

A young girl with light brown hair, wearing a sleeveless, patterned dress, stands barefoot on a large, flat rock at the edge of a body of water. She is looking down at a small, dark object she is holding in her hands. The water is calm with gentle ripples. In the background, there is a dense line of green trees under a bright sky. The overall scene is peaceful and evokes a sense of childhood exploration in nature.

A
COUNTRY
CALLED
CHILDHOOD

Children and the Exuberant World

JAY GRIFFITHS

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Dedication

THE RIDDLE

While I was travelling for my last book, *Wild*, I encountered a deep riddle: a difficult riddle. It stuck in my teeth like a string of celery. I teased at it with my tongue and my fingertips played on it. Like all good riddles, it was tricky but glimpsable and, more than anything, it told me it was worth solving.

Why are so many children in Euro-American cultures unhappy? Why is it that children in many traditional cultures seem happier, fluent in their child-nature? Nature is at the core of the riddle: I began looking for the nature of childhood, whose quintessence is inextricable from nature itself. I was interested in how children belong, needing their kith, their local acre, as they need their kin. An entire history of childhood is in that one word 'kith', which is now used as if it means only extended family, whereas in the phrase 'kith and kin', 'kith' originally meant country, home, one's land. Childhood has not only lost its country but the word for it too: a country called childhood.

How has childhood become so unnatural? Why does the dominant culture treat young humans in ways which would be illegal if applied to young dogs? Born to burrow and nest in nature, children are now exiled from it. They are enclosed indoors, caged and shut out of the green and vivid world, in ways unthinkable a generation ago. Bit by bit, a pattern came clear – that children's lives have been subject to intolerable enclosure for the profit of others.

The riddle took me to that other natural world: human nature, a term so complex, so simple and so wise. Human nature in childhood asks for both freedom and closeness. A child's mind is constellated with animals as the night is with stars. Child-nature salutes the gods of play and pays homage to wild time. It needs autonomy and self-will. The riddle asked: who owns a child, anyway? Do children naturally create their own tribes? It is in the

very nature of the child to want to learn, yet society has historically contrived a school system that is half factory, half prison, and too easily ignores the very education which children crave.

Then the riddle took me further in, to the spirit of childhood, its sense of quest; the importance of woodlands for the psyche; the faërie realm of metaphor; the secret world of a child's soul where the stories of childhood are whistled with the deft and fragile panache of poetry. Throughout, I had a hunch that Romanticism reflected the nature of childhood not as a period in cultural history but as a perennial truth, because children are themselves the first Romantics.

This book draws on my experience of children's lives among indigenous cultures in the Arctic, West Papua, Australia, North and South America and Northern Europe, and touches on the history of childhood in mainland Europe and Scandinavia, as well as the intriguing psychodrama of childhood played out when the Native American philosophy of childhood met Settler philosophy. Behind all of these, though, is the spirit of childhood itself, whose imagination knows no borders.

CHAPTER ONE

Kith

Stumbling on a bird's nest as a child, I was breathtaken. I gasped at the tenderness of it, the downy feathers, softer than my fingers, moss folded into grasses and twigs in rounds. My eyes circled and circled it, caught by the mesmerizing perfection of the nest. It was the shape of my dream, to be tucked inside a nest and to know it for home.

A nest is a circle of infinite intimacy, a field-hearth or hedge-hearth. Every nest whispers 'home', whether you speak English, Spanish, Wren or Robin. Part of a child's world-nesting need is answered seeing a rabbit warren, a badger sett or otter holt, as children's writers instinctively know, giving children a secret passage to dens, nests and burrows.

Through nests, a child's own hearthness is deepened and the child grows outwardly and inwardly into its world. Outwardly, children stare at a nest, fascinated. Inwardly, the nest reflects not just the body's home but the mind's. In the snug refuge of the nest, the psyche fills itself out from within, as round and endless as a nest, creating its infinite-thoughted worlds. Intertwined with the world of fur and feather is the world of metaphor where mind makes its nests. Metaphor weaves 'grass' and 'shelter' together. It ties 'twig' to 'refuge'. It knits 'moss' to 'home'.

Finding a nest is a homecoming for a child. In Greek, homecoming is *nostos*, the root of the word 'nostalgia' – an ache for home, a longing for belonging. Children, filthy little Romantics that they are, have an uncanny gift for nostalgia in nature; something inchoate, yes, but yearning, yearning for their deepest dwelling.

Every generation of children instinctively nests itself in nature, no matter how tiny a scrap of it they can grasp. In a tale of one city child, the poet Audre Lorde remembers picking tufts of grass which crept up through the cracks in paving stones in New York City and giving them as bouquets to

her mother. It is a tale of two necessities. The grass must grow, no matter the concrete suppressing it. The child must find her way to the green, no matter the edifice which would crush it.

The Maori word for placenta is the same as the word for land, so at birth the placenta is buried, put back in the mothering earth. A Hindu baby may receive the sun-showing rite *surya-darsana* when, with conch-shells ringing to the skies, the child is introduced to the sun. A newborn child of the Tonga people 'meets' the moon, dipped in the ocean of Kosi Bay in KwaZulu-Natal. Among some of the tribes of India, the qualities of different aspects of nature are invoked to bless the child, so he or she may have the characteristics of earth, sky and wind, of birds and animals, right down to the earthworm. Nothing is unbelonging to the child.

'My oldest childhood memories have the flavour of the earth,' wrote Federico García Lorca. In the traditions of the Australian deserts, even from its time in the womb, the baby is catscradled in kinship with the world. Born into a sandy hollow, it is cleaned with sand and 'smoked' by fire, and everything – insects, birds, plants and animals – is named to the child, who is told not only what everything is called but also the relationship between the child and each creature. Story and song weave the child into the subtle world of the Dreaming, the nested knowledge of how the child belongs. The threads which tie a child to the land include its conception site and the significant places of the Dreaming inherited through its parents. Introduced to creatures and land-features as to relations, the child is folded into the land, wrapped into country, and the stories press on the child's mind like the making of felt – soft and often – storytelling until the feeling of the story of the country is impressed into the landscape of the child's mind.

That the juggernaut of ants belongs to a child, belligerently following its own trail. That the twitch of an animal's tail is part of a child's own tale or storyline, once and now again. That on the papery bark of a tree may be written the songline of a child's name. That the prickles of a thornbush may have dynamic relevance to conscience. That a damp hollow by a riverbank is not an occasional place to visit but a permanent part of who you are. This is the beginning of belonging, the beginning of love.

In the art and myth of Indigenous Australia, the Ancestors seeded the country with its children, so the shimmering, pouring, circling, wheeling, spinning land is lit up with them, cartwheeling into life. In bitter contrast to the iridescent lifefulness of this entrance to the world, during the years of

the Stolen Generations, some Indigenous Australians were forced to give birth in morgues, surrounded by the dead, because the authorities did not consider them to be human.

The human heart's love for nature cannot ultimately be concreted over. Like Audre Lorde's tufts of grass, it will crack apart paving stones to grasp the sun. Children know they are made of the same stuff as the grass, as Walt Whitman describes nature creating the child who becomes what he sees:

*There was a child went forth every day,
And the first object he look'd upon, that object he became . . .
The early lilacs became part of this child . . .
And the song of the phoebe-bird . . .*

- 'There was a Child Went Forth'

In Australia, people may talk of a child's conception site as the origin of their selfhood and their picture of themselves. As Whitman wrote of the child becoming aspects of the land, so in Northern Queensland a Kunjen elder describes the conception site as 'the home place for your image'.

Land can make someone *who they are*, can create their psyche, giving them fragments of themselves. On losing this, Indigenous Tasmanian Errol West writes: 'There is no one to teach me the songs that bring the Moon bird, the fish or any other thing that makes me what I am.' Shatter the relation to land and you shatter personalities like a smashed wing-mirror kicked into the dust.

From song, from dream, from elements of earth and water, spirit-children are immanent in the land. They are left there by the Ancestors of the Dreaming, who sang their way across the land, leaving an imprint of music like an aural footstep. And sometimes a woman who has already physically conceived a child chances to step in that same footstep, and, if she does, part of the song and the spirit-child leap up into her so she feels a quickening, sharp as an intake of breath at a kick within, sweet as a night surprised by song. Sometimes it is the father who, seeing something unusual - a particularly large fish or an animal behaving strangely - may know it as an indication of a spirit-child. Or a man walking by a lake may find a spirit-child jumping into his mind, which he will send in a dream to his wife, inseminating the spirit-child within her. Then the Lawmen, the

knowers of the songline which the father or mother was on, can tell which stanzas of the song belong to that child, its conception totem and, in that sinuous reflexivity of belonging, its quintessential home.

To be born is, in Latin, *nasci*, and the word is related to *natura*, so birth, nature, the laws of nature and the idea of an essence are related. It is as if language itself has embedded birth in the natural world. In the Amazon, people say childbirth should always take place in the forest-gardens so the condensed energy of the plants can nourish the child. In New Guinea, future generations are called 'our children who are still in the soil' and when I was in West Papua, the western half of the island, I was told that in the Dani language the expression for digging potatoes is the same as that for giving birth to a child. Women say they can sometimes hear the unearthed potatoes, which are always handled gently, calling out to them, the land singing things into being to be mothered into the world.

Legends of childhood across the world suggest whole landscapes lit with incipience. Everywhere is potential, beginningness. It may be the inheld energy of an acorn or the liquid and endless possibilities of water; it may be the fattening of a potato in the secret earth or the leaping of a salmon which is the child Taliesin – in whatever form it takes, the land itself is kindling children.

In Indigenous Australian culture, there is a common idea that the land is mentor, teacher and parent to a child. People talk of being 'grown up by' their land; their country as kin.

So do English-speakers – without quite realizing it. A child may be looked after by its 'kith and kin', we say, as if both terms meant family or relations. Not so. 'Kith' is from the Old English *cyðð*, which can mean kinship but which in this phrase means native country – one's home outside the house – but no one I have yet met has known that meaning. This sense of belonging has nothing whatsoever to do with a nation state or political homeland, but rather with one's immediate locale, one's square mile, the first landscape which we know as children. W. H. Auden wrote of this as 'Amor Loci', the love of his childhood landscape. Kith kindles the kinship which children so easily feel for the natural world and without that kinship, nature also loses out, bereft of the children who grow up to protect it.

Much of a baby's first knowledge is in the language of touch and smell, the texture and feel of the materials which surround it. The world to a baby appears like sight underwater, when it is hard to distinguish separate

objects, when everything shimmers in varieties of brightness, a vision of the Aurora Borealis in swathes of light and curtains of colour. With this vision, a highland baby in West Papua opens its eyes to a bagful of vegetables and the odd piglet, all of them together in a string bag dangling down its mother's back, bouncing as she walks or digs sweet potato or searches for frogs, or tucked into a riverbank while she washes. Outside the mesh of the string bag, the baby is enveloped in clouds. If it cries, its mother will swing the bag round and feed the baby, maybe also feeding the piglet. The baby hears its mother's feet on the ochre clay and the slippery gurgles of ubiquitous mud. The mother wraps the child in a particular leaf, known to be very cool in the strong sunlight, and may cover the baby with an umbrella made of pandanus leaf to keep off both rain and sun.

Children are porous to nature, as Wordsworth describes: as a child, a lake 'lay upon my mind' and the sky 'sank down/Into my heart'. Created of lake and sky, he says, 'Thus were my sympathies enlarged.' Before any sense of myself, before a mirror had meaning, before my skin was a boundary, I remember nature as if it were inside me. Birds sang and I heard it inside. It snowed: I snowed. It rained: I rained. As if in some pre-verbal state, whatever 'it' was, I was too. I was warm in May because the sun was: I couldn't tell the difference. I was all the world and all the world was me, saturated with presence. Grass. Blue. Tree. Water. Wind.

It was a kinship so primary that the senses understood it long before the mind. Water was the touch of it; I could feel the sky and taste the dampness of leaves in the uninstructed mud the body knows. I had two older brothers, each of us a year apart, and our mother, a gardener, thought that children, like seeds, grew best unobserved in good black earth, so in daffodils we were crazy with yellow and by autumn we were brown and shiny as conkers, but all through the year we were frank and stout with dirt. Our mother dressed us in three little pairs of black tops and three little pairs of black trousers, so no one would ever complain about us being filthy for the very good reason that they would never see it. Every once in a while, six little bits of black clothing went in the laundry and three little bits of grubby childhood went in the bath.

The riddle of this book is that of a child's human nature, which includes a sense of quest, the need for identity and the demand to honour the ludic principle – the principle of play. It is about how that human nature is nested in nature which co-creates the child. That relationship is vital for the psyche, and shy, bullied, neglected or abused children, those without friends or those with difficult families, find that their sense of belonging in nature is itself a remedy. Nature near the home seems to be a significant factor in promoting the psychological well-being of children growing up in the countryside, but even in small ways access to nature positively influences children so, for example, playing on asphalt seems to generate more conflict among children while playing in greenery promotes more harmony.

Author Barry Lopez describes the lifelong consolation of nature first discovered in childhood: 'a long, fierce peace can derive from this knowledge.' In Flora Thompson's memoirs *Lark Rise to Candleford*, the young Laura is trapped in a depression for months and it is nature which releases her in a long river-moment where the water itself seems to have a message for her. 'To what does the soul turn that has no therapists to visit? It takes its trouble to the trees, to the riverbank, to an animal companion,' wrote psychologist James Hillman.

Nature gives children a soul-acceptance smooth and valuable as silk. In nature, children learn they are watched over by something of stature and gravity, to which they can take their levity and mischief, something which will comprehend their sadnesses and stand witness to their secrets.

In West Papua, a mountain may be referred to as 'mother' to all the children who grow up in her foothills while the forests can be places of awe, as spirit beings are thought to guard certain trees. Sometimes, after a death, the body is laid out in the top of a tree, so local children hear the bass notes of their ancestor story in the air.

If it is therapist, friend, witness, mother and mystery, nature is also muse to children. Listening to stories, children conjure images of mountains or deserts, reaching into their minds for their kith, the country of their knowledge. Especially, says J. R. R. Tolkien, a child will make that picture 'out of The Hill, The River, The Valley which were for him the first embodiment of the word'.

Pablo Neruda recalls leaving Temuco, his childhood home, when he was exiled from Chile:

There was a creek far down the slope, and the sound of its waters came up to me. It was my childhood saying goodbye. I grew up in this town. My poetry was born between the hill and the river, it took its voice from the rain, and like the river, it steeped itself in the forests. And now, on the road to freedom, I was pausing for a moment near Temuco and could hear the voice of the water that had taught me to sing.

I met a forget-me-not on equal terms, as a child. We were introduced one afternoon in the garden. Its name was so understandable and so emotional, unlike its formal name, *myosotis*, and is so-named in many languages: *ne m'oubliez pas* in French, *Vergissmeinnicht* in German, *nontiscordardimé* in Italian, *nomeolvides* in Spanish, *vergeet mij nietje* in Dutch, *forglem meg ei* in Norwegian, *mi me lismonei* in Greek and *förgätmigej* in Swedish. I was delirious for hours, finding that such a little thing, a child's flower if ever there was one, had a voice, and a loud one – a voice which demanded never to be forgotten. And with that came the connotations of forgetting: to ignore, to pass by, to treat something as insignificant, to condemn, to refuse, to betray. From that afternoon on, the act of remembering has been bound for the rest of my life – faithfully – to this tiny, cherished flower. It was the ordinary and unforgettably symbol of the ordinary and unforgettable nature which surrounded me.

When I was in Australia, Indigenous Australians told me not only how children need land, but also how land needs children, to hear their voices and their laughter in order to know that it is not abandoned. In an eloquent report of the land's distress, anthropologist Veronica Strang is told how one lagoon, the Emu waterhole in the Cape York Peninsula, went dry with grief on the death of its owner. 'If the young people don't come back to this country, the country will feel that "Oh well, look like no one don't own me now," so this country will just sort of die away.'

'Forget-me-not,' the land says, in all the dialects of deserts or forests. Children don't forget that early promise and can be vociferous protectors of nature.

In 1964, Chairman Mao denounced gardens. Flowers were feudal. Children were ordered to get rid of grass – which was bourgeois – from school lawns. Mao ordered explicitly what modernity is now ordering implicitly: the removal of childhood from its home in nature. Consumer

societies are stealing children away from their kith, their family of nature, in a stealthy alienation. This is not about some luxury, a hobby, a bit of playtime in the garden. This is about the longest, deepest necessity of the human spirit to know itself in nature, and about the homesickness which children feel, whose genesis is so obvious but so little examined. Writer on Native American spirituality Linda Hogan describes the term *susto* as a sickness of soul caused by disconnection from nature and cured by 'the great without'.

Children's first and greatest fear is abandonment. The effects of abandonment include low self-esteem, feelings of rejection, the suppression of emotion and possible suicidal feelings. The psyche-industries of the contemporary world construe this primarily as fear of maternal abandonment and understand separation anxiety in human-human terms. But if, as children themselves maintain and as listening adults confirm, nature is crucial in a child's sense of home, then the separation of children from nature in artificial societies must play an important part. Children, denied their home in nature, are denied the mothering of nature. They lose the original mother (*mater*) of matter; the nub of it all, the real, mind-mothering world. This is a primary abandonment which causes children so much unrecognized damage, for the spirit needs to feel rooted somewhere on earth, a need which has been denied in the West only very recently.

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, the bible of the American psychiatric profession, lists 'separation anxiety disorder' as 'excessive anxiety concerning separation from home and from those to whom the individual is attached'. But, says American commentator Theodore Roszak, 'no separation is more pervasive in this Age of Anxiety than our disconnection from the natural world.'

