

1. The dog in the dunes

I am the dog.

I run and twist, slow, stop, sniff, run again.

I feel the ripple of movement in my limbs. Breeze on my fur. Soft give of sand beneath my paws, each grain an entity that shuffles and slips against the pad. I see the contours of the ground in front of me, the curve of the dune; crest and hollow of wind-ridge in its surface; pock and pike of my own footprints from where I've run before. Scribblings of bird-feet in the still-moist swale.

I hear the song of my running in my ears. The panting chant of my breath, the sighing grass-stems, chatter and laughter of people on the beach, the slow sough of the sea.

I have become the dog. I run free.

It's a big, yellow dog. A retriever of some sort, with a long, flowing coat. It seems to have no owner, or if it does, doesn't much care. So the place is its own.

I didn't see it come. Just caught the sudden flash of it in the grey-green marram grass. Found myself following it with my eyes, as it made its haphazard way between the dunes.

It is something I started to do at university, and have done ever since. I was taught it by one of my lecturers on the animal psychology course. Doctor Jamieson – Jammy as we called him: an old and gently rebellious man, who seemed to regard teaching students much as if he were teaching his dog: kindly inducements to make you learn, a sharp word

made sharper by the edge of disappointment if you transgressed – if you forgot or didn't try. A simple principle, he'd said: if you want to understand animal behaviour you have to see the world from inside their bodies, their minds, not your own. Driven home with an even simpler lesson. In a spring meadow, where the cocksfoot and Yorkshire fog shimmied in the breeze, squatting low – lower, he said, head down. A terrier's-eye view. A dense forest of frondescence, green, pink, purple, buff, misted by pollen, split by sunlight. "Now try and chase a rabbit," he said, "or find your way back to the gate."

It was an insight that immediately gripped me and shaped my ambitions. It was that, and the opportunity to continue with old Jammy's enigmatic instruction, to share his wisdom, that made me specialise in animal psychology in my last year. Then stay on, as one of his last students before he retired, and do a masters, a thesis on the social behaviour of foxes.

So lying there on the beach, lulled by the voices that have already fused to a distant drone, Molly's burbling closer by, the soothing warmth of the sun, I slip into the body of the dog, into its mind. And let it carry me.

Loping, trotting, turning, stopping. Then stand. Tongue lolling, muzzle spittle-flecked. Eyes narrowed against the sharp white glare of the sand. Ears pricked for any sound.

Nostrils flared and tingling. Each scent a story. Rabbit, rodent, stoat, fox, pheasant, snipe. Dogs that have been here ahead of me – spaniel-sharpness, acid echo of male alsation a day or more ago.

Amidst them all a sweeter smell. A rabbit-doe, rich with the smell of young.

"You'll burn if you're not careful." Sylvia touches my back. "You ought to put some lotion on."

I look round, slow to bring myself back to the moment.

"Shall I do it?" she asks.

The lotion is cool against my skin, and I give an involuntary wriggle. Sylvia laughs: "Keep still – you're worse than Toby." She straddles my waist. "There, that will stop you." Her hands slide up my spine, down again on either side. There is a pause, while she squeezes more suntan lotion into her palm, then her fingers move across my neck, splay out over my shoulders. I twist and kiss her hand. She dabs lotion onto my nose and laughs again.

"Other side," she says. "Turn over."

She lifts her weight enough to let me roll over, between her legs, grips me more tightly again. Her eyes are smug when I look up, telling me: I have you where I want. I raise my pelvis slightly. She bites at her lip, fleetingly responds, then slaps my leg. "Ah-ah. Not in front of the children."

"What's not in front of us?" Toby asks, turning round.

"It's just daddy, being naughty."

He nods, unconcerned: a common occurrence. "Naughty daddy," he says, then goes back to his digging.

I watch as Sylvia lies down again on her towel, easing her shoulders into the sand. She's wearing a blue-and-white, one-piece swimming costume, decorated with large bold flowers, cut low at the back. Her figure is returning now. The heaviness has almost gone from around her hips, her legs are

no longer puffy. She moves more smoothly. Only the fullness of her breasts, the lingering flush of her cheeks, and the shadow around her eyes – legacy of disturbed nights, feeding – betray her recent motherhood.

She notices me observing her, and smiles. “Alright?”

I nod emphatically.

“It’s good to see you relax.” She closes her eyes contentedly.

I roll over again, chin on my hands; scan the dunes, trying to see the dog. Seeking myself. He – we – have moved away, westward down the beach, towards the low headland.

