

## THIS IS A TICKET

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ALL EXPERIENCES HAD are over. Anything done is finished, and everything seen is gone. And yet there is this middle to be in; this continuousness that goes on. The idea that ends are only as credible as edges cannot alter the fact that to look back, from whatever point in time, is, inevitably, to look at that which is no longer there. 'All of us, finally, are exiles from the past', wrote neurologist Oliver Sacks in a case study in 1995.<sup>1</sup>

We are exiles not just finally but now, then and always from any past that was once physically present. The individual moments within which we be and see and do vanish quickly from the world. In our internal worlds, however, this is not the way. Whilst the past cannot be tangibly reached or stepped back into, it does succeed in living a long life inside our ever-present. Even the parts of it we wish were gone forever have limitless, uninvited access. We are the constant in our own time; the 'that' which is continually here.

If everything we have been and seen and done remains inside us, what has it all become? Is experience a structure that grows up around us; a built casing? Does what is done by us or to us turn into emotion: lasting pride or gladness, sadness or anger, guilt or regret? Is the done thing, capable as it is of puncturing this invisible realm of feelings, the strongest and deepest of all gone things—the glue that binds strips of the past into bulk? This thick weave, packed tight inside walls, is often represented in reality by just one tiny thread of itself: the seen. And yet it is inaccurate to describe the past as merely 'represented' by an image, when it can of course be said that the past *is* a picture, at least insofar as memory is a visual incarnation. All that is past happened within the pictorial reality of a place, a setting, a scene. However, if a memory is a visual one—a mind picture—then it is, unavoidably, a picture stripped of real, original detail and event; a picture minus what is physically gone, because what is absolutely and unquestionably gone is the actuality of being there, inside the picture, at the exact moment when that memory was being formed.

The subject of Oliver Sacks' case study was an Italian painter who continually produced uncannily accurate views of his home village of Pontito. In 1995, it had been 42 years since he was last there:

When he was alone, the yammer and clatter of memories would die down, and he would get a calm impression of Pontito: a Pontito without people, without incidents, without temporality; a Pontito at peace, suspended in a timeless 'once', the 'once' of allegory, fantasy, myth and fairy tale.<sup>2</sup>

A memory picture, once seen by a mind's eye, is tangible, even if only hazily, transparently and hoveringly so; not even quite a mirage. Any thing, however barely there, can be grabbed at, captured and stilled, kept, had and owned.

It may be that, inside ourselves, there exist pictures not only of our own lives but of the life of the earth itself—that is, if, as well as psychological recall, evolutionary-genetic memory is possible too.

In *Cosmicomiche*, Italo Calvino imagines a time near the beginning of the world, when the moon was very close to the earth, and when phenomenal structural shifts were taking place throughout the universe, as though such infinite pasts as the Big Bang had happened only generations ago and could be remembered and related by our grandmothers.

His main character, whose name is Qfwfq, explains, 'There were nights when the Moon was full and very, very low, and the tide

was so high that the Moon missed a ducking in the sea by a hairs-breadth; well, let's say a few yards anyway. Climb up on the Moon? Of course we did.'

One night Qfwfq gets trapped on a receding moon with the woman he loves and must stay there for a month until it orbits back to earth. He says, 'I should have been happy: as I had dreamed, I was alone with her, that intimacy with the Moon... exceeded my most luminous hopes, and yet... it was... exile. I thought only of the Earth. It was the Earth that caused each of us to be that someone he was rather than someone else; up there, wrested from the Earth, it was as if I were no longer that I... I was eager to return to the Earth, and I trembled at the fear of having lost it... torn from its earthly soil, my love now knew only the heart-rending nostalgia for what it lacked: a where, a surrounding, a before, an after.'<sup>3</sup>

The philosopher Eva Brann sees memory as an entirely creative phenomenon, saying 'Imaginative memory not only stores for us the passing moments of perception; it also transfigures, distances, vivifies, defangs—reshapes formed impressions, turns oppressive immediacies into wide vistas... loosens the rigid grip of an acute desire and transforms it into a fertile design.'<sup>4</sup>

And, similarly, the neuroscientist Gerald Edelman has written that there cannot be any fixed memories, any 'pure' views of the past uncoloured by the present.<sup>5</sup>

It is usually something which is here now that causes memory pictures to appear. When they surface they may not necessarily do so only in our heads but instead as interminglings between the picture past and the physically present. Is this what happens when Tony Swain paints on a page from a newspaper? Is it the experience of being suddenly stopped in one's tracks by something recognisable and yet impossible to name? In order to evoke a creatively imaginative memory picture, it may be necessary to first go wandering. And where better to begin than amongst that which is most immediately to hand?