Between 1981 and 2011, over 625 Guaraní people in Brazil committed suicide: nineteen times higher than the national average. It is mainly children and adolescents who kill themselves, and the reason is land-loss. Evicted from their territory, as virtually all of their land has been stolen by farmers and cattle ranchers, Guaraní children suffer a land-orphaning. 'The Guaraní are committing suicide because we have no land . . . we are no longer free. Our young people look around them and think there is nothing left and wonder how they can live. They sit down and think, they forget, they lose themselves and then commit suicide,' says Rosalino Ortiz, a Guaraní woman. The youngest was Luciane Ortiz, aged nine.

Given indigenous cultures' attitudes to nature and given their experience of land-loss, it is perhaps no surprise that indigenous therapists have been first to examine this issue. In New Zealand, the Just Therapy team places nature and land at the heart of belonging. Attachment, the team insists, is not only the connection between the child and one or two individuals but also to the land. 'Whenever we Samoans speak,' says Kiwi Tamasese, a Samoan therapist, 'we are talking about the mountain, we are talking about the river, we are talking about the waters, so the primacy of attachment is to those things, to those markers, rather than to other human beings.' Therapy, then, might include the recovery of land for peoples and the restitution of nature to childhood so it can re-belong.

Both 'longing' and 'belonging' come from the Old English word *langian*. This sense of longing to belong, of yearning to be nested, this keening for nature, is audible in the accents of childhood. In his important work on what he calls Nature Deficit Disorder, Richard Louv spent years talking to nature-deprived children and wrote that they 'spoke of nature with a strange mixture of puzzlement, detachment, and yearning – and occasional defiance'.

I've seen this longing in children and how they are robbed of their belonging. They do not know how to describe what they miss because they have never had it, but their instinct knows. They know they have been cheated, terribly, and from the very start. They know the essential, vital world is just out of reach, though the need to grasp at it is still with them, leaving them snatching at substitutes, perpetually dissatisfied, without quite knowing why. I've seen the longing of the human soul for its home in nature, the homesickness of the psyche for its earth-hearth. I've seen a radiance of hope persist in children for many years, a hope that they will somehow approach that green song at the heart of things, and I've seen a dimness setting in, shadowing the radiance.

And when nature-deprived children grow up, they can demonstrate an anger which can turn against nature: furiously despising the very thing they first wanted, as anti-environmentalists do. The pattern is the same in a child who is temporarily abandoned by a parent, at first longing for them, then feeling cheated, searching for distraction. There is a persistence of hope and then sadness falls and, after the sadness, a fury, just as the parent, returning for the fond and filial welcome, finds their child hissing: 'I hate you.' When a society is inhospitable to nature, creatures lose their habitats,

their dwellings – creatures *including children*. In this, modernity is dispossessing its own children. It makes the younger generation homeless, the adults making an undwelling for the children, unbequeathing them, unhousing, unsheltering, unnesting them. Childhood sent into exile.

CHAPTER TWO

The Patron Saint of Childhood

Reading the poetry of John Clare is like reading the autobiography of a robin. Perched on a spade, tucked into a hedgerow or gleaning seed-syllables in a field, England's 'peasant poet' sang the songlines of his native Northamptonshire.

Like a bird, he made nests for himself in particular trees including one called Lee Close Oak. When the robin sings 'A music that lives on and ever lives,' Clare could be writing of himself. The nightingale sang 'As though she lived on song' and in Clare's own life there were times when he lived on little more. Both boy and bird were 'Lost in a wilderness of listening leaves,' and his fledgling childhood was spent 'Roaming about on rapture's easy wing' in the circle of land around Helpston in the wheel of the year, as time turned in its agricultural cycles and reeled in its festivals.

It is hard today to imagine what children's lives were like before the Enclosures and it is impossible to overstate the terrible, lasting alteration which those Acts made to childhood in Britain. Although it is not, in the great scheme of things, so very long ago, we today are effectively fenced off from even its memory. My grandfather's grandfather would have known what it was like to make himself a nest on the commons of mud, moss, roots and grass but neither the experience nor a record of it is my inheritance and, for that, I hold a candle for John Clare, patron saint of childhood, through whose work we can see what childhood has lost: the enormity of the theft.

The commons was home for boy or bird but the Enclosures stole the nests of both, reaved children of the site of their childhood, robbed them of animal-tutors and river-mentors and stole their deep dream-shelters. The great outdoors was fenced off and marked 'TRESPASSERS WILL BE PROSECUTED.' Over the generations, as the outdoors shrank, the indoor world enlarged in

importance.

PRIVATE: KEEP OUT

You see that sign in two places: on the bounds of the landowner's domain and on a child's bedroom door; and they are wholly related for, when children were banished from the commons, they lost their nests on the land. Over the years, as they came to be given their own bedrooms, a perfect and poignant mimicry evolved. Wanting some privacy but deprived of their myriad dens in the woods and on the commons, children have retaliated against the theft by sticking up signs on scraps of paper in wobbly writing: their last – unconscious – protest against the Enclosures which robbed them of all their secluded nests in the denning world, while giving them in return a prefab den, one small cage of a room. It was not, as children say, a good swap.

Born in 1793 to a sense of freedom as unenclosed as 'nature's wide and common sky', John Clare knew that the open air was his to breathe, the open water his to drink and the open land, as far as his knowledge of it extended, his to wander, and he began to write poetry of such lucid openness that it can best be described as light: his poems are translucent to nature, which shines through his work like May sunlight through beech leaves. Clare writes of the land as if he were a belonging of the land, as if it owned him, which is an idea one hears often in indigenous communities. His childhood belonged to that land and to its creatures; he knew them all and felt known in turn. One day, Clare writes, he wandered and rambled 'till I got out of my knowledge when the very wild flowers and birds seemed to forget me'.

And then, to his utter anguish, came the Enclosures, the acts of cruelty by which the common land was fenced off by the wealthy and privatized for the profit of the few. The Enclosures threw the peasantry into that acute poverty which would scar Clare's own life and mind so deeply. His griefstricken madness, alcoholism and exile as a result of this land-loss encapsulates in one indigenous life the experience of so many indigenous cultures.

In 1809, there was a parliamentary act to enclose his home territory, Helpston, and Clare saw the bitter effects at first hand as the Enclosers

fenced off site after site of his memory. 'The axe of the spoiler and self interest' felled his beloved Lee Close Oak, and felled something inside himself. He lost one of his actual childhood nests but he also lost the metaphoric nest which is childhood itself where the young adult can, in a vulnerable moment, flit. Trying to console Clare for his loss, a local carpenter who had bought the timber gave Clare two rulers made from the tree. It is a poignant image for, despite the good intentions of the carpenter, the rulers represented the linear remodelling of Clare's world, wrenching the cyclical qualities of the commons (the rotation of crops and the slow cycles of time, the rounds of nests) into the strict fence-lines of Enclosure. 'Rulers' also suggests the ruling class of the Enclosers who invaded the land of the poor like an imperial army: Enclosure came 'like a Bonaparte,' wrote Clare.

One of the greatest poets of childhood, Clare is without rival as the poet of Enclosure in part because of his identification with his homeland. The Acts of Enclosure signified the enclosure and destruction of his spirit as well as his land. Winged for the simplest of raptures, he now limped at the fences erected by the 'little minds' of the wealthy. His own psyche had been as open as the footpaths of his childhood, paths which wend their way 'As sweet as morning leading night astray' but with sudden brutality 'These paths are stopt -' and

*Each little tyrant with his little sign
Shows, where man claims, earth glows no more divine.*

It is winter. It is always winter. In one of Clare's poems, the overarching metaphor is that the Enclosures have brought a bleak, cold, unseasonable season, 'strange and chill'. Partly, this was a direct description of the physical cold which children experienced when commoners lost their right to collect firewood for warmth; it was only because of common rights that people could 'maintain themselves and their Families in the Depth of Winter'. The Enclosures also brought a coldness of spirit, a winter of the heart. It was as if the wheel of the year had stopped turning, frozen at midwinter all year, and summer childhood would never roll round again.

Eastwell fountain never froze in winter and Clare describes how, every Whit Sunday from time immemorial, the young people of Helpston had

gathered at that particular spring to drink sugar-water for good luck. He recalls tying branches together to make a swing and fishing with crooked pins, not catching anything. It's easy to picture the giggles, flirting and games. But after Enclosure, Eastwell fountain was made private property and the children were fenced out. Later, unchilded and unsung, the site had become 'nothing but a little naked spring', he writes, and it makes me wonder why he says 'naked'. I imagine that they literally clothed the spring with ribbons as children have so often garlanded wishing wells and lucky fountains, on the Well-Dressing Days which used to be a part of a child's calendar but, further, I imagine that their custom clothed the spring with meaning and memory. Not only are the children bereaved but the land too, once possessed by children's voices, is now owned, as it were, by silence. Bereft of its children, the land is 'all alone'. The sense that a site may be lonely without its children recalls the beliefs of Indigenous Australians, the Emu waterhole grieving.

So the children of Helpston lost Eastwell fountain, site of their festival, and the festival itself died. This was one example of a widespread effect of the Enclosures, for carnivals typically had been held outdoors on the commons but when Enclosure stole those commons both the sites of carnival and the customs themselves disappeared. When the rights to the commons were abolished, the rites of the commons were lost: Enclosure made carnival homeless and it affected children badly because carnivals were once an enormous part of the glee of childhood. Today's few festivals are the shreds, the tattered remains, of the rites which once ribboned a child's year with dozens of carnival days and festooned it with Mischief Nights. There were Feasts of Fools, Apple-Tree Wassailings, Blessing-of-the-Mead Days, Hare-Pie-Scrambling Days, Hobby-Horse Days and Horn-Dance Days, the Well-Dressing Days which John Clare recalls, and Cock-Squouling Days, Doling Days, Hallooing Largess led by the Lord of the Harvest, and all the variations of Hallowe'en (the Celtic festival of Samhain which archaeologists say has been celebrated for at least five thousand years), including Somerset's Punkie Night, when lanterns were made of mangel-wurzels. Mangel-wurzels. Give me mangel-wurzels, for the love of all that is good: mangel-wurzels.

It is not only a matter of the quantity of festivals but of their quality too. Carnival used to be a very public affair, sited outdoors with children playing a crucial role in this open, flamboyant theatre of exuberance. Carnival was

public play but the Enclosures privatized it and over the years play moved indoors, so children today, enclosed in their bedrooms alone in an Xbox-fest with their PRIVATE: KEEP OUT signs on the door, cannot even know what used to lie on the other side of the fence, the public, excessive, inebriated, unbridled effervescence seizing a whole community.

When children were robbed of their carnivals, they lost a particular aspect of their relationship with nature, something at once intimate and political. For carnival renders political facts in personal ways, it plays its public roles in individual masks. Carnivals were part of children's political education in, for example, the joint-stock merrymakings which celebrated rights of grazing, gathering and gleaning on the commons, or in the 'beating of the bounds' by which a parish mapped its territories. In one case, at Scopwick in Lincolnshire, boys were made to stand on their heads in holes to make them remember the extent of their land.

Children lost the festivals, but they also lost something of the spirit of carnival, that ancient principle of reversal which subverts the *status quo*, which turns things upside down, as topsy-turvy as boys standing on their heads in holes. Carnival, rooted in the land, sends up its shoots of play, of rudeness and licentiousness, and sends up the authorities, too, with its days of misrule. But with the Enclosures, the authorities had a field day. Children suffered, not only from a loss of freedom and of carnival but because they were prosecuted under other laws passed to protect newly enclosed lands.



There was a small common near my childhood home, called Cow Common, one tiny patch which had escaped the historical Enclosures. My first memories include the cow parsley there, which was taller than me, a parasol between me and the sun. In my memory, Cow Common was all commonness. It was the scruffy-normal from which all else diverged. It was what happened when things were left alone. It had no manners, no wealth, no restriction and no clocks. On the common, everything breathed easy and wild.

Particularly children. They are born commoners on the common ground of earth. Children, whatever their parents' class, are commoners; they come from beyond the ha-ha, beyond horticulture, decorum and dedicated

grapefruit spoons. In landscape terms, they belong on the heath. They don't like the spirit of the Enclosures which mows its lawns and minds its manners, which strictly fences neatness in and untidiness out, and speaks of it all in clipped language. Nature under control. Paved patios. Miniature golf. Children prefer the spirit of the commons. Dirty. Open. The Unoccupied Territories.

And today? Does Cow Common still exist? I don't know. I don't want to go back. I don't want to see how, as an Internet search has just told me, 'most of Cow Common has gone.' I would feel robbed of a bit of my childhood if I met its absence. I would cry if I saw how the Cow Common of my very common childhood has been fenced off and privatized for the profit of the wealthy. The developers think it is valuable: we children knew it was priceless. Our wreck is long gone; developers nabbed it years ago. The Enclosures of the commons are still happening, from the profiteering bank which has seized the bank of the river in Jericho, Oxford, for luxury flats, to developers across America eyeing up worlds of childhood in disused plots of land.

The Cow Common of my childhood recalls the way that a peasant family could keep a cow (and perhaps geese) on the common, maybe tilling a little land. The commons had given people independence, but Enclosure threw the peasantry into pauperism. Prices rose. Wages fell. People starved. While the Enclosures drove people to starvation, they were forbidden from leaving their parish by the 'Settlement Acts', which from 1662 had prevented poor people's freedom of movement. Corralled within their parish, people turned to poaching and smuggling in huge numbers.

'All our family were smugglers,' one of my grandmothers once told me proudly, and they had to be to survive. Smugglers saw their work as legitimate trade and considered that the excise men were acting illegitimately in seizing profit from it. I have seen the man-traps used to catch smugglers in the town which my grandmother and all her ancestors were from, and a shiver runs through my genetic memory at the iron jaws, shattering bones and crippling someone for life. It could have been me.

By 1816, poachers, including children of nine or ten, were given punishments of imprisonment or transportation for offences against the Game Laws, enacted to protect the hunting rights of the wealthy. Transportation often meant a death sentence through abuse, cruelty and disease on the prison ships. Meanwhile, so widespread was the practice of

poaching that, by 1830, one in three criminal convictions was for a crime against the Game Laws.

Pause a moment on this. In the 'Game' Laws, the clue is in the title. The games of the gentry – hunting for fun – were fiercely protected, while hunting for sheer starving necessity, engaged in by children and adults, was outlawed. The wealthy, engaged in sports and game shooting, were made wholly exempt from the Malicious Trespass Act of 1820, while a commoner's child, playing and breaking a branch, could be thrown in jail. Together, these acts amounted to a privatization of play. Common play – child's play – was privatized for profit.

Poaching, incidentally, something Wordsworth did as a child, has never died. Scottish artist Matthew Dalziel, from the age of seven in the 1970s, went out poaching with his dad and dog in rural Ayrshire. His mother did not always approve, tight-lipped as she cleaned the boy's clothes and berated her husband for stewing ram's horns in her jelly pan. As a boy it seemed 'a sort of human right to be able to take a fish from the river or a hare from the hill', says Dalziel. It was an adventure of the senses for a child. Chasing hares by moonlight, he recalls the rhythm of their paws 'quickenning like a drumming across the earth's surface', with the grasses hissing as they ran. After the kill, the dog's heavy breath would be full of blood and sweat and would mingle with the oily woollen smell of his father's damp jumper, a madeleine of poaching.

Poachers are the hunters and the hunted. The boy feared the gamekeepers who regarded them as trespassers. 'Like the animals you hunted, your senses would get highly tuned to seeing a shape behind a hedgerow that didn't quite look right, the sound of a gate squeaking, a steel wire fence lightly ringing, birds suddenly flying off, crows circling: all became voices saying someone was coming, something was not as it should be.' It was – and has always been – a nocturnal class war, where children could get a bit of their own back, their own commons, their own unenclosed freedom, trespassing a little against those who had so maliciously trespassed against them.

John Clare fears being told that his walking is 'trespass', saying that he 'dreaded walking where there was no path'. As a child, I shared that dread of the word 'trespass' and I still feel a fear which is wholly disproportionate to any punishment meted out today. Generations of children forced to recite the Lord's Prayer which uses the word 'trespass' instead of the

Biblical 'sin' or 'debt' were further frightened off their own land. I learned my fear from my mother who learned it from hers: it would only need some six such transfers of fear, mother to child, to span the decades from the Malicious Trespass Act to my own wide-eyed fear at the fences. As a result of this act, children were sent to prison in large numbers. Mothers would have wanted to instil fear of trespass into their children as deeply as they would fear of poisonous snakes. As a girl, my mother misread the sign as 'TRESPASSERS WILL BE EXECUTED', and she was not alone. Another friend also mistook the word but not the threat, for, nailed next to the sign to frighten the children, a gamekeeper had hung a dead, executed, fox.

The figure of the Gamekeeper stalks children's fiction, acknowledging their persistent fear, so 'Giant Grum' in *The Little Grey Men* kills the animals in the woods; meanwhile TRESPASSERS WILL hangs over all the landscapes of childhood, from Winnie-the-Pooh to today's woodland privatizations, denying children their role as part of the wildlife.

The ideology of the Enclosures was driven by some of the less likeable attitudes of the Enlightenment: a loathing of wildness, a will to control nature, a love of hierarchies and subordination. Children suffered from these ideologies and childhood was to be enclosed as surely as land. This is not only a matter of shutting children off the land but also a matter of enclosing the playful spirit of childhood and prohibiting its carnival-heart and, further, subjecting it to domination, harsh discipline and punishment, as later chapters will demonstrate in more detail.

The experience of children was mirrored in the treatment of land. Although some early Enclosures had taken place in the thirteenth century, it was the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries that saw a wave of Enclosures, with an extreme peak in the eighteenth century, falling off by 1830. Map this with the history of childhood and something fascinating emerges: children were subjected to increasing discipline from the very end of the fourteenth century to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, reaching its height in the eighteenth century, until the tide began to turn by about, yes, 1830. The nature of the land and the nature of the child were both to be controlled, fenced in. Enclosure, both literal and metaphoric, was enacted against land and childhood.