Into the rocks. They are worn smooth by the sea, and after the cool, morning sand the stone is warm beneath my feet. It holds firm as I pad across, so that I instinctively ball my paws, loosen the muscles in my hock, softening each footfall. Mapping out as I move the pitch of the ground, the small wrinkles, crystal-veins, pools. Tendons responding.

The smells here are different. More pelagic. Salt and sea rasping at my nose. Oily pungency of shellfish. Staleness of seaweed. And the myriad human odours. Musk, bitter, dank, dry; earth, fungus, flesh. Too many, too unconnected to make clear shapes or colours in my mind. No mistress, master, friend. Just the tangle of unknown people.

I veer towards the sea. The spray throws itself upward, claws at the air, cleansing it. Crabs scuttle as I approach. In the rocky ponds, pink, green, grey hands wave at my reflection; dark cones haul slowly sideways. A small fish darts, disappears. A shadow crosses my path. Sharp gull cries pierce the air around me.

I lap salt water. Knowing it is not like water from the stream or ditch, but for the action itself. And the brief cooling moment on the tongue. Wander on.

He moves out of sight, returning me to myself. I turn over, gaze for a few moments at the sky, arm shielding my eyes. Blue and uninterrupted, save for the single scar of a contrail.

Sylvia was right: I feel relaxed. I'm past the period of anxiety and scission that always grips me on those first few days of holiday, that came with me and grew as we drove down. Through the going-to-work traffic that still flooded the Brussels streets, along the south-western highway, spilling at last into the quieter and more haphazard countryside of northern France, still keyed up and tight. Drumming my hands on the steering wheel whenever we stopped, tailgating the car in front, hanging against the centre-line waiting to sweep past. Setting myself targets to reduce the boredom, dissipate the stress – Amiens by eleven, Le Havre by twelve, Rennes by two-fifteen, Trevignon at four. Checking my watch and checking it again until Sylvia said quietly "There's no rush."

In the end, we were twenty minutes late, because of roadworks on the A29. I was annoyed with Sylvia for not taking me via Rouen, the route I always prefer. The feeling lingered through the evening, though I covered it up as tiredness from the drive, and she cosseted me in sympathy, let me off unpacking and reading Toby a story to settle him for bed. Poured me an extra large whisky when we were alone, and sat against my knees, letting me fondle her hair as

we watched TV together.

Almost a week later, though, and it has slipped away, as if by gravity. For the last nights I have slept through, not even noticing whether or when Sylvia had to get up to feed Molly.

Work – the deadlines, the meetings, the telephone calls, the battles with other directorates, with project leaders, with government advisors, and ultimately with our own accountants and lawyers – all that seems far away now.

Just one small task to perform. One call. I should have made it before I left. I toyed with doing so as I looked about my office, my hand on the door handle. Shrugged it away. It probably wasn't important. A professor from Bruges who had tried to contact me earlier. I had her number, I could ring from home.

I still haven't done so, and for some reason the lapse pricks at me. Better to do it soon, at the cost of a small disruption to my peace, than leave it until I get back, when the cost might be greater: a large and grovelling apology and months of ill-feeling. Professors – the female ones especially – I've discovered, can be easy to take offence, hard to placate.

But not now. It will wait an hour or two.

I close my eyes.

2. Recapturing a day

Another beach. Grey and wind-torn. The long expanse of grey flint blurred by a grey mist from a flinty sea. A leaden sky, the threat of snow. Wind cold and callous from the east. Rasp of sea on stone, echoed by his own feet as he walked.

Dog at his heels. Head down, tail low, picking her way heavily across the pebbles. Too old for this, he knew, but he wanted her with him. His new companion, already feeling like a fixture in his life.

As he walked, his mind had run ahead, following paths of its own. Tracks and trails through that day, twenty or more years before. They seemed to run easily, now, without a missed step. Later, when he was at home, he'd reflect on them, see where they'd taken him, what he'd learned.

For that was the aim of it all. Not just to remember that day, but to recapture it, forge some sort of understanding. Weigh its consequences.

He'd started hesitantly, unsure how to begin, how to keep his mind to the task yet leave it free to explore. Unsure, too, what it was he sought. For the first two days, he'd got nowhere. His thoughts had dug themselves in, refusing to shift, or when they did scuttled out after something more immediate: the name of a plant he'd seen in the hedgerow, the origins of a word or phrase that had slipped through his mind – faggot, pumpernickel, smithereens; the shapes in the clouds and why it was we saw animals there so readily;

fragments from another memory, another day.

