But I could not help glancing at my Venetian find and every look seemed to bring closer the mystery that lay behind the glass. The peculiar effect of the imperfections made any reflected image assume an aura of unreality.

It took a good few months to decide where to place the mirror. I tried one of the oft used passages, the great hall, the long room, before installing it permanently on the Tudor screen, head high, at the foot of my bed. I gave myself, as a reason of my choice, the unfavourable light at the other possible locations. But daylight was at least as poor in the bedroom as elsewhere in the house. The truth is I wanted to keep the mirror in view on going to sleep, in bed, at home, at night.

Soon the mirror became a familiar item in the room where I spent most of my time, if the hours lost in sleep are also taken into account. But this familiarity was unlike that I had with any of the other pieces of furniture. Each time I cast on it my eyes, I recognised its rightful place, while, at the same time, being struck anew. The mirror

was too eerie to be of any practical use, I never relied on it when examining the minutia of my face. As an object, it was beautiful. As a reflection, it was disturbing. Looking back, I have to admit I must have been mesmerised.

Given the aesthetic restrictions, the artificial lighting within the house was no more than adequate. It was partially augmented, and partially substituted, by candles. The candles we use are substantial, the kind to be found in churches and in studios when filming "period" dramas. In any case, we have to have such candles for emergencies. The overhead electric cables are well maintained but, even so, they come down in savage storms. So these candles are distributed strategically all over the house, each one with a matchbox by its side.

Fortunately, storms of such force are infrequent. In the middle of the third winter after my return from Venice, the winds from the West grew to a ferocity not experienced for generations in these parts. On one terrible night, at their peak, they created havoc in the whole countryside. We lost many trees, roofs were severely damaged, cables came down and even some of the poles were uprooted.

Generally speaking, I fall easily asleep and commotions, even loud ones, do not disturb my sleep. But some time into that violent night I woke up with a start. I pushed the light switch by my bed. No response. No electricity. I got up and lit the three candles in the bedroom, there for this purpose. One of them was positioned on a chest of drawers right under the mirror. I went back to bed and despite the screaming wind, fell, once again, into a deep sleep.

Some time later, I do not know when, I sat up in bed. Outside it was still dark black, the storm had not abated. I was no longer asleep but not fully awake either. All the candles were alight, their flames flickered. The room was poorly lit, shadows played gently on the surface of the mirror. I strained my eyes. It was then that I first saw the face looking straight back. And the face was not mine. I do not mean it was the face of someone else, someone I never knew, never met. The overall shape was similar to mine, so were the eyes, the nose, the mouth but it was just not me. A stranger at an identification parade might have thought we were one and the same individual but I knew better. I knew the face did not belong to me.

The appearance of the face in the mirror, of so strange and dubious identity, did not frighten me. I was remarkably calm, amazingly unsurprised. It was as if I expected something like this. As if I wanted something like this to happen. For a while nothing more transpired. Even though I was curious, impatient and highly excited.

Then I heard a voice. The voice appeared to come from the direction of the mirror but the man in the mirror did not move his lips. It occurred to me that the voice was merely in my head and no one else could hear it even if they were close to me, right in this room. But I did not care where the voice was coming from. What mattered was what it said.

And what it said was: 'What took you so long?' This was a question, a question inviting a response. I could not wait to reply and so began our seminal encounter.

Fragment 2

The seven dream companions

Travelling light, I had with me just seven of the nine hundred and thirty dreams recorded. The selection was intuitive, in keeping with my ignorance when setting off on the long journey. Now that I have come to understand something of my identity,

"A man in a vineyard is fermenting wine. To test its maturity and strength he has to release some vapour from a tube and put a light to it. My shadow and I are standing at a safe distance. The vapour escapes, a light is put to it, but the vapour does not ignite. The vapour expands and turns into an ever growing cloud. We fear a huge explosion and retreat further and further into the distance, expecting the worst. When the cloud envelops everybody there is no explosion, just a sort of damp squib, completely harmless."

"We are on our way to a village on the outskirts of a town. Accompanying us are two black dogs and a peculiar pig-like animal. We are embarrassed by these creatures that attach themselves to us. We would like to get rid of them, particularly the pig-like one, the dogs are more acceptable. On the approach to the village the pig-like creature rips off a mask to reveal a human head."