Clare associated the commons with an everyday arcadia, so 'Nature's wild Eden' is found 'In common blades of grass'. Eden is here and how green is that valley, how evergreen, Eden, common as chaffinches, Eden-at-large, Eden-at-will, Eden belonging to everyone who will not wall others out. Clare welcomes everything; his Eden blesses thistles and embraces weeds, knowing that Eden is only truly Eden when the nettles are as welcome as the honeysuckle, when there is hard graft as well as moonlight, frozen well-water in winter as well as the zest of love in the zenith of summer.

His Eden is 'ruled' by nothing except 'Unbounded freedom' and, like all children given half a chance, Clare's sense of freedom included a quintessential freedom of time. He was a loafer, a dawdler, a *flâneur* of the fields, describing himself sauntering, roaming, lost in another time which existed before Enclosure:

*Jumping time away
on old Crossberry Way.*

Children today, peeping through the strict fences of their over-scheduled and clockworked lives, can only guess at his unenclosed sense of time. Steeped in, saturated with, drunk on the wine of time as if he had drunk it to the lees, the leavings, *laissez-boire*, the child Clare is rich on the leavings of life, the gleanings, the gatherings of memory, 'When I in pathless woods did idly roam.'

Ah, idleness, those long and lazy days when the clock is drowsy, the hours hazy and minutes erased, idleness is a friend to childhood and an enemy of the state. The 1794 Report on Enclosure in Shropshire states with nasty approval that a result of Enclosures would be that 'the labourers will work every day in the year, their children will be put out to labour early.' Children's hard labour would become necessary for survival, as families lost one right after another, including gleaners' rights to leaze after the harvest. 'Leazing' is a rich word which, like 'gleaning', means picking up what lies scattered after a harvest. Clare literally leazed in the fields but was also the poet-as-gleaner.

*I found the poems in the fields
I only wrote them down.*

He weaves together leaves and leavings, reading both language and nature; the birds and the words are interwoven as the yellowhammer weaves its nest of real sticks in the inspired air. 'And hang on little twigs and start again,' he writes, as if the infinite circle of a nest was a part-song sung by every bird.

Clare's was a nesting mind, delicate as tiny twigs, feathered with fellow-feeling and warm with tufts of grass tucked round the circle of his land in the cycle of the year. 'I've nestled down and watched her while she sang,' wrote Clare of the nightingale: the psyche which is well nested may sing the truest and when, as an adult, he writes about his childhood it is as if his childhood were a nest for his spirit. Nests within nests, his whole work is a nesting-place.

As a child, Clare nested in the lands which were his home and, charmed by nests, he wrote of the martin's nest, and a magpie's nest, the nests of linnet, blackbird, nightingale, pettichap or chiffchaff, skylark, landrail, yellowhammer, moorhen, thrush and robin. He includes the nests of hedgehogs and children's burrows, their little 'playhouse rings of sticks and stone'. His work seems to suggest that as a child he could feel safely nested only when the land around him was a safe nesting-place for every other kind of creature, knowing that the human mind can nest or make a home only when the ecology provides a home for all species. (The word 'ecology' comes from *oikos*, home.) Many children are disturbed by the idea that any animal, from a tiger to a snail, could lose its home, in a kind of instinctive ecological empathy.

It was the destruction of all the forms of home which unnested Clare's mind. He was evicted from his land by forces of undwelling and his madness and misery were written into his poems. I have been with Amazonian people when they have seen the searing brutality of their lands being ripped apart for gold in today's acts of corporate enclosure, and I have watched men weep while they say, aghast, 'We are the land,' a truth which John Clare would have effortlessly understood.

The Enclosures spiked the nest of Clare's psyche. Where moss and feathers had been, there was now a torque of barbed wire. When Clare writes of flowers or butterflies or birds being made homeless, he notes how they lose their depth of association so the landscape of the mind is pauperized by Enclosure.

*But, take these several beings from their homes,
Each beautiful thing a withered thought becomes;
Association fades and like a dream
They are but shadows of the things they seem.
Torn from their homes and happiness they stand
The poor dull captives of a foreign land.*

Language and meaning need to be nested in nature, and the immensity of the destruction Clare perceives is enormous. Enclosure, he tells us in various places, fenced off rapture and play, joy, customs, games, carnival and the past; it obliterated the glow of divinity, of generosity and kindness; it silenced songs and poetry; it prohibited lingering, lazing, roaming and straying; it closed the pathways; it brought the chill of winter into every season; it caged freedom, time and wildness; it ruined dwelling, refuge and shelter; it denied belonging and so stripped the psyche of every protection. It evicted childhood from its immemorial nest on the land and it exiled his adulthood from its nest of childhood memory.

Enclosure threatens the homes of all, whether a squirrel's dray, a mouse's nest or a badger's sett. Out on the heath, after Enclosure, the rabbits had nowhere to make a warren and were left to 'nibble on the road' while the moles became 'little homeless miners' and even the birds are ordered out of their homes in the woods by forbidding signs, so they must keep flying, from felled tree to felled tree, storm-driven and nestless.

Clare, in the sympathetic magic of poetry, gives a home to everything in the only commons he still had access to: the commons of imagination. If, as a result of Enclosures, creatures no longer had their nests on the common land, he would build nests for them in that other commons: language. One creature after another is given a home and shelter in Clare's writing and each of Clare's poems is a nest. The littlest twigs are caught, laid lightly, woven of thought and love; each gentle green adjective is like moss, each soft felt word a sheltering leaf, each verb a feather for a reverie of home. All poetry is dwelling, but Clare's are daydream dwellings for both creature and human, and when each nest-song is complete the bird of poetry alights there.

But in all these nested images – nests within nests – there is one more. John Clare, building his nests of land-poetry, has in fact made a nest for us all, a home and a flitting-place for every one of us to dwell in a while, in

order to know what an unenclosed childhood was like and how the child's heart can find its nestness on the land.

CHAPTER THREE

Textures of Tenderness

There is a sensible way of treating children. Treat them as though they were young adults . . . Never hug and kiss them, never let them sit on your lap. If you must, kiss them once on the forehead when they say good night. Shake hands with them in the morning . . .

– American behaviourist John B. Watson, 1928

I felt as if I were an unwilling accomplice to torture. Echoes of the victim's screams rang sharply off the varnished walls. The door, tight shut though it was, could not block the cries of panic. At first the victim howled in raw terror, standing in her cage, shaking the bars in the fury of fear, her face mashed to purple with the force of her rage, while time itself seemed to stand still like an appalled witness till the roars which burned her throat gave way to the aghast grief of bereavement.

A baby, alone and imprisoned in a barred cot, shut into a room, alone, alone, alone. I felt sick and shocked by the cruelty of the situation. The baby's mother was visibly disturbed, pale and tearful. She was a good-hearted woman but a victim herself, preyed on by exponents of Ferberization, or Controlled Crying, that pitiless system, cruel to them both.

Controlled. Crying. The words speak of the odious aim: a bullying system controlling the feelings of a baby. The mother had been told the situation was the reverse, that the baby was trying to force her will on the mother, but all I could see was a one-year-old demented by abandonment. One American mother wrote poignantly on the Internet: 'Is Ferberization worth my heartache or am I truly torturing my child? It seems like cruel and unusual punishment.'

The idea is that babies can be 'taught' to stop crying by being left to cry alone. A parent will occasionally check on them, but will neither pick up nor

stay with the infant. In time, the baby will learn that crying doesn't bring consolation and will cease the attempt. Parents are encouraged to schedule and limit the time they spend checking on the baby and may elect to use Graduated Scheduled Ignoring, whereby the more a child cries, the longer she or he must wait for a response. The Extinction method means letting a child cry indefinitely.

Does the system work? Of course it does. That is hardly the question. The real issue is why would such a thing be promoted? Why would it ever be accepted? What does it reveal about modernity's priorities? And how does it suggest answers to the riddle of unhappy children?

'They teach their children to cry!' was the appalled, disbelieving remark of a Lakota woman who, in the early 1930s, was confronted with the European belief that it was good for babies to be separated from their mothers in the government hospital and to cry until they were blue in the face.

Cuddled, snuggled and tended, most infants, throughout most of history, have known the world unlonely in that commons of tenderness unfenced from other human bodies. Among the Tojolobal-speaking Maya people of Chiapas in Mexico, children in the first two years of life are always close to their mothers, instantly appeased with toys or milk, to prevent them ever feeling unhappy. For infants under one year of age, among the Ache people, forest nomads in Paraguay, about ninety-three per cent of their daylight time is spent in tactile contact with their mother or father, and they are never set down on the ground or left alone for more than a few seconds. In India, and many parts of the world, children may share a bed with their mother until they are five; caressing, stroking and sensual pleasure is an important part of infancy among the Huaorani of Ecuador. In the infinite circle of arms, infants the world over have experienced that primary nest of human warmth.

For a typical European baby in the mid-seventies, the situation was, in a word, 'hell', says Jean Liedloff, psychotherapist and author of the influential book *The Continuum Concept*. 'He knows life to be unspeakably lonely, unresponsive to his signals and full of pain.' 'Deprived' is the term she uses – the infant given only intermittent physical closeness, as opposed to being constantly held in the arms of its mother or other adults. The terms 'lonely' and 'deprived' are telling: both hint at the dark side of individualism where privacy becomes emotional deprivation.

When Liedloff stayed with the Tauripan people in the Venezuelan forests, she was thunderstruck by happiness. 'They were the happiest people I had seen anywhere,' she writes, attributing this to people's childhood experience of being always held in arms. Ambushed by joy with the Yequana and Sanema peoples near the Brazilian border, she writes: 'much of the unreal quality of its people was accounted for by an absence of unhappiness, a large factor in every society familiar to me.' A huge number of anthropologists have similarly remarked on the happiness of children in traditional cultures. Likewise, whenever I have spent time in indigenous communities, I have never heard anything like the shrieks of fear and rage of the Controlled Crying child.

I have a memory of the cloudiest kind, an almost-lost feeling of sweetness experienced through a mist-covered haze, as if the earliest dawn of my life half lit something I can recall only with my sense of taste. So it is that I 'remember' the feeling of breastfeeding, drunk with milk, honey-suckled, all the round world mine and gentle, saturating me with love. This sense of immersion in the physical world – where 'mother' and 'world' are the same – is something which in-arms infants continue to experience: the rapt happiness nested in the lap of the world, wrapped in warm and living arms.

In a parka with a pouch and a large hood, a child – perhaps in a vest of velvet fawn skin – sits between the mother's naked body and the fur of her clothes. From here, the baby can see all the world and can drink all its sweetness on demand: so traditional Inuit infancy is recalled. Children of the !Kung people traditionally spent their first years in a sling, skin to skin with their mother, feeding on demand several times an hour, the relationship with both parents typically intimate and nurturant. !Kung people say that the closeness, the almost exclusive attention, unlimited love, food and comfort which each child receives in their first years provides strength and emotional security, the ability to handle the stress of the birth of a sibling.

If an infant is satiated with closeness, comments Liedloff, then as an older child he or she will need to return to that maternal contact only in emergencies. Such an infant will grow up to be more self-reliant, not because of the scarcity of early contact (as the Controlled Crying advocates argue) but precisely the opposite: from its abundance. By the age of about eight, the Ache children who as infants were never alone have learned how

to negotiate the trails in the forests and can be fairly independent of their parents. In West Papua, I have seen how infants are deluged with closeness and grow into children who are fiercely, proudly independent.

Leaving a baby to cry will damage its confidence in its parents and in the world at large, making it more dependent rather than less, argues the psychotherapist Sue Gerhardt. Insistence on imposed sleep-times or feeding schedules is 'mental-illness-inducing', according to child psychologist Oliver James, and babies subject to this spend fifty per cent more time crying or fussing than babies given infant-centred care. He reports on an experiment in which some mothers, randomly selected, were asked to carry their baby regularly in a sling while another group were not. At the age of thirteen months, eighty per cent of the sling-carried babies were emotionally secure in their attachment to their mothers but only forty per cent of the others.

If, as an adult, one can feel the glimmers of varying radiances in the mind according to different touches – the harsh danger-light of being pushed aggressively or the glow when one is stroked by a lover – then how much more will touch matter to the mind of a baby for whom tactile knowledge is the first skill? Mind is kindled at the edge of the body, as are feelings.

High levels of maternal affection at the age of eight months are associated with significantly lower levels of distress, including anxiety and hostility, in adult offspring. On the other hand, if a baby is left to cry alone, high levels of stress hormones flood the infant, who is not developmentally equipped to deal with them. If there is no parent to de-stress the baby, she or he will end up becoming stressed at the least event and this stress is for ever: the baby's brain chemistry is changed for life. Human babies are born needing parents to protect them from stress, rather than force it on them, and if babies are consistently stressed through being ignored they will experience high levels of cortisol, which is hazardous to development, adversely affecting the immune system, memory and learning. There are strong links between high cortisol levels and depression, anxiety, suicidal tendencies, eating disorders, alcoholism and obesity. A baby's brain development is dependent on the baby being touched, on being held, on not being left to cry alone. The well-known studies of Romanian orphans show that those who were left untouched in their cots 'had a virtual black hole where their orbitofrontal cortex should be', writes Gerhardt.

There is a tradition of maternal separation among the aristocracy in

Britain: Queen Victoria, buying three prams for her children from Hitchings Baby Stores of Ludgate Hill, popularized the bodily separation of the infant from the mother, and the wealthy have a history of abandoning even tiny children in boarding schools, with terrible emotional consequences. The social groups which impose separation on babies then often severely restrain older children, while (as the next chapter will discuss) children are happiest with first closeness and then freedom. Generations of Controlled Crying children (the idea began in the 1920s with New Zealand-born Truby King) have grown up with the precise opposite of what they need.

Many parents' reasons for using Controlled Crying can be summed up in one word: 'work'. Gina Ford, a famous British advocate of the system, stresses its importance for 'working mothers', and her consultancy service deals with 'women with high-powered jobs'. Parents who want 'routines' are keen on Controlled Crying, says Ford, and she comments that babies who have been forced into a routine will later adapt easily to a school routine and, one presumes, be more malleable to a workforce system.

While Gina Ford et al focus so heavily on the priority of work, tellingly, both Jean Liedloff, and Marjorie Shostak (working with !Kung people), draw the reader's attention to the connection between physical closeness in infancy and short working hours. !Kung women work perhaps two to four hours a day, spending the rest of their time making music, playing or telling stories. Short working hours, anthropologists say, is a feature of many indigenous societies. Liedloff, meanwhile, could discern no Yequana concept of work and became aware of an apparent absence of a word for 'work' in the Yequana vocabulary.

I've heard Controlled Crying advocates say a baby must learn to respect the parents' *boundaries*. Aside from the fact that a baby is about as well equipped to learn that lesson as it is to refute the theory of relativity, the very term 'boundary' is suggestive. The parents' psychological boundaries are illustrated in the 'limits' imposed on cuddling, the strict fencing off of time in routines and the emotional walls between parent and child – avoid even eye contact after 10 p.m., says Gina Ford. Mark the time, demarcate your territory, make the separation, erect the fence. And *No Trespassing* over the boundaries. A baby's open sense of time – the commons of its hours – is fenced by routines.

I can still see, in my mind's eye, the baby subjected to Controlled Crying, the hated bars of the cot like fence-posts, and the tiny hands gripping them

as if this little Rebecca would overthrow the fact and the spirit of enclosure – hers and all children's. She was enclosed in a cot, enclosed in a room, fenced off from the tenderness she needed. In the historical Enclosures, the wealthy took what was common, erected fences around it and turned what had been public wealth into private wealth. So it is in these enclosures: limiting, fencing, restricting, marking boundaries, enclosing something common in order that private profits are made in those high-powered jobs, enclosing the commons of tenderness for the profit of wealthy corporations.

Closeness is food for a child's mind, feeding the spirit and leaving it satisfied, satiated with attention and tending. The world which that child perceives will be one of fullness and emotional abundance so the cup is brinkful to overflowing. But deprive a tiny child of that sense of abundance and you create an insatiable child – an emotionally needy, dissatisfied child who feels itself to be living in a world of depletion rather than abundance, learning that there is a scarcity of emotional resources. Such loss of essential well-being, writes Liedloff, 'leads to searches and substitutions for it', so 'happiness ceases to be a normal condition of being alive, and becomes a goal.' Deprived of the closeness of an infancy in-arms, 'One feels off-center, as though something were missing; there is a vague sense of loss, of wanting something one cannot define.' To Liedloff, the experience of constant closeness and the concomitant emotional warmth promotes a powerful feeling of one's lovableness. 'A person without this sense feels there is an empty space where he ought to be.'

This is a devastating psychological experience for an individual child who has suffered it. But I would argue that it has further political ramifications. Controlled Crying creates perfect conditions for consumerism. For if a consumer feels an unspecified but insatiable hunger, they will be manipulable by advertising. Marketing experts, we know, present objects as consolations for loneliness: products will comfort and befriend the consumer. Of course parents don't regularly set out to damage their children but, incrementally, society does so when it causes widespread emotional scarcity – an emptiness too deep and too early for words. So consumerist societies are formed, ever unsatisfied, greedy, needy and lonely, searching for substitutions.