Again, in *Cosmicomiche*, when the sun first starts to emit radiation, it has a melting, unstable effect on the newly solidified dark planets. Every bit of what is underfoot is moving and Qfwfq's twin brothers have gone missing in the commotion. He offers to try to find them:

Good for you, Qfwfq, yes, go! Father and Mother said, then, immediately repentant: 'But if you do go, you'll be lost...! No, stay here. Oh, all right, go, but let us know where you are: whistle!

Other relatives who had left Qfwfq's house moments earlier were now crying out:

'Oh! Oh!' could be heard from very distant points, though they ought to have been still only a few paces away. And we could hear some exclamations of theirs, whose meaning we couldn't understand: 'Why, it's hollow here!' 'You can't get past this spot!' 'Then why don't you come here!' 'Where are you?' 'Jump!' 'Fine! And what do I jump over?' 'Oh, now we're heading back again!' In other words, everything was incomprehensible, except the fact that some enormous distances were stretching out between us and those relatives. It was our aunt, the last to leave, whose yells made the most sense: 'Here I am, all alone, stuck on top of a piece of this stuff that's come loose...'<sup>6</sup>

G. K. Chesterton believed that, at the back of every artist's mind, there is something like a pattern or a type of architecture:

It is a thing like the landscape of his dreams; the sort of world he would wish to make or in which he would wish to wander; the strange flora and fauna of his own secret planet.<sup>7</sup>

This presumes that artists make what they want to, rather than what they are compelled to.

Oliver Sacks realised that the Italian painter's task was 'not just an exercise in memory; it was, equally, an exercise in nostalgia—and not just an exercise like a compulsion, and an art.'

Dr. Sacks goes on to explain that 'One may be born with the potential for a prodigious memory, but one is not born with a disposition to recollect; this comes only with changes and separations in life—separations from people, from places, from events and situations, especially if they have been of great significance, have been deeply hated or loved. It is, thus, discontinuities, the great discontinuities in life, that we seek to bridge, or reconcile, or integrate, by recollection and, beyond this, by myth and art. Discontinuity and nostalgia are most profound if, in growing up, we leave or lose the place where we were born and spent our childhood. If we become expatriates or exiles, if the place, or the life, we were brought up in is changed beyond recognition or destroyed.'<sup>8</sup>

There is one sure way for the 'done thing' of the past to cross over, as intact physical reality, into the here and now, and that is if the thing that was done was a making action.

Tony Swain does not consciously look into the mind's eye of his memory, neither does he contemplate a blank canvas or sheet of paper. Beginning instead with a full page of newspaper, on which he will most likely both paint and collage, means that suggestion is already present. This is not entirely unlike looking at a Rorschach inkblot test, or answering a psychoanalyst who, after hearing details of a dream, asks, 'Any associations?'

It is the involuntary, like Proust, that Tony would seem to hold most valuable. To Proust's mind, voluntary recall was conceptual, conventional, and flat. Only involuntary recall, erupting or conjured from the depths, could produce the full qualities of innocence, wonder and terror that he wanted to convey.

The psychoanalyst Ernest Schachtel said Proust was 'ready to renounce all that people usually consider an active life, to renounce activity, enjoyment of the present moment, concern with the future, friendship, social intercourse, in his hunt for the remembrance of things past'. These sorts of memories, says Oliver Sacks, are, 'elusive, shy, nocturnal; they cannot compete with the full light, the bustle, of daily life—thus they must be invoked, conjured up, like dreams, in quiet and darkness, in a cork-lined room, or a mental state akin to trance or reverie.'<sup>9</sup>

The 'involuntary' as an access point to subconscious imagery was central to metaphysical and surrealist methods of painting during the first forty years of the last century. The resulting finds, especially the deep melancholy unearthed by De Chirico and the fear and fantasy dredged up by Picasso, now resurface in Tony's paintings. There are traces too of Yves Tanguy floating tiny ambiguous blobs inside infinite horizons, and of Salvador Dalí transcribing microscopically precise dreams.

In *The Watched Day* from 2005, what could be one eye and a top set of teeth settle near a section of wooden barrel or treasure chest, leering sideways at a calm, realistic sea-sky of small paint daubs. Tongues reach in from outside the painting and pick up the chest with an unseen hand. On the left, with all of this—the painting is in two halves—is a grey tombstone shape and a labyrinth, plus a mountain

or hill and what could be thrown gold jewellery—a bracelet and a ring? It may just as well be anything else though, or nothing but a composition of colour and form: swishing paint, flying and crashing against part objects, scribbling and blurring itself into semi-representational renderings.