"A military man of high rank, handsome, is called away to fight in a war. He leaves behind his son to be looked after by me. The infant is fully formed and normal except that he is about four inches in height. I have difficulties in keeping track of so minute a human being. Fortunately, most of the time he hangs onto my jersey with miniscule talons formed on his feet."

"I am standing on the balcony of my childhood home. A devastating summer storm left just one huge tree standing, towering over the house. The tree is severely damaged, perhaps already dead. It is black and grey with many of its branches smashed to the ground. Yet still large chunks of the tree are above my head, about to fall down on me at any minute.

I am afraid and excited at the same time. I feel brave standing my ground, not trying to run away. As the remaining branches are falling, they turn into paper shreds floating gently past me. I come to no harm."

"A mine. Soft dark greyish coal like substance is being dug up. The workers are using spades – they are digging into the substance. An attractive, young, blond man appears on the scene. He is full of vigour and wants to introduce new ways of

mining. He is using a spade to demonstrate what he wants done. In a movement both clumsy and sinister his head is completely severed by the sharp edge of the spade. The head, on its own, utters a few words, asking for help. The words turn into a whimper."

"Against the backdrop of semi-dark sky a flock of birds disappears into the distance. I am deep underwater is a sea inlet. On one side of the inlet a castle wall reaches right down to the shore. On the other side, the sharply sloping ground displays rocks with interspersed vegetation

I am moving along in the water but not by swimming. A force behind propels me forward. I do not feel human; I do not seem to be inside my body. I am some kind of human submarine.

Loud music is blaring in my ear. Finding all this very strange, I question myself whether this is the state of being dead. In fact I am unsure whether I am dead or just about to die. Almost colliding with a moss covered rock, I wake up."

"In company with my sister and someone else. We are in a field. In an adjoining field we see a bull. My sister is afraid. I reassure her by drawing her attention to the dividing fence between the two fields. I point out that we are near enough to the other fence and can jump over it if the bull decides to charge.

The bull rushes at us at speed and it becomes obvious that we cannot reach the safety of the fence in time. As the bull approaches he turns out to be not a bull but a pre-historic monster. The third person in our group is now revealed as a mythical beast, half human – half animal. He interposes himself between us and the monster, facing him with extreme confidence.

The combat is fierce as the two creatures rise, locked together against each other. The mythical beast unfolds the top of a vestment he has been wearing, revealing half his chest to show and prove something. He scratches himself as a gorilla would. It is evident that he lost the fight and is about to die. His last words are: 'don't kill the …' pointing to the monster".

EXPLANATIONS

At the end of this kind of quest, the questions asked at the beginning seldom find wholly satisfying answers and the revealing answers, such as they are, are often answers to questions unasked. Being in the middle of my search, I cannot yet know the final score but I am beginning to understand that the puzzles of the morning, reflecting on my dreams, have to be recast in nightly terms if I am ever to have a peace of mind. And, more than that, the unravelling of the puzzles itself is bound to generate other, undreamt of puzzles, in a language that makes allowance for them to remain unresolved. I set out to probe the age old mystery of dreams and uncovered an inexhaustible well of strange stories. I followed the stories, dwelling on their strangeness, and happened on the trail of a story teller who sleeps when I am awake and tells me his stories only when I am asleep. It may destined that our paths can never cross and yet I have the greatest need to meet him face to face.

So, after all this time, what have I garnered about the man? He does not seem to have a permanent abode. He inhabits unfamiliar territory as readily as places I have most intimately known from the earliest days of my childhood. He moves with ease among the most extreme variety of creatures, both human and inhuman, animate and inanimate, fancy and commonplace, simple and composite, common and rare, close to me and far removed, dead and very much alive. At the same time, ironically for someone who moves with such ease, he is most concerned with all aspects of moving and tends to put in his hero's path a diversity of ingenious obstacles most challenging to surmount. Oblivious to any constraints imposed by the immutable laws governing space and time, not bothered too much about the kind of causal links we associate with the real world or the logic we use to help us survive, he gives free reign to an imagination unparalleled in any form of literary art.