The argument between Constant Closeness and Controlled Crying is profoundly linked to a centuries-old debate about human nature. Is the self a social being or an atomized individual? Advocates of Controlled Crying say

it develops children's 'independent' sleep patterns and teaches children to 'self-soothe'. These responses are politically revealing, telling of a certain kind of individualism. Proponents argue for 'privacy' as if it were self-evidently good. For an older child, a sense of privacy in the intimate quiet of their own mind is ferociously important (and a later chapter will go into this), but an infant has no idea of, or need for, such privacy: rather, this system teaches it that it is ineluctably alone in the world – the hollow isolation of a baby alone in its bereft and inescapable canyon, hearing the echoes of no one except itself.

Controlled Crying advocates say it creates 'autonomy' within the child, but I would argue that it creates an anguished austerity, a bleak sense of deprivation – that word which is linked to the idea of a 'private' individual as one *deprived* of public life; here deprived of the public life of warm bodies and constant touch.

Advocates say it creates 'self-reliance': science tells us it creates a lifelong separation anxiety where the infant is taught that she is a lonely character in the theatre of abandonment which nightly restages her greatest fear. Controlled Crying advocates claim the system encourages independence and individualism. Me, I'm all for independence if that means true freedom. I'm all for individualism, where that means a genuine and wide diversity of character and the distinct voices of difference, but 'individualism' is one of the greatest lies of Western history. Ours is not a society that genuinely prizes individualism – note the dull conformity of politics, the dumb sameness of consumerism, the tabloid media's narrow focus on ubiquitous and identical drivel, society's intense hatred of the high notes of madness and the xenophobia against all kinds of border-crossers. This is not an individualistic society, rather it is a hyper-privatized one, removing the individual from the commons and privatizing communal life, privatizing the commons of tenderness and motherlove to create the hyper-privatized and innerly starved consumer.

When the private baby in her private room is screaming out her private hell, her first guess must be that her parents cannot hear, so she redoubles her cries, shaking the walls. After some time, her mother comes in, checks her and then leaves again. What will the child think? That her mother can hear but doesn't care. What does it mean for a child to learn that it is heard but intentionally ignored? I think it means teaching a child something of the annihilation of the self. In time, she may learn a subsequent lesson that

she too should make herself deaf to the minds of others, repeating the legitimized cruelty.

In the States, developmental psychologist Dr James W. Prescott has studied the ill effects of sensory deprivation on infants, showing how a lack of closeness and bodily movement warps development, setting a child on a life path which may include depression, violence and suicide. The sheer unnaturalness of depriving infants of touch staggers Prescott, and he comments that, with the exception of Euro-American societies, 'there is no mammal that separates the newborn from its mother at birth or for any extended period after that. Yet we do that routinely.' In filmed experiments with baby monkeys, he shows how monkeys brought up touchfully will play, pet, hold and cling to each other, whereas touch-deprived monkeys refuse to play and avoid close contact, rocking endlessly in a form of self-soothing; growing older, they self-mutilate and exhibit signs of pathological violence. Prescott opens his observations out into the political sphere, commenting that children reared with 'affectional bonding' are likely to favour egalitarianism, while those reared with 'affectional deprivation' are likely to favour authoritarianism.

Infants perceive the warm and mysterious messages of the body, its pheromones and hormones, the baby's senses woven into the tapestry of other human beings, in cherished tracteries of scent and excitement, feeling the textures of tenderness and the rhythms of love. This is the beginning of a politics far older – and kinder – than the selfish capitalism of today which would put the high-powered job before the anguish of a child; this is the politics of kindness, rooted from infancy in connectedness, in abundant empathy, the opposite of the deprived and hyper-privatized self.

The Controlled Crying baby is not only barred from the mother's closeness and her body, but from everything that is alive. The bodily senses, keen from birth to rub against the velvet skin of the living earth, are sealed in an artificial world with perhaps a piece of dead cloth for comfort and some plastic bars for companionship. An infant so treated has lost not only the world of its mother but the extended physicality of life, the motherworld.

Insecurely attached to its human parents, one can perhaps argue that such a child may also feel insecurely attached to the earth, to nature, and may respond by becoming un-empathic towards it and withdrawn from it. Is this also, in a complex underground process, one reason for modernity's

terrible severance from, and lack of attachment to, the world of mothering nature? Wordsworth's intuition was that breastfeeding connects the baby to nature itself, and he writes of the unsundered relationship between infant and earth, describing a baby at the breast:

*No outcast he, bewildered and depressed:
Along his infant veins are interfused
The gravitation and the filial bond
Of nature that connect him with the world.*

It creates a form of empathy or pity 'cast from inward tenderness'.

Hannah Rachel Bell exquisitely describes the life of a newborn baby among the Ngarinyin people of Australia:

The child is suckled and continuously held by women until it can hold its head up on its own . . . Touch, smell, the rhythm of the heartbeat, and breathing are considered 'food' as necessary for survival as mother's milk. Through these functions, the baby is attuned to its own humanity, and the rhythm or resonance of its group and culture. Alienation or separation from these rhythms of life are considered cruel, tantamount to deprivation and starvation of the child's developing spirit . . . If the child is going to grow to its potential, to be attuned to Earth, nature, the family, tribe, and Law, it must be nourished in this rhythmic life in infancy.

What better reasons could there ever be? To hold the earth close and be held by it, nested in the motherworld and intimate with the cosmos.

CHAPTER FOUR

By the Mark, Twain!

There is a direction beyond north, south, east and west: the mysterious fifth, the compass point for navigating one's daydreams, the star to steer them by. Speaking of her dream to circumnavigate the world, Laura Dekker repeatedly smiles as she turns her gaze to that point, up and to the side of her sights, to the lodestar of her freedom.

The child was born on a boat, as her parents were embarked on a seven-year voyage, and she lived at sea until she was four. When she was six, she had her own yacht and by ten she was solo-sailing. This was when she first set her heart on the far horizons, wanting to sail solo around the world, and by thirteen the Dutch girl was ready to attempt it.

But she found herself confronted by an implacable obstacle, worse than the Doldrums, worse than the Bermuda Triangle: she had the wind taken out of her sails by the forces of double dullness, the 'Office for Compulsory Schooling' which went to the law to prevent her. The court stepped in, making itself part-custodian of the child although her father, also her custodian, wanted her to be free to leave. In a series of rulings the court repeatedly prevented her from setting sail. (Laura did not turn up for one of the court sessions, as she had gone sailing instead.)

At one point, she sailed to England by herself but the British port authorities stopped her returning, insisting that her father must escort her home. Initially he refused, saying she was quite capable of sailing back alone. 'Capable' is the word. And resourceful, resilient and self-reliant.

At another point, she upped sticks and took herself to the Caribbean so she could start her round-the-world odyssey from there, but again the authorities prevented it, concerned with the risk of harm to the girl. If only the Dutch authorities, so apparently mindful of children's well-being, could consider the presumably trivial matter of the thousands of devastated

childhoods in the former Dutch colony of West Papua, where Indonesia conducts a genocide against Papuans and where, I was told proudly, every child would be a freedom-fighter; and if only the courts could have left alone a child setting her sails for the freedom of the seven seas.

Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn would have fought a duel over her on the spot, as they also are freedom-seekers, yearning for a freedom of time and of will, the freedom of the runaway slave and the freedom of the water. Mark Twain, as a young man, piloted steamboats on the Mississippi, that river which would become such a player – a character in its own right – in his most famous books. Born Samuel Clemens, Twain named himself after one of the river cries – ‘By the mark, twain’ – which the pilots would shout out when there were two fathoms of water below the boat, enough to steam away. It is, in other words, the call of the ship’s own freedom.

Laura Dekker’s ambition to be free, to run away to sea, newsworthy as it is today, is not such a remarkable desire. Aged fourteen and without his parents’ knowledge, the future King Henry II hired a band of mercenaries, sailed to England and failed to take two minor castles. Ian Niall, in his 1967 autobiography, *A Galloway Childhood*, recalls: ‘My mother’s father was an adventuresome man. He had crossed the Atlantic as a boy, signing on as a member of the crew of a sailing-ship when he was no more than thirteen years of age. He sailed barefooted for he hadn’t the money for seaboots.’

Paris, 1840. A thirteen-year-old boy called Béasse is having a run-in with the courts. Found without home or family, he is hauled before a judge and charged with vagabondage. Picture the cocky lad, his panache ringing out across the years, his elan running rings around the judge, turning on its head everything which Authority decrees.

JUDGE: One must sleep at home.

BÉASSE: Have I got a home?

JUDGE: You live in perpetual vagabondage.

BÉASSE: I work to earn my living.

JUDGE: What is your station in life?

BÉASSE: My station: to begin with, I’m thirty-six at least; I don’t work for anybody. I’ve worked for myself for a long time now. I have my day station and my night station. In the day, for instance, I hand out leaflets free of charge to all the passers-by; I run after the stage-coaches when they arrive and carry luggage for the

passengers; I turn cartwheels on the avenue de Neuilly; at night there are the shows; I open coach doors, I sell pass-out tickets; I've plenty to do.

JUDGE: It would be better for you to be put into a good house as an apprentice and learn a trade.

BÉASSE: Oh, a good house, an apprenticeship, it's too much trouble.

And anyway the bourgeois . . . always grumbling, no freedom.

JUDGE: Does not your father wish to reclaim you?

BÉASSE: Haven't got no father.

JUDGE: And your mother?

BÉASSE: No mother neither, no parents, no friends, free and independent.

Turning cartwheels on the avenue, he also turns cartwheels with the judge's words, cock-a-hoop, cocking a snook as he challenges the judge's assumption that he should have a home. A young expert in the art of deliberate misunderstanding, he rephrases his lack of parents as a positive – it makes him 'free and independent' – and in this benign anarchy he is no one's slave and no one's master. Refuting the judge's idea of law and order, he alludes to freedom as an inalienable right, part of the robust life force, and does so with the chutzpah of a juvenile Dionysus. Against the stasis of establishment he opposes the vehement nomadism of vagabonds with an effervescence both cheeky and stubborn: he is an escapee from the dreary bourgeoisie ('always grumbling, no freedom') and refuses to be owned or controlled, domesticated or bored. Béasse stood (or cartwheeled) for liberty. The judge imprisoned him in a reformatory for two years.

Vivacity glints in these runaways, from Tom and Huck to Laura Dekker, the stray kings and footloose sailors, all those cut from that patched and motley cloth, running colourful flags of freedom from the masthead. It is as if all these children suggest the tenets of freedom as a political right: freedom of thought, freedom of expression and freedom of movement. 'Give me liberty or give me death!' are the exultant words Tom Sawyer chooses for his school recital, supposedly from the speech of Patrick Henry, a major figure in the American Revolution.

When the moon is a vagabond in the vagrant heavens, children dream of escape. For some, it is the circumnavigation of the garden at midnight, or leaving safe harbour and scudding over the bin bags, heading for the out-of-

bounds, seafaring across parks and neighbours' gardens. 'The world's not such a bad place,' says Calvin, of *Calvin and Hobbes* fame, 'when you can get out in it.' A teenager told me recently (and with gusto) that the most 'real' thing he'd ever done was to shit in the woods under a full moon.

Climbing, running, sailing or sauntering with the swagger perfected by Richmal Crompton's 'Just William', children have seized freedom in any way they can, grinning with, green with liberty. What was common once can be common again, so children may know their own freedom, on the land and in the mind, turning starwise for liberty until horizons themselves somersault backwards off the map.

Playing 'games that the night demanded', writes Laurie Lee, was a priceless part of his childhood and he describes a game called Fox and Hounds, which began with two boys, on a five-minute head-start, loping away through farmyards, hills and woods.

They had all night, and the whole of the moon, and five miles of country to hide in . . . we chased them through all the world, through jungles, swamps and tundra, across pampas plains and steppes of wheat and plateaux of shooting stars, while hares made love in the silver grasses, and the large hot moon climbed over us, raising tides in my head of night and summer that move there even yet.

Wordsworth in *The Prelude* describes nights of frost and wind on mountain slopes when 'twas my joy':

*To range the open heights . . .
... Through half the night . . .
... I was alone . . .*

He was alone. He was nine. It was winter. It was normal.

Compare this with a big media story in England in October 2005, when an eight-year-old boy got lost in the woods and spent a night alone. His 'survival' was treated as a miracle and widely reported. Clearly, any unfamiliar situation may be frightening but, across the world, throughout history, eight-year-olds would be expected to be able to spend a night in the woods alone without anyone fussing.

Children's desire for freedom seems unquenchable. I recently gave a writing workshop in Kolkata for street children who had been temporarily corralled into a school where they were clearly well looked after and, in the main, happy, but they thirsted for the one thing which the school would not allow them: freedom. 'They want the freedom they knew on the streets,' said a teacher, 'to go anywhere, anytime.' In spite of the troubles on the street – poverty, abuse, hunger and violence – the children 'miss their freedom and keep running away'.

Once out of infancy, Native American children were traditionally free to wander wherever they wanted, through woods or water. Lakota children 'roamed far and wide over the countryside. They grew up without a sense of restriction and confinement. Their faculties became accustomed to space and distance, to skies clear or stormy, and to freedom in its full meaning,' writes Luther Standing Bear in *Land of the Spotted Eagle*; he recalls days – entire days – roaming the land. They would have appreciated D. H. Lawrence's rules on childcare: 'How to begin to educate a child. First rule, leave him alone. Second rule, leave him alone. Third rule, leave him alone. That is the whole beginning.'

'By the time he is five, he is grown up, beaming with health . . . delirious with liberty,' writes Roger P. Buliard in *Inuk*, describing an Inuit boyhood of 'freedom unlimited'. By about the age of seven, the boy handles knives and wants a rifle and a trap line, and from then on, 'travels with the men, as hardy a traveller as any of them.'

When I spent some days reindeer herding with Sámi people, I saw how the children were free not only out on the land, but indoors in the summer-huts. They rummaged around for food, finding a strip of cooked reindeer meat or a freshly caught fish or a tub of biscuits, feeding themselves as soon as they could and deciding what and when they would eat: a situation which averted that major source of family conflict – mealtimes.

Autonomy over food from a very young age seems a feature of childhood in many traditional societies. Young children in nineteenth-century Oxfordshire would catapult birds and go 'spadgering', casting a net over a whole hedge to catch sparrows. Alacaluf children of Patagonia fend for themselves early, using a shellfish spear and cooking their own food from the age of about four. Very young Inuit children may use a whip to hunt ptarmigans, with a flick of the wrist lopping off their heads. Ache children of Paraguay learn early how to collect fruit, and boys are given a bow and

arrow when they are around two. By the time they are ten or twelve, they carry a bow all the time, learning to hunt, and by this age have become very independent of their parents. When Tom Sawyer runs away with Huck and Joe Harper, they take hooks and lines for fishing and they light a cooking fire: it seemed to them 'glorious' 'to be feasting in that wild free way'.

Travelling through the highlands of West Papua among the Yali people, I often saw village boys going off together, bristling with bows and arrows, to hunt birds, catch frogs and roast them in fires they would build themselves. From about five years old they would grow their own sweet potatoes, no longer asking their parents for food. At this point, they would leave their mother's house to live in the men's house: again, food is a marker of maturity.

Meanwhile, in England, an environmental play project called 'Wild About Play' asked children what they most wanted to do outdoors, and the answer was to collect and eat wild foods, to make fires and cook on them. This is exactly the sign of independence demonstrated by children everywhere, controlling their own food and their own bodies. I stress this because it seems that modern Euro-American children have two unusual food-related experiences: firstly, they *don't* have early autonomy with respect to food and, secondly, they *do* experience eating problems. While the desire to control one's own food seems a widely shared need among children, the issue of 'control' is one possible contributory factor to eating problems.

For years of evolutionary history, children have trapped, grown, found, hunted or fished for themselves and cooked on their own fires. The instinct to control one's own food and fire is blocked by the lifestyle of the dominant culture, which discourages children lighting fires or finding food outdoors, which categorizes food as something coming from shops rather than directly from the land, and which stipulates that food must be cooked, indoors, by an adult who often makes a child eat at their command. Is this part of the reason why some children, deprived of such an age-old freedom, are vulnerable to developing distorted relationships with food?



The sea. That was where I first learned the word 'horizon'. My brothers

were pointing to something and I started looking for a boat. 'Not a boat,' they said, 'the horizon': it was as if I had never seen it before. That actual horizon would later extend into ideas of horizons: far horizons, horizons of time, past and future, horizons of hope and possibility. But it began there. My brothers and I spent weeks with our grandparents by the sea where we learned so much more than it may have seemed. Not because we saw an actual shipwreck but because we saw the potential for it. Not because we actually found treasure but because we could feel the immanence of treasure at every seashore. ('There comes a time in every rightly constructed boy's life when he has a raging desire to go somewhere and dig for hidden treasure' – Mark Twain.) We fished for wishes and caught them; we swam to find mermaids and became them; and we dived for pearls and returned with a stick, a bit of litter, a coin or the makings of a joke. Pearls, in other words.

We learned about tides and chance, storms and sun, the vicissitudes of what is lost and found, flotsam and jetsam, castaway luck, islands, sea-songs, rings, riddles and pledges. We learned the sense of a clean slate in the renewal of the tide-smoothed sand. We learned the physical sense of hot, soft sand on scuffed knees, the sharp cuts of seashells, and we learned what it meant to have salt rubbed in a wound. We learned a real and wise fear of swimming near rocks. No amount of Jacques Cousteau – adore him though we did – would have been a good enough substitute for the lived adventures of that modest little strip of beach, Dumpton Gap. This part of my childhood was, I know now, a passport to the world.

At home we had an old, battered (and horribly heavy) canoe which we took to the river. This cast-off canoe seemed one of the most perfect inventions of humanity for the waters belonged to us when we paddled around on mud-chill shores, and the noisy serenity of our afternoons was reflected in the bright, wet sunlight of an English river. Quite often, if we couldn't be bothered to carry the canoe we would still go to the river to sit, soggy and happy as frogs, stirring the mud.