Today, though, they had at least agreed to play the game. And now he'd started, he was surprised how much, how readily, he could remember. Scenes and voices he should have forgotten by rights. Phrases, thoughts, sensations that should have slipped from his mind almost the instant they happened. Yet now, with a small nudge, were ready to burst forth, entire. Each one pointing to the next.

How could that be? How could his mind have stored so much, kept it so fresh, when he thought it had all been buried, put away?

Though perhaps he shouldn't be surprised. Before then, before he sealed them in, he'd handled those memories often enough. Visiting and revisiting the events, trying to make sense of them. Picking them up, turning them over, looking again. Plenty of time to reinforce them, to etch them deeply into his mind.

The real question, he thought, was what hope he had of finding anything new. After all those previous attempts, all that remembering and analysis, could there be anything else to discover?

The doubt in his thoughts made his feet hesitate. He stopped, looked round. The dog had slipped behind him now, stood sniffing at some patch of seaweed or driftwood. He tried to whistle her, but the wind and cold shrivelled his lips, and no sound came. He called: "Rhea! Rhea! Here girl."

She looked up, seemed to observe him dimly, gave a small, tired wag, and plodded towards him. He squatted at her side, fondled her ears. "You're a good girl," he told her.

She leaned against him.

Crouching there, he brought back the memory of that other dog. The yellow retriever, amidst the dunes. Strange that his mind should have chosen that as the starting point. A triviality; at the time, more within his own imagining than part of the real world. Yet somehow preserved there, vivid and clear.

Just an association of ideas, perhaps, triggered by Rhea?

Though in reality, not the start at all.

Before that there must have been so much more – things that he had lost, or at least, not yet found. The first questions as they'd lain in bed, whispering in case they woke Molly: what do you want to do, no what do you? A discussion reopened over breakfast, with different options. The seaside. Carnac to see the ancient stones. A contest Sylvia won all too easily by recruiting Toby to her cause. "I want to go to the seaside. I want to go." The beach along the coast, where they'd been once before when Toby was just a baby. "I remember it. I remember that one. Yes please." Votes counting, as ever, far more than veracity.

Once more the thought jolted him. If there were lies and evasions then, what chance of truth now? What odds on understanding?

Yet the commitment had been made. To himself; silently to her – to Molly. He owed her that. He owed them all that. He had to try.

He straightened up. "OK girl, that's enough. Let's go home." He started back down the beach, and she trudged after him, nose at his knee.

He asked himself again: what was it he sought?

Not an apocalypse of any sort, for that, surely, he'd have seen before now. Yet if not that, what? An omen, a warning? A motive, giving what later happened a purpose? Or the pattern of something deeper, which could not be refused – fate, of a sort, working its way on their lives.

More likely, he told himself, something much less. A tiny and trivial event: a thought, a gesture, a tiny shrug or innocuous turn of the head. Or less still. Not something that happened, but its opposite. A piece of slack, of inattention, a nothingness. A sliver between one second and the next, when what could have been avoided was not. When chance turned its back, shrugged and said: let it be.

A bee that might have stung, but chose not to do so. A small stumble on the rocks, avoided. The youths with their frisbee, the girl who ran over and collected it, apologising: all it would have needed was a sneer, a jeer, a foul word, instead of that demure and beautiful smile. A cloud shadow that might have made them suddenly cold, made them pack their belongings and move a few yards down the beach.

Something, anything that might have shifted them onto another path; let him rewrite the story now, shape it to a different ending. A different now.

He stopped again, gazing around, feeling suddenly displaced and lost. Not just a different beach, a different day. Everything was different then. He, Sylvia, the children. The world in which they moved. The future it offered them.

He tried to picture them, as they were that day. Not from the inside, through his own eyes, but as they might have

been seen by someone else. Fixing them there at the start of the drama, like actors in that moment when the curtain rises and the whole theatre holds its breath.

The day: July 1991, a beach near Trevignon, on the southern coast of Brittany.

The four of them. Himself. Stewart Chambers, age 29, five-foot-ten tall, mid-brown hair. Twelve stone something – slightly overweight as a result of recent months without real exercise; something he planned to put right over this holiday. A Project Officer in the Research Directorate of the (then) Commission of the European Communities in Brussels.

His wife, Sylvia (née Willoughby), age 28, housewife/mother. Blonde hair, blue-eyes. An inch shorter than him, nine-and-a-half stone under normal conditions, but a few pounds heavier for now.

Their son, Toby Allen, age four; their daughter, Molly Jane, age 5 months.

And, of course, the dog.