What can I make of a narrator who is obsessed by the number 2 and the duality of almost everything in sight? Who drives his hero by some sort of compelling force that is never spelt out? Who chooses to distort or transform creatures and objects at will? Whose output is full of vagueness and ambiguity, improbability and impossibility, unexpected and disturbing gaps? Who promotes me to hero one minute and casts me in a minor role or confines me to a mere viewer, in the next? A story teller who toys with my identity, so that I cannot be sure whether I am a woman, a man, a child or a fully grown man?

I have never come personally across any individual capable of concocting comparable tales. Those dealing in legends, fairy tales and children's stories come closest but they are still miles away. To get anywhere I have no option but to take a step back and look behind the stories to the kind of mindset that their author might perhaps possess. Among my current circle of acquaintances I know of no one who could fit the bill. I am blessed with a rich variety of friends, professional colleagues and an extensive library but I know of no one who thinks quite like that. But going

further a field, in more primitive cultures, where story telling has retained more of its ancient form and the stories themselves draw on a time when science and faith have not yet gone their separate ways, I detect traces of a mindset not dissimilar to the one I have to confront. A number distinguished experts in this field have already explored the common ground between the treasured tales of Aborigines, of Bushmen, of the surviving tribes of the Andes and some of the more outlandish dreams logged by sundry deranged members of the civilised West.

The more I examined the hundreds of stories that I alone was told, and studied the mindset at their source, one correspondence stood out blindingly above the rest. As parents we can but marvel how a child learns from scratch the complexities of the surrounding world. Signs of new understanding appear almost every day. Growing up proceeds at an astonishing rate. Yet each step learnt is a struggle, requires endless practice, countless repetition and is agonisingly slow. It takes an awfully long time before children can tell stories in their own words. Ages before then they yearn for stories and understand to varying degrees the bedtime stories that accompany them to the realms of sleep. And, leading up to that stage, from the moment they come into the world, there is a period of growing awareness of which we have no direct knowledge simply because the child cannot speak. At least he lacks the language to convey how sees the world, the way he views what he sees. So we are reduced to conjecture. And we conjecture as best we can, in the only terms we know, the terms of an adult. We measure the distance of where the child is at a given moment and where he ought to be as a grownup. Thus we deal only in lacks, in what is still missing. The child sits but cannot crawl, can crawl but not stand, stand but not yet walk, walk but not yet run. The child seems able to recognise some places and people but not others, distinguish dogs from humans but not one dog from another, respond only to a few words, annunciate still fewer. We judge achievements on an adult scale and study them as stages in child development. The accent is on when a stage is reached, on which order faculties and skills are acquired, on what may or may not retard such development and how to accelerate the process.

It is, or course, safe to conclude that at certain ages of our childhood we will not yet have acquired many of the concepts essential for a rational understanding of the world. There was surely a time when we had no idea of time and space, of common features, of causal links and the simplest of logical syllogisms. And it is understandable that, viewed from a scientific, educational and cultural perspective, they are simple and temporary deficiencies which disappear when growing up follows its normal course. Such a perception is understandable but it misses what is, perhaps, the most crucial attribute of the child mind. For it assumes that understanding the world, that is bringing our disparate experiences, memories and thoughts somehow together, is only possible by means of association, comparison, leading to differentiation and reasoning. They are the tools that enable us to acquire an encompassing world view. In the measure that a child lacks these tools, he does not know, does not understand, cannot organise his experience and has therefore no world view. This assumption is

not justified. More than that, it flies in the face of all that is commonly known about the nature of man.

In dealing with his environment, primitive man does not wait for the assembly of all the tools required for a rational evaluation of what is going on. He does not just stand perplexed and wonder about the sun and the moon, the never ending sequence of day and night, raging seas and floods, ailments and recoveries, the mysteries of death and birth of new life. He organises the surrounding events, and brings together the diverse fragments of his experience, in a profoundly different way: he tells himself stories. Every ancient civilisation has its creation myth. Some have a sun god who drives his golden chariot across the sky, is defeated in his struggle against the goddess of the night only to return in triumph at dawn the following day. Poseidon is angry for some excellent reason and churns the sea over. Noah is just of one of many stories of spectacular floods. The Garden of Eden, the Tower of Babylon, Isis and Osiris, Romulus and Remus, the songlines of Australia are not deficient explanations of puzzling phenomena awaiting a more plausible, more rational analysis. They are stories that represent an alternative mode of organising human experience. They are expressions of an earlier form of thinking. They are the fruit of a mindset in heavy contrast to the rational one. I am choosing to call it *the narrative mindset*.