Like all children, we saw ourselves reflected in water. Children are always drawn to it, their thinking water-like, each word fluid to many meanings in the years when the world trickles past them, unfixed as water. Children seem allergic to dryness, as the phrase 'still wet behind the ears' suggests: they are happy sliding, slipping and getting wet, 'when the world is mud-luscious and puddle-wonderful', as ee cummings put it. Being

covered in wet stuff – sauce, slime, chocolate, ice cream, or gravy – doesn't bother children. ('What is the difference between adults and children?' I once asked a friend. 'Children just don't mind having jam all over them,' he answered.)

Water represents the fluxy freedom which children – spring tides running high in their lives – thirst for. The adventures of Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn, the river-journeys of *The Wind in the Willows* or *The Little Grey Men*, the lake adventures of *Swallows and Amazons* or the sea adventures of *Robinson Crusoe*, all cry freedom. It's doubtful if these books would have been written if their authors had not known their waterful childhood freedom.

As a child, Mary Shelley spent a lot of time in Scotland on the banks of the River Tay, and she describes these shores as 'the eyry of freedom', for beneath the trees or on the mountains her imagination was 'born and fostered'. Without them, who knows?

William Wordsworth would sometimes take a five-mile detour around a lake on his way to school, when the school day began at six or six thirty. Without his liberty, his greatest poetry might never have been written, for he traces its origin to his unenclosed childhood. Water is a reflecting thing, and it allows children to reflect within themselves. Wordsworth describes waking at dawn and going outside to a world of nature which took him inside to the psyche's landscapes:

*... and what I saw
Appeared like something in myself, a dream,
A prospect in the mind.*

When artists have, as children, encountered freedom, they have also experienced an ecstatic knowledge of nature. This is not only about the freedom of the body but the freedom of the mind, for art's first demand is freedom so imagination can circumnavigate a world.

One summer evening as a child, Wordsworth writes, he found a 'little boat tied to a willow tree'. He purloined it, rowing late by moonlight towards a crag, the horizon's utmost boundary. The peak seemed to have 'purpose of its own' and for many days after that haunted him with 'unknown modes of being'. His actual childhood freedom found by water led

him to his psychological and creative freedom.

Children may experience the world as water, swimming in streets where nothing is dry, nothing is literal (or indeed littoral) but all is in the process of dissolving and re-forming, mer-maid, mer-man in a mer-world, a child's mind and environment so influent that they flow within it and it within them, each porous to the other. (This vision has rarely been better expressed than in the child hero of *One Moonlit Night*, by Caradog Prichard.)

Children feel a quick affinity for people whose lives seem free: those of the travelling circus, the fairground people, pirates and sailors and, of course, gypsies. When I was a child, the Romany books by G. Bramwell Evens, 'the Romany of the BBC', magnetized me with something I knew but could not articulate. I know now. It was raw freedom which even applied to adults. (And I was a little bit in love with Raq, his dog.)

Of all gypsies, perhaps the sea-gypsies – pearl fishers – seem the most captivating to the imagination, combining as they do all the mystery and freedom of gypsies and sailors both. A few years ago, I spent a day with children of the sea-gypsies, the Bajau people who live off Sulawesi in stilt-houses set far into the water, bordered by flotillas of cigarette packets and biscuit-wrappers, among hundreds of boats and sea-grass gardens, each marked by flags torn and fluttering against the sky, like a Tibetan mountain pass. The children were swimmers and divers, boaters and paddlers, rinsed with seawater night and day till they seemed half-child, half-otter.

I asked what their childhood was like. The answer was immediate: 'Children have a happy childhood because there is a lot of freedom.' The connection is noted by others: 'Delight and liberty, the simple creed/Of Childhood,' wrote Wordsworth. When Huckleberry Finn has been taken under the protection of Widow Douglas, he bitterly misses the days when he had been 'free and happy'. If happiness is a result of freedom, then surely the unhappiness of modernity's children is caused in part by the fact that they are less free than any children in history.

For the sea-gypsy children, much of their time was spent fishing from the boats or paddling. They can cook on the boats, where a rock or piece of flat coral is set as a fire-base. If they meet with problems, they told me, they can row away, just find somewhere else. I was asked if children had this much freedom where I came from. 'No,' I said, 'not so much, and they don't seem so happy either.' I had been very struck by the obvious happiness of the Bajau children: spending the whole long afternoon with about a

hundred of them, not one was crying, cross, unhappy or frustrated. I can't imagine spending an afternoon with a hundred European or American children and not once hearing a child cry – unless, of course, they're watching back-to-back early episodes of *The Simpsons*. There was a problem, though, the children said: they missed not having television on the boats.

In Europe, one country seems to have honoured the relationship between freedom and childhood happiness in a way which the sea-gypsy children would have understood. A waterland of lakes, seas and fjords, a country which has enshrined in law an ancient right to canoe, kayak, row, sail and swim, to walk across all land (except private gardens and tilled fields) in a freedom known as *Allemannsretten*, 'every man's right', the right to roam.

Norway's freedom is intoxicating, a go-where-you-will sense of all the wide world, open and yours. It is exhilarating, it is vitalizing, it is a relief almost shocking for those who come from Britain, with our pinched footpaths and blocked rights of way, where canoeists are told that they are 'trespassers' in the rainwater which is somehow 'private' once it reaches a river. For all those fenced out, bullied, frightened and intimidated off the land, being in Norway is like being able to breathe fully after years of semi-suffocation.

If the sea-gypsy children, Huckleberry Finn and Wordsworth are all correct in their analysis that children are happy when they are free, what of traditional Norwegian childhood? A fascinating tale emerges. In 1960, the American psychiatrist Herbert Hendin was studying suicide statistics in Scandinavia. Denmark (with Japan) had the world's highest suicide rate. Sweden's rate was almost as high, but what of Norway? Right at the bottom. Hendin was intrigued, particularly since received wisdom opined that Denmark, Sweden and Norway shared a very similar culture. What was different? What could possibly account for such a dramatic difference in suicidal unhappiness? After years of research, he concluded that reasons were established in childhood. In Denmark and Sweden, children were brought up with regimentation while, in Norway, they were free to roam. In Denmark and Sweden, children were pressured to achieve career goals until many felt they were failures while, in Norway, children were left alone more, not so much instructed but rather simply allowed to watch and participate in their own time. Instead of a sense of failure, Norwegian children grew up with a sense of self-reliance.

Danish children, the study showed, were over-protected, kept dependent on their mothers and not free to roam. For Swedish children, a common experience was that, in infancy, just when they needed closeness, what they got was separation and a sense of abandonment while, in later childhood, just when they needed freedom, what they got was far too much control. By contrast, in Norway, 'great value is placed on the individual right to move about freely,' Hendin wrote, 'a tradition that goes back to Viking days.' Norwegian children played outdoors for long hours unsupervised by adults, and a child's freedom was 'not likely to be restricted'. They had more closeness than Swedish children at an early age, but then more freedom than both Danish and Swedish children at a later age, suggesting that closeness followed by freedom is likely to produce the happiest children.

Intriguingly, Hendin also noted the difference in the stories which children were told. In Denmark and Sweden, folk tales tended to be about heroes who needed the help of some other, higher being, so the children were saved through magic, miracle and a higher power. The hero of Norwegian folk tales is the Ash Lad, and he saves himself. He wins out by his own inventiveness, his own cunning and observation. The Ash Lad was not only a folk hero, he was also a way of being, an exemplar of Norwegian childhood which had long emphasized children's freedom – but this figure barely appears in the traditions of Sweden and Denmark.

The Ash Lad is a quintessential role model for all children. He is a happy-go-lucky child, embodying delight and liberty. No one's slave and no one's master, he acts autonomously, spontaneously and freely, following his nose, living by his wits, responding to his own volition; independent. He is reminiscent of Huck Finn, Tom Sawyer, Laura Dekker, Béasse, Laurie Lee, the young Wordsworth, Philip Pullman's Lyra and Will and indeed all those for whom childhood freedom is vital. The Ash Lad's physical freedom fosters his freedom of mind and he is a free thinker, a non-conformist, eccentric and idiosyncratic. Resourceful, he has a strong sense of initiative and is quick to improvise. Curious and attentive to nature, he is open and kind to those he meets, all of whom he treats as equals. He was a beloved influence on generations of Norwegian children.

In the decades since Hendin's work, though, the story grows sad. As Norway became more centralized and urbanized, childhood altered, involving housebound computer games rather than the free roaming of

earlier generations. Norwegian children now spend more time indoors in sedentary activities, such as watching television or DVDs and playing computer games, than they do outdoors. At the same time, the suicide rate has rocketed and is now one of the highest in the world.



In America and Europe alike, many kids today are effectively under house arrest, eighty per cent of them in the UK complaining that they have 'nowhere to go'. It's about four o'clock in the afternoon, you've got a couple of quid in your pocket but not a lot more. You've knocked off for the day and you'd quite like to be with your mates. The cheap cafés will be closed in an hour, you can't afford restaurants and you are not allowed in 'public' houses. You tell everyone who will listen that you don't want to cause trouble, you'd just like somewhere which is dry, well lit and safe, where you can hang out and chat. So you go to bus shelters and car parks and the brightly lit areas outside corner shops. You have nowhere else to go, so you find the margins, the little pockets on the edges of public spaces. And then you are driven off as if you were vermin. The UK seems to be leading the way in how not to treat children, and a few examples are in order.

A plan to erect a netball hoop on a village green in Oxfordshire was blocked 'because residents didn't want to attract children'. In West Somerset, an eight-year-old girl was stopped from cycling down her street because a neighbour complained that the wheels squeaked. In one survey, two thirds of children said they liked playing outside every day, mainly to be with friends, but eighty per cent of them have been told off for playing outdoors, fifty per cent have been shouted at for playing outside and twenty-five per cent of eleven- to sixteen-year-olds were threatened with violence by adults for . . . for what? For Playing Outdoors, Making a Noise, Being a Nuisance.

Saddest of all, it works. One in three of the children said that being told off for playing outside does successfully stop them doing it. If a puppy is caged indoors and not allowed to play outside, its owners may be prosecuted for not allowing the dog to 'express normal behaviour' according to the law. Children are merely expressing normal behaviour and wanting rights equal to dogs.

If there is one word which sums up the treatment of children today, it is enclosure. Today's children are enclosed in school and home, enclosed in cars to shuttle between them, enclosed by fear, by surveillance and poverty and enclosed in rigid schedules of time. These enclosures compound each other and make children bitterly unhappy. In 2011, UNICEF asked children what they needed to be happy, and the top three things were time (particularly with families), friendships and, yearningly, 'outdoors'. Studies show that when children are allowed unstructured play in nature, their sense of freedom, independence and inner strength all thrive, and children surrounded by nature are not only less stressed but also bounce back from stressful events more readily.

But there has been a steady reduction in available open spaces for children to play. In the USA, the home turf of children shrank by ninety per cent between 1970 and 1990. Similarly, in Britain, children have one ninth of the roaming room they had in earlier generations. Childhood is losing its commons. There has also been a reduction in available time, with less than ten per cent of children now spending time playing in woodlands, countryside or heaths, compared with forty per cent who did so a generation ago.

'The countryside - I've been there, maybe about once,' says a ten-year-old boy from Huddersfield.

Although they are themselves part of nature, children are removed from the world of moss and trees, of fur and paw. Children don't need to live in the countryside to have access to nature, and most city children, left to their own devices, can find a bare minimum of what they need in urban parks and gardens, even on the streets. But play is enclosed indoors while outside signs bark at children like Alsatian guard dogs: NO CYCLING. NO SKATEBOARDS. NO BALL GAMES. NO SWIMMING. NO TRESPASSING.

My later childhood was hollowed by cold and poverty and that depression which sets up snares in the young psyche, trapping it for life. My early childhood, though, was far happier, in large part because my brothers and I were part of the last generation which was not under house arrest. It was not a rural childhood, but we had a garden, and a few streets away a river ran by the side of the 'wreck', as we called the recreation ground. It was a wreck. Scruffy. Ignored. Ours. Five minutes' walk away was a park. Two hours away were those grandparents who lived by the sea. All the games we had fitted into a bench trunk about six foot by two. We were rich

in library books, bicycles and outdoors.

Outdoors, we could do what we liked. Throwing sticky seeds at each other, gurgling water or chucking it all over someone. Indoors, obviously not, for indoors was where complexity began: 'mine' and 'yours' and the difficult rules of time. Outdoors was a commons of space and a commons of time, the undivided hours till dark. Outdoors could comprehend all our moods: thoughtful, playful, withdrawn or rampaging. Outdoors was the place for voices other than human. 'Stones,' one of my god-daughters says, emphatically, 'are the most interesting things in the world.' She is five.

Outdoors, no one told us to be careful about breaking, spilling or kicking things, because that's what sticks, water and leaves were for. The verbs of 'destruction' only mattered indoors. No one could ever use up all the grass by mowing it with their teeth or spoil the sun by making too many shadows. No one could ever suck all the honey from the honeysuckle. There would always be more stillness in the pond after a rock had been hurled into it; there would always be enough rocks and no river would ever run out.

Outside, spitting didn't matter – in fact it was useful glue. How much of the world of childhood gets stuck together with spit? How many twigs, leaves, bits of rubbish, bog roll, berries and labels, pieces of clothing surreptitiously scissored off? Outside was the place to build breathless towers of stuff and then, in revenge against order, to demolish them, unleashing some archaic chaos. Recently, I was playing on a dewy morning with another god-daughter. 'Look at the million rainbows in the grass,' she said, 'and I can trample on them all.' On the beach we made a fish of sand with shells for scales. 'When can we cut it in half?' she asked, with the innocent bloodthirstiness of four-year-olds.

Nature was tough enough; she was Baba Yaga-like, leaf-tangled and hair-matted, her house dancing on chicken legs. Children will chase, catch, kill or burn just about anything, smashing ice and breaking branches, happily destroying what they can reach, but nature is generally safe from children because they don't have the tools for serious damage. Generally. The unsupervised hours of my early childhood led to physics experiments, and one of my brothers, now a professor of the subject, thought it was a good idea to try bomb-making in the back garden and got as far as matches and a hosepipe full of petrol before Baba Yaga in the form of our dad was roused to (understandable) fury.

Along with everyone I knew, from our first day at school, we walked

there. I went with my brothers and friends, a little ragged string of us, taking short cuts which weren't, chatting nonsense, swapping things, eating sweets, making dares, sticking chewing gum on walls, doing deals, showing off, doing silly walks, shuffling, holding hands, telling secrets, getting the giggles. It was a crucial part of the whole business of childhood. We learned our home territory; we learned which shops might give us free doughnuts if we tried to look particularly hungry; we learned which hedges bloomed with which flowers and we put the flowers on the graves of road-kill squirrels; we went into cake shops to cheekily ask why they had had the same cake in the window for two years; we learned how to avoid cars and how to look out for each other; we learned which of the older boys were truly scary; we learned which of the older girls drank whisky on her way to school and, goggle-eyed, we were particularly impressed that in her insouciance she chose to drink Teacher's.

There was, of course, safety in numbers. When today so few children are out alone, the venturesome child feels vulnerable indeed. In Britain, in 1971, eighty per cent of all seven- and eight-year-olds went to school on their own. By 1990, this had dropped to nine per cent. In 2010, two children, aged eight and five, cycled to school alone and their headmaster threatened to report their parents to social services. They should have been awarded a medal for allowing their children the freedom which we took for granted and which gave us so much.



Enclosure can be metaphysical. Caught on camera or trapped in the unceasing stare of CCTV, children may be unhappy partly because of the surveillance they suffer, according to Mary Bousted, general secretary of the Association of Teachers and Lecturers. In school, children are subject to constant supervision while even 'outside school they are not allowed the freedom to play and learn unwatched.'

Among animals – including children and adults – staring is a sign of aggression. Predators target their prey by staring fixedly and this is a prelude to attack. The prey can feel it, their skin prickling, their senses disturbed, and they may want to attack back. Staring at someone may thus provoke their hostility and surveillance will certainly undermine their

easefulness.

Never before have children been so subject to surveillance, supervision and monitoring. As well as ubiquitous CCTV and webcams in classrooms, there is an increasing market for 'nanny cams', the secret home camera, and for non-removable watches containing GPS devices, which seventy-five per cent of British parents are in favour of their children using. Worst of all is the 'teddy cam', that perversion of children's trust, where Teddy, with nasty little spy-cameras in his eyes, stares and films the child. Without doubt, individual parents want constant surveillance of their child because they genuinely fear for their safety, but this fear is manufactured by the companies who will profit from it.

Children who are told 'It's rude to stare' are themselves stared at all the time. It's no surprise that children desire – fervently and furiously – to be unseen, with an invisibility cloak, a mask, a spell for disappearing and their hoodies. The fashion for hoodies arose at the same time as increasing surveillance, and it surely represents a highly appropriate response to it as young people shade themselves from the constant, aggressive staring of adults. Yesterday, I asked one of my favourite hoodies if that might be one reason why he liked wearing them. Emphatically, he said, *yes*. Companies, shops and malls want to ban hoodies. I would like to ban the reasons why kids feel the need to wear them.



Younger children may be enclosed on the grounds that adults are frightened *for* them. Older children are enclosed because adults are frightened *of* them. The latter fear is manufactured by the media in a blitz of hatred which would be illegal if it were applied to any other group.

The Samaritans say the main contributory factor in youth suicide is leaving school with a poor sense of self-worth, and yet damaging children's sense of well-being seems something of a national hobby in Britain. The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child refers to a 'general climate of intolerance' in Britain towards children, and stresses that the media's 'consistently negative portrayal' of young people is unacceptable. Seventy-one per cent of media stories about young people are negative and a third of articles about young people are about crime.

