

2.8

So. As happens, the future eats the present without sentiment and with straightforward hunger. We are in a position to know. Tom is speaking to me less. We agree. In the automatic formulation of speech, the consciousness that flies out in straight parallel with the word is under strain. Attention and great effort of thought are required and even that may be not enough. The strain fluctuates but at root now it is permanent.

The way his intellect is made manifest through language is being destroyed. Great chunks of speech are collapsing. Holes are appearing. Avenues crumble and sudden roadblocks halt the journey from one part of consciousness to the other. He strings words together like ropes across voids. He is a master improviser, an artist of the swing from thought to word. *Optimism, content, publication, orchestra, ladder*. Yesterday those words were lost and could not be summoned up or spoken. He got them back today through trial and care but will they be lost again? He never panics. What would it be like if he did? Strategically our lives depend on this aspect of his character. And what happens when those words are lost entirely? No optimism, no content, no publication, no orchestra, no ladder.

His vocabulary is filleted. The lapses may be temporary. After a time he can track them down but they are no longer to hand. As I write - *no longer to hand* - the words are to hand. I know what they are. I know what they mean without thinking about them. I know what order they go in and how to spell them. I know that I can use the phrase *to hand* without referring literally to my own hand. This is no longer his experience. Spelling goes awry or syllables get switched or a likely sound is substituted. The complexity of the problem is so intricate as to be scarcely graspable: sometimes minuscule, like drop-out in a piece of digital music, or then surreal, like the wholesale cut and paste of a message spoken in tongues, at which we all stand astonished, including him. It is a traffic jam inching by degrees. When it becomes chronic, everything stalls. What does *work* mean? What is *of course*? He knows what work means and how to do it. But how do you spell it? In the last two weeks, spelling is gaining as a significant problem. Along the top of his computer I put a strip of masking tape and write in red pen: *a b c d e f g h i j k l m n o p q r s t u v w x y z*. I point out the letters. It works, sort of, for a bit.

We are having lunch in the cafe in the park and as we eat he relates a conversation he had yesterday with Mark. He had said to him, *Talking used to be such fun*. When I hear this I lower my face on to the white disc of my plate and rest my forehead on its surface. It is a comedy gesture, a side step. I cannot risk a straight one. If I did I would collapse like a puppet in spasm, my joints and connectors violated. No one would be able to put me back together.

Talking used to be such fun. We met in conversation at a party. I'd been in London for only a year after leaving Holland. I had ditched my old happy life with some discontents in search of a new happy one with more structure - if being an artist could be said to have structure - and I was without much firmly established in the way of networks, money or sense of place. I had a horrible studio in King's Cross, a parttime job and an idea about what I wanted to do. With no optimism for the party I had come north on my bike in a spirit, not so much of hedonism but puritanism - much closer to my heart - thinking that socialising in this period of mild drift would be better for me than sitting in my bedsit. The bedsit was often reason enough to propel me out into the night and I was still new enough to be thrilled at cycling across the city in the dark.

I didn't know many there, the hostess, one other and a couple of faces. But I could see that the company was most interesting around him. Tom was drinking happily with a long start on me and

not worried about the road home as he lived opposite. What our content was I'm not sure, but the other talkers, a woman and another man, receded. The surface of the table was dotted with foil tops from wine bottles, corks, cigarettes, bits of snacks, spoons, ring-pulls, orange peel, and as we talked his hands were always fiddling with this or that detritus: underscoring a point, rolling a cigarette, pushing things around, orchestrating the surface in front of him like a map or a tabletop battle, not really looking at me too much but concentrating on what we were saying. So we began in words. The next day, at twelve o'clock, he called me.

In the space of the last month, words and meanings have been presenting themselves above the surface of the still pool of our existence as if the water that has been evaporating all along had suddenly reached a point where it was noticeable. We are being laid bare. Our waters are receding. Faint white rings of past levels lime the walls.

Wordlessness is a symptom of the object-tumour-thing but hand in hand with it is a symptom of its host. Through the last eighteen months he has been producing regularly each week two pieces, 1,500 words and 1,000 words approximately. This is the minimum. Sometimes there is much more. These articles involve going out in the world, looking at artwork, exhibitions, thinking about them and making sense of them. His pieces remain lucid, original and to the point. Funny. His style, always telegraphic - *Why do you make such short sentences?* I used to say - is now more so. He is in danger of self-parody: full stops, commas, dashes and truncations flash and dot all over the text. Here everything flows like language. The work is coherent. It sites itself in the world of legibility and insight. Its aim is to communicate clear things wonderfully well. You can read them. No one would ever know.

These communications are done later and later at night. They take double, near triple the time to write and consume more energy to compose than we can quantify. What does the brain do when it can't reach the phrase *of course*? Where does it go to look for substitutes? Tom was always canny. He waits and he thinks and he waits some more. He does not give up. We are still in the cafe, my face remains in the plate when he says slowly, *The getting of things exactly right with words, refined and compacted, is my job of many years standing. It is my pride.* The plate holds my cheek and frames the dead weight of my head. It is cool. My eyes are shut. I do not see him, or the cafe, or the square.

In desperation Ev and I go to the Diana Memorial Playground. He is in my sights.

C'mon. Play, he says, turning to look at me. *Play.*

I'm sad.

You can be sad and still play.

Is the world of the happy different from that of the unhappy? Both states are true and present, both polarities alive in the same moment, cognisant of each other and coexisting. They map exactly. Within the margins that have been given to us, everything is contained, stuck tight against its opposite in full measure, and the friction between them is what makes the life. You cannot help but notice this. If we were to lose this demarcation, if, say, Dr B phoned today to say *It has all been a clinical error*, the friction would vanish. It is total, yet weak as surface tension on a drop of water. There would be no way to mentally attain it or to think yourself back into this state. You cannot pretend to live like this. But it makes the old ways seem intolerable, dependent as they are on pretence.

Trailing Ev as he tacks through the sand, I light up to watch him and I despair as I think of Tom not having this experience now and Ev not having the experience of him to come. It's the same world in the same moment of the world. Dying atoms are contiguous with living atoms but their mass is much heavier, of a weight beyond what I ever thought possible. Ev chases bubbles from a machine shaped like a gun. *Look, Mum, stars, millions of stars!*