The first abstract painters achieved physical manifestations of their separate internal realities, almost simultaneously, around 1912: Frantisek Kupka and Robert Delaunay in France; Mikhail Larionov and Kasimir Malevich in Russia; Wyndham Lewis and David Bomberg in England; Arthur Dove in America and Vasily Kandinsky in Germany. It is Kupka who stands closest to Tony, with his *Vertical Planes* of 1912, sombre rectangles in low-key grey, black and white, with just one accent of violet.

In *Far Flung and Taken*, also from 2005, above a horizon, in an infinity of open space, are what look like flying saucers hovering in a vertical line. We move between worlds via the use of paint gaps and portals into the space of the past, of what was there before the paint, of what was printed on the newspaper page, which, in one segment, turns out to be a blank nothing, just the glaring white light of paper. Crunched up fluted funnels of clothing fabric merge with a long, flat, red, powdery sandstone cliff with a chalky white edge. The black and white of a photograph from the newspaper is recognisable against blocks of ungraded, atonal acrylic colour. An archway is on top of the clothes, giving access from left to right but not from front to back. This is a picture plane without depth, not unlike the one Jacques Louis David offered up in 1784 when he crashed back through 400 years of perspective recession to the idea of painting only as adaptation of classical sculptural relief. Such governances as this of pictorial space are a tempt for those who look. Possibilities and yet blocks. This is not an entrance: access is denied.

Newspapers, along with the photographs reproduced in them, are dried out slices of time: recent history mass produced. These are the facts. Someone has already laid out a composition on a newspaper page: a sub-editor who placed a headline here, a photograph there, and fitted text into boxes and columns. Tony disregards most of this. Newspapers are throwaway, destined to become rubbish. Here, reading is meant to be easy, logical, rational. Tony paints away the words, and yet he does this sitting down, leaning over a page that is flat on a desk, not upright on an easel or attached to a wall. Traditionally, this is the posture of reading, not of painting. It is in this way, however, that a scrap of something owned by everyone, valued by no-one, alive for one day only becomes a unique and precious object; an unchartable, mysterious picture.

In 1911, Picasso glued a sheet of simulated chair caning onto an oval canvas, overpainted it with still life objects and the letters JOURNAL—shorthand for JOURNAL, to represent a newspaper lying on a café table—and framed it with some old rope. This, it is said, is the world's first ever collage. In 1912 Georges Braque pasted scraps of fake oak wallpaper onto a painting called *Fruit Dish and Glass* thereby inventing a technique now called 'papier colle'. Later that year Picasso took the step, again in a first such recorded instance, of gluing pieces of actual newspaper onto a painting—*Man with a Hat*. Sheets of the newspaper make up the lightest side of the face, with other fragments used to suggest teeth and nostrils. There is a report about tuberculosis on the page that covers the man's chest. Hannah Hoch made photomontages by cutting up and pasting back together mismatched details from magazine photographs, creating shocking Dada images from 1919 onwards. Kurt Schwitters picked up rubbish from the street—cigarette packets, tickets, string and newspapers too—while Max Ernst metamorphosed illustrations, anatomical drawings and botanical charts throughout the early 1920s.

In *Torn Rota*, of 2006, there is something like a rope bridge or a suspension bridge, spring-loaded and tightly stretched, striped with paths that could lead somewhere. Above it, though, is only another bridge or shelf, less confusing and much more smooth but too high to leap up onto. Both bridges are actually barriers, built from boy's backs, themselves supporting canvas knapsacks—almost army-issue—that loom large in the foreground.

The light in all of Tony's paintings is flat. The brushstrokes are hazy, misty, atmospheric and, therefore, within the romantic tradition. What they add up to is, however, very precise and almost classical. The paint blocks and fills, not in pools but in gapped and broken, thin transparent areas, in raggedy strips and sketches. The colour is subdued, muted: red is rusty, deep, dark, green is mossy and brown-tinged, the sky blues are misty. All of the colours are worn, rubbed, used, actually soaked in and absorbed by the newspaper, as are the inks with which it is printed, quite unlike the surface layer of skin that might lie on top of a primed canvas. The result is colour from which any shine has been sponged up, and that makes it seem old, faded by the light and air of days.