Imagine if seventy-one per cent of media stories about Jews were negative. So-called 'public' houses display signs saying 'No Jews unless Accompanied by a Gentile'. Jews are disproportionately subject to police 'stop and search'. There is a Sonic Jew Deterrent to stop them gathering outside the synagogue on Saturdays. Then the synagogues are closed down in government cutbacks. A curfew is brought in, specifically applied to Jews. Without committing any crime whatsoever, two or more Jews 'hanging around' may be subject to police dispersal. Leisure centres and museums may refuse people entry on the grounds that they are Jewish. The police spray bleach in places where a handful of Jews gather to talk.

You get the picture. It's really ugly. And it is the experience of kids.

In recent years, there has been 'an increase in discrimination against children as a whole', says the UK Children's Commissioners' Report. From 2001, when the Terrorism Act came into force, the police have had 'stop and search' power over anyone aged ten or older, and it is disproportionately used against children. This was one frequent reason which kids gave for their fury which erupted in the UK riots of 2011. If you're black and male and a child, you may be subject to 'stop and search' hundreds of times before you reach adulthood.

In Norfolk, police have sprayed bleach in public stairwells because its acrid smell drives children away. The town council in Rochdale, Lancashire, considered installing low-pressure sodium lights because they make teenagers' spots glow in the dark, so they will be too embarrassed to congregate. And twenty-five per cent of local authorities in the UK have used the 'Mosquito' device, the Sonic Teenager Deterrent, which emits a noise almost unbearable to children and teenagers but which is inaudible to adults. The Council of Europe's parliamentary assembly recommends that the 'Mosquito' device is banned because it discriminates against young people. Teenagers, though, have exploited the technology, using it as a mobile-phone ringtone (Teen Buzz) so teachers can't hear their phones ring in class. (You have to hand it to them, that's a fine piece of *détournement*.)

Young people are treated as if their mere presence in 'adult' space is a malicious trespass. Children are discriminated against on public transport and by public services: they are often refused entry to libraries, leisure centres, museums and art galleries, so the commons of public space is cordoned off to them. In Britain, you can find yourself on the wrong side of the law for no other reason than that you are outdoors and under sixteen,

through curfew powers to stop young people being outside, unsupervised, between 9 p.m. and 6 a.m., while dispersal orders give the police power to clear two or more kids who have committed no crime whatsoever. This power may be disproportionately used against groups of children ‘hanging around’, says the UK Children’s Commissioners’ Report and ‘may penalize law-abiding children with nowhere else to go’.

It is a violation of that common and ancient right, freedom of association, but where are the mass trespasses against these acts? Where is the Kinder Scout for the Kinder of today? Where is the revulsion – in this ‘free’ nation – against the offensive idea that children should be under house arrest for no crime other than being young outside?

Of British adults, 1.5 million say they would consider emigrating ‘mainly because of young people hanging around’. Frankly, I wish they would. But where would these grumpy gits go? Somewhere which outlaws childhood altogether? Or somewhere which perhaps routinely incarcerates children? The USA and Britain already do, imprisoning more children than any other country in the West. Children as young as ten can be tried and jailed in England and Wales, and children excluded from school can be effectively subject to house arrest, forbidden from being ‘present in a public place’, while wholly innocent refugee children are imprisoned in detention centres. In the USA, children can be sentenced to life imprisonment, which would be in violation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, except for the fact that the USA (together with Somalia) has refused to ratify it.

What does society do with its most reviled prisoners?

- ~ Subjects them to loud and unpleasant noise
- ~ Intimidates them with ‘stop and search’ procedures
- ~ Forces them to live by clockwork routines
- ~ Bullies them with smear campaigns in the press
- ~ Forbids them equal use of public space and public services
- ~ Denies them access to nature and the outdoors
- ~ Restricts them to specific exercise yards
- ~ Arrests them arbitrarily
- ~ Refuses them autonomy, independence and freedom
- ~ Puts them under constant surveillance
- ~ Isolates them in small rooms

- ~ Segregates them from 'ordinary' society
- ~ Compels them to wear special uniforms
- ~ Fences them in strictly, at all times

And this is what we do to the vast majority of our children.



Parents may of course enclose their children out of love and fear: including of so-called 'hostile nature'. Nature is not unsafe but rather becomes so when children do not have knowledge and experience of it, when they are fenced out by ignorance. Take skating. Generations of children have skated on lakes in winter and, with some basic know-how, anyone can safely skate. But over the last few decades, wild skating has become almost unheard of, because people are led to believe it is dangerous.



A little digression on skating . . .

I have to confess that whenever the lakes near my home freeze over I am absolutely delirious with skate fever, as the ice issues an imperative: *Carpe Diem! Get Your Skates On!* I have skated in sunlight, by starlight and lanternlight. Once with friends we skated by moonlight in full evening dress plundered from charity shops: feathers, fascinators and fake furs. Skating is a form of flying. The god Mercury was, according to Coleridge, the first maker of skates, and every skater has his wings at their feet. John Clare skated as a child, and skating in the Lake District was, said Wordsworth, 'a time of rapture'. His sister said he was a 'crack skater' and I hope this wasn't a pun.

It so saddens me that children have been frightened off skating that I thought I'd offer a quick guide. First, find some skates. You need stiff boots with sharp blades. Next, find a place to skate. Rivers and canals are both dangerous, as they freeze unpredictably. Fields that have flooded and then frozen are fun and safe. Lakes are heaven, but you need to test the depth of the ice. To do this, take a hammer and chisel or a battery-operated drill; or,

if you'll be lighting a fire, take a poker, heat it in the flames and melt a hole in the ice. When you've drilled a hole, stick your hand in: the ice should be three or four inches deep. Then take a safety rope, and a broom, too, which is good for children and novice skaters to lean on for support and (unlike a stick or a well-intentioned friend) the broom will not slip on the ice. Take food and drink and musical instruments. Then fly, for, like most things in life, skating is best done open-hearted. Trust your wings.

. . . *digression ends. Forgive me: I was unable to resist* . . .



Never mind skating, even tree climbing is 'unsafe', say some teachers. Yes, indeed. 1,067 British children were hospitalized having fallen out of trees in 2006–7. More than twice as many (2,532) were hospitalized for falling out of bed. Must we ban beds? Pantomime artists are told not to throw sweets to children in case they cause injury. Children have been told to wear goggles in conker fights and at a donkey derby in Llandudno, children were not allowed to ride the donkeys. Inflatable sheep replaced children.

The risk-averse society denies the very idea of freedom's role, it stops chance throwing a wild card, it kills the free play of luck. The adventure-monitor creeps up, pouring cold water on every fire-pit, banning people from bringing home-made cakes to school fêtes. In the otherwise important UNICEF report into childhood well-being in 2007, the authors comment that health and safety 'did not feature highly in children's priorities'. Who knew?

Laura Dekker risks death or injury, yes, and this is the very meaning of adventure: that you accept a dare, that you allow the freedom of both chance *and* mischance. I remember first reading the word 'happy-go-lucky' and experiencing the idea like a peal of bells in my head. This is a crucial quality of the Ash Lad and other folk-tale heroes, combining happiness and liberty with chance – the opposite of the controlled and enclosed life. Setting out to seek one's *fortune* is the readying line of folk tales and children are only too willing to play with risk, to draw straws with hazard. It's a rare child who doesn't take to gambling like a duck to water: they shine at the luckiness of cards, dice and tossing coins, and every child I've ever known would place a bet as soon as nick a biscuit.

Primed to see luck where they can, children turn lucky moments into wishes. In the wishing lists of childhood, you can have a wish when you throw a coin into a well; when you catch a falling leaf or see a falling star; when you find an eyelash fallen on to your cheek; when the words fall out of your mouth at the same time they do from someone else's; when you accidentally put your knickers on inside out (but-only-if-you' re-a-girl); when you blow out all the candles on a birthday cake; when you pick up a fallen penny and give it away. Many of these involve falling things, as if language recognizes a form of fate: this is how things 'fall out'. It 'fell this way', say stories. Meanwhile a lottery, a lucky dip, a tombola, a lucky number or a lucky day of the week all appeal to children's sense that life is riddled with luck and that freedom means doing a deal with chance, for you cannot plan luck or control it, you cannot fence it, enclose it, or store it. You can only be open to what falls out and hold on to your hope.

This is why the risk-averse attitude of modernity is not only annoying but conceptually malevolent. It works against the correct instinct children have that they must find a working relationship with chance and risk, otherwise their adventures cannot even begin and they will remain infantilized and enclosed, stuck forever indoors in the house 'hard by the great forest' with no chance of setting out on the quest through that forest. Children know life as a huge adventure, this calling dawn, the invitation of all the mornings of the world, asking chance and childhood to play. Adventure demands you accept that the roll of the dice may give you a six or a one, that you take a risk for a venture.

Luck is deeply involved in the nature of play. Luck, writes cultural historian Johan Huizinga, 'may have a sacred significance; the fall of the dice may signify and determine the divine workings . . . Indeed . . . for the human mind the ideas of happiness, luck and fate seem to lie very close to the realm of the sacred.'

Tightly constrained by the enfeebling of a risk-averse, health-and-safety-obsessed society, many children are unable to light fires, paddle canoes, make shelters, use knives or cope with darkness. Further, children are discouraged from acts of physical courage and this is more serious than it appears, for we learn with our bodies as well as our minds – or rather we learn with the mind-body – and when we see our physical selves modelling bravery, our sense of moral courage, political courage, emotional courage or intellectual courage is heightened.

Rather than learning to trust their own judgement – paying attention to the body’s own knowledge that fire is hot, for example – children are taught to obey the signs of the authorities instead, so barriers are erected around a Guy Fawkes bonfire with notices warning ‘STAND BACK – DANGER’ as if children are to take their orders from signage, not from the fact that there is a blazing pyre melting their wellies.

My local primary school, in winter days of glorious thick snow, forbade children from playing in it for fear of litigation in the event of an accident. But this is about far more than merely living in a culture where people are ready to sue at the drop of a hat. This is about insidiously demanding that children must always seek permission for the most trivial of actions, that they must obey the commands of others at every turn. Children today are not being beaten into obedience but being eroded into it. The risk-averse society creates a docility and a loss of autonomy which has a horrible political shadow. A populace malleable. Commandable. Obedient.

I’m not arguing that children should be unsafe. It’s just that I think the one thing which truly makes children safe is their own competence, their own capability, their authentic skills in meeting the asymmetry, irregularity and unpredictability of life. How do they come by their competence? Only by the practice of it. Experience made Laura Dekker ‘capable’, as her father said.

A Leeds primary school banned skipping ropes after a child was hurt in the playground. The health and safety authorities, here, are laming the spirit till it limps towards a risk assessment to be registered compliant. Children *need* accidents – little ones, ideally, accidents the right size, through which they learn to avoid bigger accidents later.

Maurice Arnatsiaq, an Inuit elder from Nunavut in the Canadian Arctic, speaks of one long adventure when he was about fifteen years old. He left home with a dog team and travelled alone for two weeks, from Igloolik to Crown Prince Frederick Island, then to Committee Bay and the Melville Peninsula, voyaging over hundreds of miles of Arctic ice. ‘Maybe only three or four young people would be able to do that journey now,’ he says. ‘They don’t know about the land.’

The elders say that as children they learned what they should be scared of and what they could safely ignore. They learned navigation by the stars, or by checking snowdrifts and currents and floating seaweed. The school system taught them little which would help them on the land or sea. Theo

Ikummaq, born in 1955, ran his own dog team by himself when he was fourteen, went camping and built igloos. He found schooling risible: 'Columbus, Cabot, Math, spelling' was about the sum of it. Nothing that would keep you safe and therefore nothing which would let you have any kind of adventure. Although some hunters have tried to teach land-skills in schools in the last few years, the chain of knowledge has broken down and teenagers now don't even know how to find water, says one hunter. Children get too cold to play for long outside because they no longer wear warm gear, choosing instead the kind of clothes they see on television, say Inuit elders. For Inuit people, the clash of two cultures has been grotesquely damaging for the young. I have never seen children so claustrophobically imprisoned as these, so suffocated, so unfree, because they lack the ability to be out on the land and are therefore effectively imprisoned in the communities, bored to tears, bored to death. Many Inuit children who have attempted suicide have said it was because they were bored. The rate of suicide among Inuit youth in Canada is eleven times the national average.

For Sámi children in Norway, lessons can be pragmatic and life-saving: how to survive fog, for instance, which can kill by leading people so far astray they cannot find shelter or food. Children are taught to stop, to find a stone with some kind of protecting edge and wait until the fog lifts. I saw first-hand how Sámi reindeer herders would trust their children to be wise in fog: a ten-year-old boy was sent trekking for hours with a smaller cousin and a dog, looking for lost reindeer to bring back to the herding area.

Fog we met, in those days, fog so sudden and dense that you could barely see across the corral, fog which hugged the small children who were themselves hugging a small reindeer calf, cutting a slice off its ear and yelling out its number to see who owned it. The reindeer gallop around the pen, barging the walls, and the children spin with the reindeer around the corral, one four-year-old blowing raspberries to get the fur out of his mouth, tottering after a calf, giggling with pleasure. His mother tells me the children prefer not to be in a city because they are happier out on the tundra: 'Here they are free.' Lassoing and wrangling reindeer, driving quad bikes far over the horizon, the children almost visibly grew an extra inch of independence.

In Sámi tradition, trial and error are important and failure is helpful. Children may be left alone, tackling difficulties in often quite dangerous situations. They are given knives, scissors and matches at an early age, and

this is both a challenge and a trust. Sheltering children is considered unwise because it will mean they do not know how to manage for themselves.

How to keep children safe: give them not only knives, scissors and matches, but machetes, lassoes, sledges, dog teams, snowdrifts, fire and fog. Give them competence, give them appropriate fear and the knowledge to scorn false fear. Keep Away From Children only one thing: infantilism.

In the Amazon, I've seen five-year-olds wielding machetes with deftness and precision. In Igloolik in the Arctic, I've seen an eight-year-old take an *alu* (an Inuit knife) and carve up a frozen caribou, as they regularly do – without accident. In West Papua, I've known youngsters of twelve or thirteen with such physical capability and confidence that, when asked to be messengers, they completed a mountain run in six hours: a journey which had taken myself and the guides a day and a half.

This is not only a matter of physical competence: the freedom which Inuit children traditionally experienced made them into 'self-reliant, caring and self-controlled individuals', in the words of one Inuit person I met in Nunavut. It gave them courage and patience. Indigenous Australian Bob Randall speaks of his childhood and its 'non-restrictive nature, psychically and physically. I was always totally free,' and his words bask in the memory of unfenced freedom like lizards in the sun. This freedom, he suggests, meant autonomy but not licence, the freedom to be the captain of your soul.

Mark Twain, steamboat captain, gave to his boy-heroes the chance to be the captains of their own lives and to plot their course with the ebullience of adventure. 'I did not wish to take a cabin passage,' wrote Henry David Thoreau, 'but rather to go before the mast and on the deck of the world, for there I could best see the moonlight amid the mountains. I do not wish to go below now.'

Laura Dekker, sharing this bravura, eventually wrested her freedom from the hands of the authorities and succeeded, in January 2012, aged sixteen, in becoming the youngest person to circumnavigate the world solo, having demanded her right to live on the deck of the world, to be the captain of her own soul, daring to honour a fierce daydream, the right to roam for body and mind, to set sail for horizons of magnificence.

CHAPTER FIVE

Wolf Milk in the Ink

My kitten has been awarded an Anti-Social Behaviour Order. The reasons involve the toilet, three houseplants, my other cat's ear and some genetic predispositions, including the fact that his mother was an acrobat and his father was a kangaroo.

I'd been in two minds about getting a second cat but a nearby farm had kittens *de trop* and I had house guests, among them a seven-year-old boy in an off-kilter mood whose face became suddenly cloudless when I whispered the word *kitten*. Enter Otter. The two kittens, one of each species, played together for hours and the child happily strolled over the borders, belonging to the world of brimming animality as much as to human culture.

'Thou art of the Jungle and not of the Jungle,' Bagheera says to Mowgli. 'And I am only a black panther. But I love thee, Little Brother.' That children love animals is a manifest truth and they also seek love from them. So crucial are animals to children's happiness that in a significant UNICEF study of childhood well-being children specified that pets were one of the top four most important things for their happiness. 'I want a kitten . . . a puppy . . . a horse,' children clamour for years, and this is perhaps only the most audible part of their love. Children talk wordlessly to their pets, taking a dog in their arms or, upset, burying their faces in a cat's fur and crying. They whisper secrets to their pets and feel understood by them. Children want to talk with the animals, eat with them, curl up with them and think with them, for children intuitively understand that animals are guides for the mind in metaphor-making.

John Clare, a hater of all fences, made a friendship across the fences of the species, keeping a tame sparrow called Tom which would come at his call. He introduced the sparrow to his cat and taught her never to harm the bird, by hitting her when her paws got too twitchy. In time, the cat would

even bring mice for the sparrow, mew to it and let it perch on her back. After three years, though, the sparrow disappeared – possibly because, Clare surmised, it had met a cat uneducated in sparrow-cherishing.

Children’s authors, peopling their books with animals, know that children are fascinated by tales of crossing the species-fences, and the stories work carnally, suggesting a nuzzling sensuality, fostering a child’s animal nature and answering a longing deep within children to be suckled by earthmilk, pressing their faces into the warm flank of horse, lion or wolf, breathing in the spicy, messageful air of animals, falling asleep in their paws.