And so I come back to the child simply because I have to believe that throughout his formative years the narrative mindset is clearly predominant. A love of stories, the demand for their endless repetition, a hunger for new ones and the impatient turning of pages to see what is next, are the easily grasped, outward signs. The inward ones, of necessity, have to be construed but they are more valuable and, from where I am, substantially more significant. At the outset on the convoluted, infinitely complex, road to intellectual maturity, the child has a very limited mental capacity to help him. Not only does he lack the concepts of time and space, a deductive or any other kind of reasoning but he has not even the power to compare or associate what is present to his eyes with what he has seen some time before. So to start with, at the very least, the child has to have a conscious memory. And what is the form of the earliest memories? Beyond any doubt, it is the visual image. Even if tactile, olfactory or auditory retentions precede the remembered image, they are hardly relevant to the emergence of the narrative mindset.

If visual image is the first building block of memory, how does it help with the construction of that magnificent edifice: the story? Once visual images are registered and established they can be recalled. Initially they are recalled in the chronological order of their arrival, stretching to what becomes something of an episode. The remembering of an episode is perhaps the first proto-story that the child tells himself. As the images multiply both in numbers and complexity, to satisfy the innate need to organise them somehow a simple chronological order, obviously, cannot suffice. So the images are linked in another kind of order depending on how powerful or important they are, how far they resemble or clash with each other, whether they are useful or promise to lead to better things. Thereafter, ranging images, or sequence of

images, side by side, is just not enough. Especially so when two such images are far apart. The image of a happy dog, wagging his tail, and the image the same dog barking in anger can be brought together by a simple sausage. The dog is expecting to be given the sausage, the sausage is, however, eaten by someone else. The image of a toy out of reach and the image of the same toy being played with could be brought together by conjuring up a helping adult hand. Thus images are linked to bring elementary proto-stories into being.

The faithful retention and orderly recall of a sequence of images produces a realistic account of what, as seen by one witness, took place. It is a narrative, the product of a narrative mindset, but it is not yet what we call a story and certainly not what moves children. Memory is not enough. The images have to be reselected, reordered and reshaped to create the kind of visual sequences that correspond to the child's fears, desires and priorities. And this is the work of the faculty of imagination, or image-ination, as I have come to think of it. And as for this faculty, as we well know, the child has it in abundance. His mind is rich and fertile in stories, he creates them, craves them, responds to them, understands them, because he sees the world in narrative terms.

What happens to the narrative mindset in the course of growing up? The question, thus posed, is immediately intriguing and gives rise to many others. So far as I can see, it rules the child's mental life for a good many years, exercising its influence on all perception, language and thought. Then, in the measure that analytic thought develops and the basic learning tools are fully acquired, the rational mindset takes over. At the end, for all intents and purposes, the narrative mindset appears to have been banished to the less valued areas of mental activity, like daydreaming, lying, exaggerating, writing and reading fiction, making and watching films. This seems to be the case, at least in the daytime, when we have to fight our way and earn a living. At night, it is a completely different story: the narrative mindset retains its dominion and the narrator is in his element.

So I am reasonably confident I know where my story teller was born, brought up and educated. I sense the environs that have helped to hone his skills. I also know that he is not content to confine himself to the night but keeps wandering off into the day, growing in intelligence and experience all along the way. In fact, he keeps track of everything to do with me: what I eat, what I do or fail to do, who I meet or wish to meet or avoid meeting, where I go and where I do not, my plans, successes and failures, down to the last detail. So I have still some distance to cover if I want to get really to know him and meet him face to face.

It took some time to come to terms with the presence a story teller at the very core of my being. But eventually I had to accept that he was there from my very beginnings, well before I had any idea of my place in a world of incomprehension. Of course, in the early days he was a mere beginner, a babe in arms, unskilled and inexperienced in the art of proper narration Even so he grew up faster and kept ahead of me throughout our childhood years.

Looking back into that distant, precious past, I see just how close we have always been: I unaware and he watching everything I did. I learnt to crawl, totter and then to run. He played with the bits and pieces gathered with my eye, linking them into sequences I could retain, recall, remember.