This bleakness is accompanied by a steepness of perspective in a lot of the paintings, prompting a visual climb, and evoking the exhaustion of travelling through tough terrain. To go on, to continue, to get up and push forward; to rally, to seek, to journey, to not give up; to find the new places or keep returning to the old ones. Either way, it's a long road.

In *Peter Camenzind* by Hermann Hesse, the main character, a poet and wanderer, is annoyed by a woman at a party who compliments his nature poetry, and tells her, 'No one understands nature and... despite all one's groping and desire to understand, one [is] merely confronted with enigmas and [becomes] depressed.'<sup>10</sup>

Hesse's novels concentrate largely on young men who set out on often tortuous travels in the pursuit of what they hope will be enlightenment, self-knowledge or truth.

One such book is *Siddhartha* in which the main character, while still a boy, 'often repeated to himself the words from one of the Chandogya-Upanishads. "In truth, the name of the Brahman is Satyam. Indeed, he who knows it enters the heavenly world each day." It often seemed near—the heavenly world—but never had he quite reached it, never had he quenched the final thirst.'

Some wandering ascetic Samanas pass through Siddhartha's town:

Three thin worn-out men, neither old nor young, with dusty and bleeding shoulders, practically naked, scorched by the sun, solitary, strange and hostile—lean jackals in the world of men. Around them hovered an atmosphere of still passion, of devastating service, of unspying self-denial.

And Siddhartha tells his best friend Govinda: 'Tomorrow morning my friend, Siddhartha is going to join the Samanas. He is going to become a Samana.'<sup>11</sup>

Tony paints people out of his paintings. The faces that were in the newspapers are erased. Is it always more exciting, more liberating to be alone in a landscape; to be the solitary explorer? Not only for him, the painter, but for us who look in on these deserts, tundras, mazes, galaxies; these other worldly scenes.

19th century Romanticism was obsessively concerned with the mystery and alienation of the individual. For Caspar David Friedrich the image of open nature was by definition a statement of the infinite and the immeasurable. In his landscapes, filled with mysterious light and vast distances, the human beings, when they rarely appear, occupy a subordinate or purely contemplative place.

In *Untitled*, 2004, which could be described as a hill with objects, there is what looks like some sort of recording apparatus, an early communication device or an electric-powered book. There may also be a metronome and a ruler, or a puzzle or toy. There is real wood, possibly mahogany or teak, and folded off-white muslin and linen. This painting looks and feels very old fashioned. At the top of the hill there are black craggy gaps to fall through, a canyon or a quarry and an abandoned wooden row-boat, up-ended in rotten shards, a big tooth sticking out of it sharp as a shark's. Still, there is room to scamper underneath it to a place of shelter with some nice ups and downs to clamber around on. The future waits to be faced, regardless of the past.

What most crudely separates the medium of painting from that of sculpture is the cerebral, imaginative escape of its optical transportation, as opposed to physical absorption in concrete, object reality. Tony's pictures can induce both states. The end of his paintings are the actual serrated edges of newspaper pages, the frames their original margins of blank white space. The shapes of the paintings are rarely pure squares or rectangles, but often accommodate tiny left-over juttings from other pages to which they were once attached, or from extra scraps cut and pasted on. Ideas from Frank Stella's 1970s shaped canvases and relief constructions may be seeping through. These thrust out from the wall all the way back to Jacques Louis David, while managing to also benefit, as Tony does, from leaps made by 19th century painters. Gustave Courbet, for example, admitted both the reality of the picture plane and of paint. Edouard Manet revealed the sketchiness of his technique, while pushing forms hard against a frontal plane. Cézanne, with an unusual combination of logic and emotion, made painting, inasmuch as it resulted from his own unique experience, a new, separate reality in itself, and Whistler too produced art for art's sake.

A painting by Tony Swain on the wall, from a distance, first appears as an overallness—an intact scene. Whether a landscape or an abstract, it is, like much of traditional painting, a window onto another world. With closeness, however, comes physical effect: rippling of the newspaper and an uneven frame. It does not lie consistently flat. Then there is the picking apart of what is painted and what is collaged, what was already printed on the newspaper page, and how much of it is now left. And then the foraging for, tripping over and being trapped by tiny details: miniature worlds existing in millimetres of space.

It is not a window that will allow only a contended looking out of it. A static position is not possible because the painting instils such restlessness. Even to walk right up and closely examine the surface, necessary as that is, is not to be able to stay there. This painting will satisfy neither as intact optical image, nor as shattered physical detail. Instead it demands fluctuation between both, and so creates its own past within the shifting, absorbing and, therefore, long present experience of seeing it. Each individual viewer will look away eventually, left only with a picture in their head.