Aslan. To run your fingers through his golden mane, to see ‘the great, royal, solemn, overwhelming eyes’, to feel that humming, purring warmth and its ferocious power; ‘whether it was more like playing with a thunderstorm or playing with a kitten’, the children cannot say. The writer Francis Spufford recalls a tender trespass of his childhood when he was suddenly seized with desire for Aslan and reached his face up to a poster of the lion on his bedroom wall. Stealthily, heartfeltdly, he kissed the lion’s nose. From early childhood, I remember that feeling, wanting to nudge myself deep into the musk and silage, the mushroom, rust and grass of an animal’s den, wanting to know with my whole body the felt world of fur and pawpads and to feel the animal world in its fullness, in yawls, hackles and green-scent, to be batted by the paws of the furred earth, my senses drunk with it, living in the whisky of animality. And to kiss the lion’s nose.

There’s a fox in the garden. Those words would thrill us to the core. My brothers and I would crowd to the window in pressed silence, breathless, excited and honoured that something so wild might bestow on us for a flickering moment its feral presence. Birds and animals come in to our lives as ‘guests’, say Mohawk tales, and people must treat them well.

One of my god-daughters set up a snail hospital in a corner of her garden, using spit to mend cracks in their shells which were invisible to the adult eye. I’ve sat in trees for hours with children silent as frozen leaves, trying to conjure badgers. Children’s sense of delight at the animal world is as reckless as their spelling can be: at the Aigas centre in Scotland, which runs nature courses for children, one child wrote of his pleasure in learning ‘that beevish have pouchis at the baof side off it’s mouf,’ and another said ‘the bughunt was amingszing.’

Eighty per cent of the dreams of children under six are about animals,

and their psyches need different creatures: rabbit, octopus, spider, frog, whale, sloth or tiger. Children today say they lack good role models, which is a truth sadder than they know, for they deserve a range of such examples beyond the human and including, for instance, the fleet sensitivity of a deer, the watchfulness of a bird or the lazy grace of a cat. First-hand knowledge may bring them the powers of different animals, the feeling of a feather for flight or strong hind legs for leaping. 'Children use animals as a gymnasium for their own emotions,' says David Attenborough.

In the Koyukon world-view, children have an especial sensitivity towards nature and it was traditionally considered wise to raise a hawk owl around them, as these birds are clean and kill things easily, and adults hoped that children would learn these virtues. Conversely, there was a taboo against keeping dogs indoors because children would copy them, behaving badly and eating dirty food.

Animal-helpers snuffle in the hedges of fairy tales and they feather the treetops with bird-advice. In the nick of time, the winged lion or the armoured bear swerve into stories. If the fairy-tale hero treats an animal kindly, it offers its skills, pecking out grain or tracking a scent beyond human guesswork.

Creatures are friends to the psyche of a child. When Henry Old Coyote, from the Crow nation, was a boy, his grandfather would wake him early to listen to the birds and encouraged the child to know the exuberant joy of this bird medicine and to keep it inside him all day. I'm told that in Tamil Nadu, India, a child suffering nightmares may be cured by walking under an elephant's belly, being blessed by Ganesh. The nightmares, knowing better than to contend with an elephant, beat a retreat. A psychotherapist in Britain once told me about a deeply disturbed boy who came to sessions with his dog. The two had such a close relationship that often the dog would sense a difference in the boy's emotional state before the therapist, so she learned to take her cues from it. Studies show that animal companionship reduces a child's sense of alienation and increases their self-esteem, self-control and autonomy. Other studies demonstrate how children treat their pets as they themselves would like to be treated and suggest that children who have pets feel more empathy towards other people.



'In the old days the animals and the people were very much the same . . . They thought the same way and felt the same way. They understood each other,' says Simon Tookoome, an Inuit elder, recalling a belief common to many indigenous cultures. As a child, he adopted animals, including a caribou which followed him everywhere like a dog and, at different times, five wolves. More loving than dogs, one of these was shot for its fur, and the death left Tookoome grief-struck. Once, and thrillingly, his parents brought him a very young polar bear. His parents told him never to hurt animals but 'just to play with them', for children can, of course, be both mercifully kind and mercilessly cruel. Anthropologist Jean L. Briggs describes an Inuit child who 'enjoyed killing the unwanted newborn puppies, dashing them with squeals of excited laughter against boulders or throwing them off the high knoll edge into the rapids below'.

Tookoome explains how children were taught to understand animals so that they could hunt them better. Children often enjoy snaring, poaching, chasing and trapping animals and, to succeed in this, children need to learn to imitate other creatures, disguising themselves in order to fox their prey. Cherokee childhood in the 1860s, depicted in the autobiography of James Hightower, emphasized this 'imitation work' for children over five. His diary of childhood encounters includes an escape from a dangerous situation when the children had had to imitate a panther mewing for a mate, and describes a sound-world of baying timber-wolves, chattering squirrels, calling bob-cats, hooting owls, bellowing buffaloes and howling coyotes. One girl was the best of the bunch at coyote calls, perfecting the sharp bark, finishing on a note somewhere between a bark and a jabber, which is the signal of a coyote in strange territory *calling all coyotes*. Lit with language, and these languages understood, the world is more than human: it glistens with excitement, adventure, danger, delight and knowledge. It teems with meaning and message. 'There was not an Indian over eight years old but who could tell what temper the animal was in from his whine, or his purr, or bellow, or bark. Also every bird, whether in distress or content.'

One peculiarity of modern childhood in the West is its estrangement from the animal world and the consequent silence of that world, its unmessage, listless, speechless vacancy. Poet Gary Snyder speaks of the necessity to 'Bring up our children as part of the wildlife', but the dominant culture treats wildlife as insignificant to children's happiness which, as children themselves know, is a terrible oversight. Children's classic *Black*

Beauty and Michael Morpurgo's mesmerizing *War Horse* touch the hearts of millions of children as they willingly listen to the experience of creatures other than human.

There is a weighty book, some 379 pages long, entitled *The Inner World of Childhood: A Study in Analytical Psychology*, which was first published in 1927. There is nothing about nature in it. Oh, hang on, just the one: an entry for 'Animals, fear of' in an index which itself runs to nine pages. You almost have to applaud the book for its blinkeredness, for its majestic refusal to see animals entwined in, and beloved of, childhood.

In the bleak enclosures of modernity, adults and children alike may stand by the tiger cage at the zoo, waving and hoping for a flicker of acknowledgement in the tiger's eye, getting only the dulled stare of resentment. Forlorn, caged as the tiger, we are a lonely species now. We have fenced ourselves off, though our bodies still remember the wilds in the sinews, in the fingertips, in the skin which still thrills with electric recognition as when, for example, a wild fox was filmed on the loose in the National Gallery.

'With their whole gaze,' writes Rainer Maria Rilke, 'animals behold the Open,' while children are forced to:

*look backward
at the forms we create,
not outward into the Open.*

Animals can teach children how to be open to the pounce of the wind and the claw of the thorn, receptive to the handshadows of trees and the earth's telluric drum.

Children cling to animals: real ones when they can, substitutes when necessary. Take teddy bears (or, in David Crystal's witty collective noun, a threadbare of teddies). How much love goes wasted on sicked-up-all-over, chewed, tatty pieces of cloth and plastic? I should know. All those of us who are faithful to our teddies know the perfect and lifelong commitment that a passionate child freely gives and a passionate adult freely honours. From the moment I was given him – a little monkey with a plastic face, huge sad green eyes and a red collar and lead, which I tore off because he looked choked – I have loved and shared my pillow with Charlie, my protector and

my comforter. I named him after Charlie Chaplin, who never made me laugh but whose sadness touched me to the core. (I wanted to rescue him.) Charlie was once sent in misdirected baggage to Dubai but his most frightening moment came just recently, when my ASBO kitten started chewing him and he lost a paw and a lot of stuffing.

Teddies are touchstones by which children read the minds of adults. When the poet John Burnside was six, his father put his son's teddy bear, Sooty, on the fire. A child 'will gauge our intentions not so much by what we say, not even by what is implied in the gift we bring him, but from the way we spontaneously treat his teddy bear', writes psychoanalyst and fairy-tale expert Bruno Bettelheim. In Kabul under Taliban rule, a Taliban speaker said teddy bears were banned. 'No,' said a BBC correspondent well versed in the list of banned items and activities, 'actually teddy bears aren't banned.' 'Well, from tonight, they are,' thundered the furious voice.

Peter Prideaux-Brune, heir to the manor house Prideaux Place, had a teddy called Me Too, and the devotion lasted beyond childhood, as he took the teddy to Oxford and it sat finals with him. A friend of mine in her forties and not given to sentimentality saw her teddy disintegrating into sawdust and rabbit fur. She was utterly unable to put it in the bin because of all it meant to her, so she gave it a burial. Almost magically alive to a child, teddies are talismanic. 'My little, lovely Bobo, my hero, my lover, my friend,' wrote my brother to his teddy. As a child, when his dreams turned to nightmares, he would 'call in Bobo. Bobo was a sort of personification of my will, when my imagined world was frightening. Thus some nasty drowning dream would be made safe because when I was underwater Bobo could grab me and draw me up to the surface. Most of my nightmares could be turned around with this semi-external benign presence.'

More than a toy, a teddy is something of a guardian angel, keeper of wishes, witness to tears, holder of the keys of sleep, infinitely kind. But this fiercely loving relationship tells of a terrible loss. Infants are given soft toys as comforters, to console them in their grief at being separated from the physical warmth and presence of humans and other animals. The very love children bestow is a measure of their need for real fur and paws, real animal or human characters.



One day in 1996 when he was four, Ivan Mishukov left his flat in Moscow and walked out on to the streets alone. Uncared for at home, he begged food and shared it with a pack of dogs. In return, the dogs protected him from theft and abuse and, in the frozen Moscow winters, they saved his life by including him in the warmth of their lair. Over time, the dogs came to treat Ivan, this child who could be part-dog and part-child, as their pack leader and when humans tried to 'rescue' him, he ran away with the dogs. Eventually, after two years and three attempts, the police separated the child from his pack and he was returned to human lairs.

Eva Hornung turned this true story into an extraordinary work of fiction, *Dog Boy*, which describes how the dogs reared Romochka, the fictional Ivan. A bitch offers the child her teats to suckle so he drinks the milk of animal kindness. It's the stuff of legend: feral children, raised by wild creatures, fed on animal milk. So Mowgli drinks wolf milk, the abandoned Paris is suckled by a bear and Romulus and Remus are wolf-suckled. There are real-life examples of animal suckling when, in the villages of sixteenth-century France, for instance, it was common for a child to drink from the teats of a goat when its human mother could give no milk; and, as Michel de Montaigne commented, the goat would come running at the cry of that one particular baby and for no other child, while the child would suckle from no other goat.

My kitten Otter, much to the human kitten's delight, began suckling my other cat, Tom, even though he was male, wholly unrelated and they had only been introduced the day before. The fact of Otter's kittenhood seemed to trigger a tenderness in the older cat, who licked the little one into a purring-circle. This tenderness trespasses over the borders. A human baby can evoke a maternal instinct in other species, be they dogs, cats or wolves. The milk can flow both ways. Artemis, goddess of the wild woods, suckled the young of wild creatures, and Huaorani women in the Amazon may suckle a baby monkey as well as a child, as highland Papuan women may suckle a piglet.

There is a twofold reaction to stories of feral children: pity for the child as a stunted human *déclassé* and also envy for the child having been a cub in the nestling earth, kindled with hot, rank, animal-kind. The phenomenon reflects the twofoldness within the Western tradition which divides the world into either human or animal; culture or nature; civilized or wild; the city or the wilderness. Many of the children of legend abandoned in the

wilds grew up to be founders of cities, as if to be fully cultural (represented by cities), the human being must also be fully natural (represented by the animals), suggesting that culture knows it is rooted in nature. The root of the word 'culture' is the Latin *cultus*, concerning the rituals of cultivation of plants – of nature.

Semiramis, adopted by birds, founded Babylon. The abandoned Amphion and Zethos rebuilt the walls of Thebes. Romochka in *Dog Boy* builds a pretend city (made of toys) in the dogs' lair. His namesake, the wolf-suckled Romulus, together with Remus, founded Rome. Tellingly for these stories of twofoldness, many of the legends of children abandoned in nature involve twins: Amphion and Zethos, twins deserted on Mount Cithaeron; Valentine and Orson, the twins lost in the woods; Neleus and Pelias, twins abandoned on a mountain; and, most famously, Romulus and Remus, cared for by a wolf and fed by a woodpecker.

Interestingly, the Ancient Romans loathed the transgressive aspect of their city's legend, that the founding fathers had suckled on the milk of a wolf, so the poet-historian Ennius decided that *lupa* (she-wolf) should be taken to mean *lupa*, a prostitute. Nice try, this, to take the wolf out of the story, to wipe wild nature out of civilization's history, to remove the wolf milk from the ink. It failed, though, for wildness will out, in its howl of tender ferocity.

Probably the most famous true-life feral child was Victor, the 'wild child of Aveyron' found in France in 1800, who is thought to have lived in the forests from the ages of five to twelve, when he was captured and then cared for by a doctor, Jean Marc Gaspard Itard. Victor's story was made into the haunting film *L'Enfant Sauvage*, by François Truffaut.

The doctor tries to teach the boy to speak, but 'milk' is the only word he learns and he never uses another. The symbolism is striking, for milk is an emblem of our shared animality: intimate, raw, uncultured – if you'll excuse the pun. Itard regarded his work with the child as a failure because he could not create a relationship of empathy with the boy, the empathy which socializes children into culture. But, reading Itard's notebooks, it doesn't seem to me as if there was a failure of language or of empathy, for the boy does communicate, he pays rapt attention and he expresses himself in a duet of devotion – to the natural world.

'If, at any time, a boisterous wind arose; if the sun, concealed behind a cloud, suddenly burst forth, brilliantly illuminating the surrounding

atmosphere, he expressed an almost convulsive joy by thundering peals of laughter,' wrote Dr Itard. After a snowfall, the child 'escaped half-dressed into the garden. There he exhibited the utmost emotions of pleasure; he ran, rolled himself in the snow, and taking it up by handfuls, devoured it with an incredible avidity.'

Watching water, 'his face . . . took the well-defined character of sorrow, or melancholy reverie.' On moonlit nights Victor would wake and stare out of the window, 'carried away in a sort of contemplative extacy [sic], the silence of which was interrupted only by deep-drawn inspirations, after considerable intervals, and which were always accompanied with a feeble and plaintive sound.' The boy's story struck a deep chord with Coleridge who, in his notebooks, wrote of Victor's 'restless joy and blind conjunction of his Being with natural Scenery'.

If Itard was saddened by the child's refusal to speak and inability to join human society, he missed the fact that the child had already been socialized – by nature, within nature – and was already expressing empathy with every kind of voice, in every language he owned, resonant with the society of the moon and the forest and in sympathy with them.



A four-year-old boy became a dog in my kitchen. He licked the floor, he growled and barked, he wagged his bum and wanted his food thrown down to him. Bewitched by animals, children want to play with them but also to play them, to *be* them. Because they already are. Wholly engrossed, the boy was being watched by his father, an intellectual, an edgy, very witty and highly cultured man, with an expression as mixed, as self-contradictory, as torn as the human face can be. Amused, disturbed, impressed and revolted, he was staring over the fence as bewildered as his son was not.

There was a spring day in my childhood when I felt I was at the fence myself. I was about twelve, at the border of adolescence. It was a day of conscious liminality for me, and I was aware of the immense peer pressure which dictated that I should spend Saturday mornings making clumsy forays into eye-shadow or trying on clothes in front of mirrors. I didn't have a mirror or eye-shadow and the only clothes I wore, beyond my school uniform, were a pair of jeans, one brown T-shirt and one brown sweatshirt.

I was, to be blunt, a total failure as a girl.

What I also felt, though, beyond the peer pressure, was the familiar tug of the green world, and I realized quite lucidly that I was being taught that to grow up meant eschewing animals and staring at mirrors, while to be a child was to grab a fishing net and a jam jar, fetch my bike and head for the ponds. That is what I did and, that morning, although it was spring and I was in my own springtime, I felt sadder than I ever had in my life, for it was valedictory, it was autumn in April, it was twilight at dawn. The bewitched time when as a child I had so unselfconsciously and easily slipped between the railings and run to the woods, and had equally easily slipped between the worlds of human and animal, was overing. Not absolutely over, but drawing to a close. I sat, crying, watching a water boatman, itself a liminal creature, rowing his oars across the whole pond-ocean with a meniscus for a boat. And I, at the tadpole stage myself but turning into a teenage frog, was entranced by his metaphor.

An eighteen-year-old recently told me of a very similar moment when he was about fifteen. He had an indistinct sense that as he grew older he was supposed to leave nature behind as 'childish'. He was meant to put on The Suit and go to The Office, and he was sadly and unwillingly trying to resign himself to this. Then, courtesy of one wise teacher, he read Wordsworth and it turned his life around because, he said, it gave him a sense of permission, that he could live his life within nature, where he felt he belonged.

Western society has adamantly insisted on The Fence between human and animal worlds. We speak and They do not. We conceive of a past and future and They do not. We use tools and They do not. We make jokes and They do not. These are uncertain issues, particularly when it comes to tool-using chimps, the intricate communications of birds and, especially, the liquid intelligence of whales and dolphins. Yes, though, we make fire and fences and fictions. We are metaphor-makers. But the qualities which humans share with animals are overwhelming: the senses, motion, life, language, belonging, loyalty, closeness and – dare I say it – love.