When I was old enough to tell strangers what had happened, it was he who told the story, putting his words in my mouth. At bedtime it was again he, not I, who demanded from my mother the reading of a fairy tale to send us both to sleep.

Later on, confronted with the rigours of school, he was tireless in weaving private stories to deflect my attention and public ones to deceive tiresome teachers or impress class mates with flights of fancy most agreeable to us all.

It was my embarking on the road to achievement that reversed our fortunes and began his gradual decline. We stayed close, of course, but the more I was capable of doing the less he appeared to play a part in my daytime actions. For quite a while he still fed on my very low threshold of boredom, seducing me with ambitious daydreams of the improbable, to break up an interminable supply of facts dished up dry at the university of my choice. But when I started to earn a living and was in pursuit of what was attainable, he appeared to lose interest. As most of the day was spent in serving practical objectives, stories would have been in the way. To do my job I had to take account of cause and effect and focus on what served the immediate aims. In these circumstances, it was inevitable that he would feel neglected, even hurt, and fade into the background. So it was therefore hardly surprising that I lost sight of him.

But to have lost sight of him, did not mean that he was not there. I now see that he never left my side. He must have been kept busy keeping an account of all I did and did not do, of what I desired to do and was afraid of doing. He must have noted all that was of particular significance to him, even though, back then, it seemed of no consequence to me. For our approach to life has always been diametrically opposed: I was after knowledge of the world and the difference I could make to it whilst his preoccupation has been with me. The world came into only in what it did, or could have done, to me.

With the passage of time my story teller outgrew his childhood and, along with me, became a full grown man. This meant that he acquired the bare necessities for the understanding of the vagaries of an adult life. He still much prefers to narrate in moving pictures, he has acquired a working knowledge of words and is conversant in just as many languages as I am. He follows easily what is being said to me by others, by others to others as well as what I say to myself.

As for memory, in many ways his memory is better than mine. He remembers events of yesterday, of yester year, of years gone by in my fast receding personal past. But he has always been highly selective, retaining only what has been close to my heart. And since matters of heart are intense, I have early on developed the habit of forgetting precisely what he invariably remembers. Even as I navigate the shoals of daily life, doing my best not get stranded, he will file away incidents of no practical

import, incidents too trivial for me consider. He then makes use of them in his stories, mostly distorted and blown out of all proportion.

Beyond language and memory, in growing up, my story teller has learnt the rudiments of adult thinking. Rehearsing his narrations, there was no missing chunks of deductive reasoning, the occasional abstraction, ideas floating about and the rational anticipation of actions, reactions and their results. He has come to understand the business of cause and effect. The workings of the external world became familiar. Given our growing up together, all this was not that surprising. But why should he have bothered with regular daytime preoccupation that were so alien to him? Why not confine himself to the world of imagination where he was in his element, where he was immeasurably my superior?

The more I delved into his stories the more this question preyed on my mind. People acting out of character has always bothered me. Unexpected behaviour made me uneasy, doubting whether what I took to be a character trait was not merely my faulty perception of it. It was worse here, because I was not dealing with an occasional aberration but with what seemed an ingrained habit. And a habit, moreover, that stood in stark contrast to the true nature of the story teller's very being. About that there was no uncertainty, the stories themselves carried the proof.

I do not know exactly when and how the answer came to me. Nor what was the critical clue. But once I had it, I was sure it was right. It went to the heart of the matter. It had to be thus, it could not be otherwise. The story teller had one, very severe, handicap: he was doomed to an audience of one. No matter how wonderful his stories were, they had to be told to me, to me and no one else. As to how entertaining, exciting, terrifying, perplexing, moving or meaningful a narration be, I was the sole judge of that. To keep my attention, to elicit my interest, he simply had to take account of what I did, what I willed, how I felt and how I saw the world. Above all, to understand my thinking was crucial to his success.

He could not have cared less about how the world worked, about cause and effect, logic, induction, deduction, any of that rational stuff. He learnt it all, could handle it tolerably well, but used it merely as stuff of his stories, stories that were meant for an adult, no longer an infant, audience. He must have discovered early on that I was particularly partial to stories that revolved round my life. Especially so when, for better or worse, I myself was the hero of the tale. So he simply had to keep abreast with what I was about. To keep my attention, much of the stories had to be relevant to my days prior to, and ahead of, the telling of the tale.