In childhood, the boundary is quivering because children are liminal. The door is ajar; it opens easily on its hinges. The world creeps in through the portals of our senses, there is a paw scraping at the gate and our transgression is not a sin but an act of kinetic accomplishment. At the ravenous edge of the pack, a hunger stalks our species now, the howl is in

the lungs, ready to tear the throat as it roars for raw belonging. Children are not howl-proof or animal-proof. The hoof is there inside the shoe. The fins are discernible at the shoreline: starfish, dogfish, childfish. Artist Paula Rego, in *Night Stories*, etches the storytelling girl whose shadow stretches into wolf-shadow, telling a toothed story. An anarchic cat plays the fiddle with a hungry grin; animals smoke pipes, fuck and do headstands. Both children and animals are off the leash – untamed, disobedient compadres in sardonic, sometimes sexual, mischief. The demarcation between animal and human is grittily transgressed: *trespassers all*.



Animals matter to children as companions, as consolers, as comprehenders. A child's psyche leans to the animal world, and tales of children brought up by animals exert an uncanny fascination. Animals, though, are important to children in a further sense: they are guides to thought. They lead children to leaps of imagination. Wondering what a wasp is thinking or what a tree might feel in the wind is part of the mind's development, practising the quick spring of empathy. Children ascribe meaning, intent and emotion to animals. Faithful to anthropomorphism until they are ridiculed out of it, children nurture a relationship with the animal world whereby they become party to extra sensitivities, to other stories and a diversity of viewpoints.

Our minds are suckled by wolves. There is wolf milk mixed in the ink and no Roman historian can remove it.

It is only literalists who hate anthropomorphism, because they take it literally. (And, in this, they are really the only ones who literally believe in it.) The rest of us – virtually all cultures across history and certainly all children, Romantics fluent in the language of metaphor and far more intelligent than Utilitarians ancient and modern – appreciate that it is a way of coming into the knowledge of a creature; it opens a dialogue with nature which poetry understands, as Shelley addressed the West Wind as the 'comrade' of his boyhood.

Many children think the moon is following them. When I was a child, I thought I was the moon's daughter because it seemed that she watched over me and understood me; she was where I was from. I've heard from children

that a stone might need to be moved to the other side of the stream because it was stuck where it was; that a cloud is cold; a tree is lonely; and a snail needs a trail of Tippex to find its way home. Children see the world as soul-porous. To a child, everything is lit with intent, following its storypath, coursing with will. Ascribing a liveliness to the world brings the child's imagination alive; it refuses to allow either the world or the mind to be inert. 'Sometimes he was a panther lying lazily in his den,' writes John Joseph Mathews (born 1894) of the Osage nation, describing a boyhood melting across boundaries. 'Sometimes real pain would be the result of these dream-world metamorphoses; pain caused by the desire to fly . . . Unhappiness would descend on him as he lay on his back in the prairie grass, watching the graceful spirals of the redtail.'

Every animal suggests different characteristics to children, various moods or qualities. Each is a possible costume-change in the theatre of childhood, a shift of shape. In the electrifying transformations of the children's daemons in Philip Pullman's work or in the metamorphosis of Taliesin – hare, fish, otter, bird – or the shapeshifting fight between Merlyn and Madame Mim in *The Sword in the Stone* – dragon, field mouse, cat, dog, oak, blue tit, snake, bird, gnat – you can hear the rustling in the costume box behind the scenes, the proliferating, shifting possibilities for the child's still-unfixed shape, this subtle shimmer of animal-influence.

Mowgli's story is also a tale of metamorphosis as the child is adopted by the wolf, taught by the bear and intoxicated by the monkeys in the unfenced world, the jungles of transformation. The reader can tell how Kipling relishes metamorphosis, yet just when he creeps towards acknowledging the deeper meaning of it, he recoils in horror. Metamorphosis doffs its cap towards *shapeshifting*.

In Kipling's hands, shapeshifting is part of the murky superstition of the bludgeoningly stupid villagers. Mowgli's human parents are accused of having brought a demon wolf-child into the world and must, of course, seek salvation *with the British!* Ding! rings the school bell, and we know we're back in the decent, sensible and colourless world of teatime, fact, punctuality and fences.

In much of the world, finding one's 'power animals', using a wild epistemology of metaphor, was considered a wise part of a young person's spiritual growth. The idea of something half human and half animal can be seen, for example, in the concept of the Inuit seal-woman; the wer-jaguar of

the Amazon; and the mer-maid, half fish of *la mer* and half maid of the land. Within the classical tradition, metamorphosis is part of the forest allure so Dionysus, god of wildness, shapeshifts into lion, panther, snake or forest satyr. The werewolf of Europe, though, was demonized and, from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century (influenced by the literalizing Reformation with its loathing of metaphor), there were 'werewolf trials' in which thousands of men and women were charged with the crime of being a werewolf and killed for it.

A metaphor shifts into metamorphosis, which melts into shapeshifting – trespassing wisely and well across the fences of species. Angela Carter's version of 'Little Red Riding Hood', translated into the film *The Company of Wolves*, is full of boundary-crossing between dream and reality, childhood and adulthood, fiction and fact, past and present. 'Do you live in our world or theirs?' Red Riding Hood asks the wolf as a little silver cross glints at her neck. 'I come and go between them,' the handsome huntsman-wolf answers with Gallic insouciance, Gauloise smoke coming from his lupine ears. But even as the question is asked, it is hard to know whether 'our' world means human or wolf. *Do you live in our world of wolves?* she could have meant, as she herself chooses to cross over, in the shining transgressional moment of the film, when a silky, strong, female wolf, with a little silver cross around her neck, bounds out of the windows of the grandmother's house, making a break for freedom.

Shapeshifting is an epistemology, a way for people to increase their sensitivities, to perceive the world with an imaginative leap, to feel through the body of another, metaphorically. Pueblo Indian children, from three years old, transform themselves into antelope and deer, they don fox skins, deer hooves or parrot feathers. In rituals and dances, through lyrics, choreography and costume, the child embodies earth-knowledge – of corn and cloud, of sun and lightning, of buffalo and skunk – and steps through the looking glass. Animal nature is another side of human nature, a mirror, by twilight, by twilight, where the twinnedness of those myths is reflected.

In the mirage of mirrors, *it is as if* . . . As if man-cub is wolf-cub and we can all move between worlds at will, can come and go, transgress and cross the river, our fingers unfurling into flight feathers, our arms wings. Through a relationship with animals, we humans add to the repertoire of our senses the beady alertness of a bird, the scent-subtlety of a mole, the smooth-swum escape of the fish. This is the apprenticeship which children

gleefully follow, given half a chance.

Language follows the same path: first the mind's metamorphosis, then language's metaphor. As lazy as a coyote, as tricky as a fox, as wise as an owl. It is a way of 'reading' the world, of translating between nature and human nature which children's minds need, to be able to somersault and leap, to catch the branches of a simile. The mind climbs trees and performs its first aerial acrobatics. To jump is a need of the young mind as much as a need of the young body.

In the forests, our ancestor-primates needed to learn to leap from tree to tree, judging distance, space, branch width and branch strength, comparing and holding many bits of information all at once and then making a judgement which links them all. The mind does exactly this when it reaches for a metaphor, bringing all kinds of knowledge together in a sudden moment, a leap of thought.

The mind, a monkey in the branches, is a meta-forester, a *metaphorista*, champion of the forests. ('Forest' comes from *foris*, meaning outside, far out.) Metaphor is a play on words and a play on worlds. *Meta-foris*. Right outside the enclosure into the leaping, laughing forests. Far out.

Playing different roles by pretending to be different animals, children are nurturing their own animated selves. They are also practising the realization that there are other minds. The transformation in shapeshifting links with this: it is the *ur*-metaphor, the primal drama of the human mind. The force of the human sense of metaphor and art must surely come originally from our ability to step into the bodies of other animals. In this, children are then truly practising culture when they are most open to nature, learning how to be artists. Free to be fictitious, free to crack jokes, free to invent, free to lie, free to translate.

Eva Hornung writes of Romochka that the dogs cannot lie, whereas the boy can: and he may be useless as a dog, but he can pretend, including 'pretending' to be a boy. He tries to make the other puppies listen to a story and is described by the scientist as 'a master of passing' between the world of dogs and the world of humans. He could translate. He could transgress. He could 'cross . . . over'.

This is metaphor, from *meta* (across) and *phor* (to bear or carry). To carry across. Metaphors are prowling round the mind. The water boatman bore metaphor in his name, carrying meaning across the little pond; each tiny foot was an oar in the water as I watched him in grief. But what comforted

me that day was the incredible beauty of this metaphor. An insect-sized boater, with six oars, each making its miniature dent in the water. I too yearned to row across waters, in the mind's psychic fluidity, with those tiny oars.

Watch the yearning: for wanting to move out of the human world and into the animal world is exactly the same pattern as wanting to step out of literal speech into metaphoric speech. Wanting to be free of the prosaic single-reference of factual speech and wanting the sheer adventure, the glee, of the unfenced world of metaphor, where things are set free of their single meanings, to fly like birds, to skiff like a water boatman. This is part of the answer to the riddle of childhood unhappiness: their minds need, and deserve, a whole world of utterly unfenceable freedom where everything has othering, everything is radiant with the possibilities of elseness.

There is ink in our milk.

CHAPTER SIX

A Ludic Revolution (and a doodle)

In which is related how the king of France's cock went up and down like a drawbridge; who padlocked the swings; who plays guardian angel to reverie and why play matters to the arts - because a child of six could do it.



You never need to teach a child to play. Made out of cogs, kazoos and wagglegsticks, play is the undeniable instinct of childhood. Children have a sixth sense for the ludic and under their gaze lounge furniture is no longer there simply to house books and ornaments but transmogrifies into the elastic game of getting round the room without touching the ground. Enter an adult, and the room shrivels back to its single meaning: the Lion, the Witch and the . . . IKEA flat-pack furniture, furnishing one-dimensional meanings.

Play is life-jazz. It relies on a sense of swing. It dances with the moment when the moment is calling for a dance. Deep play involves rhythm and openness, it is collaborative; jazzers or children catching each other's glances, holding hands with their eyes to sustain the blue note. Unscored, unscheduled, spontaneous, this ludic life-jazz improvises. Because when it comes to the living of one's life, there is no dress rehearsal. It is all ad-libbed, extemporized. Play is the jamming of the psyche, how the child practises the greatest art of all, the art of life.

When to play, when to be silent, when to suggest a comic duet, when to judder a too-easy melody, how to send an arpeggio one step beyond, dicing on the top-notes, why to wait for the drums and how to let the flute fly solo to the stars when it is winged for the flight. *Just say yes.*

'All animals, except man, know that the principal business of life is to

enjoy it,' wrote Samuel Butler. But play, like so much which is natural to childhood, is under threat. The National Association of Head Teachers has accused the UK government of killing fun and play in primary schools. Children, forced to be 'productive', are discouraged from exactly the free play which scientists say is vital to their development. Children's play is commodified as never before: there is profit to be made – at the expense of childhood. Puritans ancient and modern threaten the ludic life.

Exiled from nature, children barely play outdoors. Where I live, in rural Wales, I have canoed many rivers uncanoeed by children. I have noted the uneaten blackberries and the unclimbed rocks. I can see the bit of air where a treehouse should be. Although they still get conkers from the conker tree (which mysteriously has always been known as 'the bamboo tree' to the town's children) and, in seasons of snow, the snowmen are not shy nor lacking in carrots, yet there is a sad absence of children playing outdoors, for a landscape like this should be riddled with children like rabbits in a summer dawn.

Play on the urban commons, the street, has today 'mostly disappeared', says one academic study. Even though the school playground is crucial to the continuance of aspects of children's culture, quite horribly, schools are now being built without playgrounds.

The leader of Wandsworth Council in London could afford to visit his local playground 96,000 times a year if he spent all his pocket money. (Nearly a quarter of a million pounds.) But plenty of Wandsworth's children cannot go there once, as the council is charging children £2.50 per visit. The spirit of enclosures is alive and well, fencing off the swings and roundabouts, privatizing common play for profit.

Meanwhile, at the other end of the country, heavy black letters in a stentorian voice stencil out these words:

PLEASE DO NOT USE THIS PLAYGROUND ON SUNDAYS

The chill rain palls the playground but nothing is colder than the spirit of this sign, on Raasay, one of the Western Isles of Scotland. The swings are chained up on Sundays, too, in Stornoway on the Isle of Lewis, in case the jazzy swing of childhood play had its way with the saturnine orders of the stony kirk. Swings seem particularly loathed by the Church. In Harris, the

When John Keats was a child, he played a game with other boys in the school playground. They re-created the solar system, with a sun and planets circling it and moons on faster cycles, with comets thrown in just for fun: a universe without cost in their heads and in their hands.

Children's toys were all but unknown before 1600, because children had access to a magic toyshop, both priceless and free, in themselves and in nature. John Clare recalls making cockades of corn poppies, pretending mallow seeds were cheese, listening to corn crackle in the sun, watching a grasshopper bounce, playing Harlequin and, of course, skating.

Generations of children have imitated animals, playing Leapfrog, Sardines, Piggyback, Chicken, Hare and Hounds, Gecko Gecko (an Australian tag game), Lynx and Rabbit, Fox-is-the-Warner, Dead Ant Tag, Fox Hunts Squirrel and Camouflaged Worms.

Until very recently, play has been an activity rather than a product and it has been free, free as a fox cub sneezing in the foxgloves: physically free, imaginatively free, free of schedule, free of rules and free of money. In free play, all are commoners. No one can buy a snowball; neither a whale-shaped cloud nor the blue streak of excitement in a seashore child is for sale. The bird feather, the burr and the sticky-grass have no price tag.

But then, on 3 October 1955, the Mattel toy company began advertising a gun called the Thunder Burp. It was the first time that an advert for a toy had appeared on TV outside the Christmas season, and it marked a turning point in the story of play. Play was to become an industry. Today, children in the USA aged twelve to nineteen spend an average of \$101 each, every week, playing. These commercialized play-products lead to the awful playground aristocracy based on some children's ability to buy the most expensive toys.

In play, children make-believe. Stop a moment on that, for the creation of belief in the human psyche is no small thing. Turquoise fish can swim right through you in the make-believe world. Not only is make-believe an extraordinary phenomenon, but it is also crucial to children's well-being, for when children play imaginatively in make-believe worlds they learn something vital to their development – the ability to self-regulate, to control their emotions and behaviour – which is self-evidently important, intellectually and socially. This happens because in imaginative play they

have always preferred to wend their own way through their own wild hours, in sincere and universal protest, because they do not like Chronos, the god of measured clock-time, but rather they hold a candle for Kairos, the god of timing, of chance and mischance, the god of the special moment, the colourful, variegated time of the psyche.

Children know time in so many guises: the split second of a kingfisher flash, the reckless suddenness of a toboggan run, the slow hush of thinking whether or not to drink a puddle just because your brother has dared you to do it. Time can crawl slowly as a sloth sleeping off an over-energetic yawn, or run speedy as a cub raccoon ricocheting off a tree-trunk which it lassoed with its own tail, by mistake. Sometimes it can disappear altogether. Tamed clock-time does not offer a child's soul what it needs: the swings of morning, the embers of evening and the difference of all the hours in between.

My kitten was named Otter because he arrived on 12 August which, according to the French Revolutionary Calendar, is the day of the Otter. In that calendar, to each day was assigned an animal, a plant, mineral or tool, as if the spirit of Apricot presided over one day and another day's deity was the Wheelbarrow. Clay, Slate, Sandstone, Rabbit and Flint begin the year, while Ladder, Watermelon and Fennel comprise a late-August list. The months were named after the seasons: 'snowy', 'rainy' and 'windy' months, followed by 'sprouting', 'flowering' and the 'meadow' month. The Revolutionaries overthrew the Emperor months of Julius and Augustus and replaced them with 'harvest' and 'heat'. September to December, with their lifeless numerical order, were renamed with the vitality of 'fruit', 'vintage', 'foggy' and 'frosty'. Children, sensitive to place and moment, also experience their time like this, so one day may be coloured by slate or conker or the taste of pear, while for them a month is far more fully expressed by 'foggy' than 'October'. On one day, the watering can is the hero of the moment, and another day may be spent under the auspices of licorice.

By the clock, each hour is numerical and standardized. Time itself, however, is variegated, embedded in both nature and in the psyche where different moments, hours and seasons are coloured and characterized diversely. Children live happily in this wild time, untameable, full of character, full of difference. And in this way, time has codes for the child's psyche.

Dawn, wide open, when time stretches untrapped, can nurture a child's sense of dawn within, when the mind can bask extravagantly in an open moment. Broadening sunrise, lighting on all it can see, suggests how curiosity and breadth of interest lights everything the psyche can reach. The straightforward, robust afternoon hours illustrate the mind's ruddy, tough confidence. A child who knows dusk directly can better know the psyche's own twilight-mindedness, mesmerized by ambiguity, dwelling with dilemma and unsimple truths.

As with the hours of the day, so with the seasons of the year: the child learns aspects of the psyche itself. Nine o'clock will never teach a child anything except obedience, nor will 12/8 educate a child beyond the border. Modernity's banal sameness of time will never give a child the lifelong codes for the spirit.

But the seasons will.

A child's psyche which knows the year's seasons as reality, not as pictures on calendars, can nurture its own seasonality. To such a mind, spring may suggest soul-values of expectation, a need to begin, to conceive, the wound-up spring set to be sprung, the sense of possibility and exploration.

A psyche which knows the stretch of summer may know how its soul-analogy is pleasure, how to be fully engaged, engrossed in play. 'Time is a child playing,' said Heraclitus, and I can only see this image saturated with summer.

A psyche which knows the fruits of autumn may know the soul's harvest of generosity, open-handed and open-hearted. Death is autumnal and may shock a child less if it is already understood in falling leaves.

A psyche which knows the bite of winter may learn how to endure, how to resist the frosts, how to survive in style, defiantly burning the candles all the brighter in the midwinter festival.

These generations, exiled from the natural world, lose yet another dimension of nature: wild time, with all its seasons of significance. And Otter is better than 12/8 as a name for a day. And for a kitten.