

Graham Swift, *Waterland*, 1983

WATER LAND AND HISTORY

1. About the Stars and the Sluice

‘AND DON’T FORGET,’ my father would say, as if he expected me at any moment to up and leave to seek my fortune in the wide world, ‘whatever you learn about people, however bad they turn out, each one of them has a heart, and each one of them was once a tiny baby sucking his mother’s milk . . .’

Fairy-tale words; fairy-tale advice. But we lived in a fairy-tale place. In a lock-keeper’s cottage, by a river, in the middle of the Fens. Far away from the wide world. And my father, who was a superstitious man, liked to do things in such a way as would make them seem magical and occult. So he would always set his eel-traps at night. Not because eel-traps cannot be set by day, but because the mystery of darkness appealed to him. And one night, in midsummer, in 1937, we went with him, Dick and I, to set traps near Stott’s Bridge. It was hot and windless. When the traps had been set we lay back on the river-bank. Dick was fourteen and I was ten. The pumps were tump-tumping, as they do, incessantly, so that you scarcely notice them, all over the Fens, and frogs were croaking in the ditches. Up above, the sky swarmed with stars which seemed to multiply as we looked at them. And as we lay, Dad said: ‘Do you know what the stars are? They are the silver dust of God’s blessing. They are little broken-off bits of heaven. God cast them down to fall on us. But when he saw how wicked we were, he changed his mind and ordered the stars to stop. Which is why they hang in the sky but seem as though at any time they might drop . . .’

For my father, as well as being a superstitious man, had a

knack for telling stories. Made-up stories, true stories; soothing stories, warning stories; stories with a moral or with no point at all; believable stories and unbelievable stories; stories which were neither one thing nor the other. It was a knack which ran in his family. But it was a knack which my mother had too – and perhaps he really acquired it from her. Because when I was very small it was my mother who first told me stories, which, unlike my father, she got from books as well as out of her head, to make me sleep at night.

And since my mother’s death, which was six months before we lay by the eel-traps under the stars, my father’s yen for the dark, his nocturnal restlessness, had grown more besetting. As if he were constantly brooding on some story yet to be told. So I would see him sometimes, inspecting his vegetable patch by the moonlight, or talking to his roosting chickens, or pacing up and down by the lock-gates or the sluice, his movements marked by the wandering ember of his cigarette.

We lived in a lock-keeper’s cottage by the River Leem, which flows out of Norfolk into the Great Ouse. And no one needs telling that the land in that part of the world is flat. Flat, with an unrelieved and monotonous flatness, enough of itself, some might say, to drive a man to unquiet and sleep-defeating thoughts. From the raised banks of the Leem, it stretched away to the horizon, its uniform colour, peat-black, varied only by the crops that grew upon it – grey-green potato leaves, blue-green beet leaves, yellow-green wheat; its uniform levelness broken only by the furrowed and dead-straight lines of ditches and drains, which, depending on the state of the sky and the angle of the sun, ran like silver, copper or golden wires across the fields and which, when you stood and looked at them, made you shut one eye and fall prey to fruitless meditations on the laws of perspective.

And yet this land, so regular, so prostrate, so tamed and cultivated, would transform itself, in my five- or six-year-old mind, into an empty wilderness. On those nights when my

mother would be forced to tell me stories, it would seem that in our lock-keeper's cottage we were in the middle of nowhere; and the noise of the trains passing on the lines to King's Lynn, Gildsey and Ely was like the baying of a monster closing in on us in our isolation.

A fairy-tale land, after all.

My father kept the lock on the River Leem, two miles from where it empties into the Ouse. But because a lock-keeper's duties are irregular and his pay, set against the rent-free cottage in which he lives, is scant, and because, in any case, by the 1930s, the river-traffic on the Leem had dwindled, my father also grew vegetables, kept chickens and trapped eels. It was only in times of heavy rain or thaw that these secondary occupations were abandoned. Then he would have to watch and anticipate the water-level. Then he would have to raise the sluice which cut across the far side of the stream like a giant guillotine.

For the river in front of our cottage divided into two channels, the nearer containing the navigation lock, the further the sluice, with, in between, a solidly built brick-faced pier, a tiny island, on which stood the cabin housing the sluice engine. And even before the river had visibly risen, even before its colour had changed and it began to show the milky brown of the Norfolk chalk hills from which it flowed, Dad would know when to cross the lock-gates to the cabin and begin – with a groaning of metal and throbbing of released water – to crank up the sluice.

But under normal conditions the sluice remained lowered, almost to the river bottom, its firm blade holding back the slow-flowing Leem, making it fit for the passage of boats. Then the water in the enclosure above it, like the water in the lock-pen, would be smooth and placid and it would give off that smell which is characteristic of places where fresh water and human ingenuity meet, and which is smelt over and over again in the Fens. A cool, slimy but strangely poignant and nostalgic smell. A smell which is half man and

half fish. And at such times Dad would have plenty of leisure for his eel-traps and vegetables, and little to do with the sluice, save to combat rust, grease the cog-wheels and clear away from the water the accumulations of flotsam.

For, flood or no flood, the Leem brought down its unceasing booty of debris. Willow branches; alder branches; sedge; fencing; crates; old clothes; dead sheep; bottles; potato sacks; straw bales; fruit boxes; fertilizer bags. All floated down on the westerly current, lodged against the sluice-gate and had to be cleared away with boat-hooks and weed-rakes.

And thus it was, one night in midsummer, when God's withheld benedictions were shining in the sky, though this was several years after Dad told us about the stars, but only two or three since he began to speak of hearts and mother's milk, and the tump-tump of the pumps was drowned now, in the evening, by the roar of ascending bombers – it was, to be precise, July, 1943 – that something floated down the Leem, struck the iron-work of the sluice and, tugged by the eddies, continued to knock and scrape against it till morning. Something extraordinary and unprecedented, and not to be disposed of like a branch or potato sack or even a dead sheep. For this something was a body. And the body belonged to Freddie Parr, who lived less than a mile away and was my age, give or take a month.

2. About the End of History

CHILDREN. CHILDREN, who will inherit the world. Children (for always, even though you were fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, candidates for that appeasing term 'young adults', I addressed you, silently, as 'children') – children, before whom I have stood for thirty-two years in order to unravel

THE FENS

Children, who will inherit the world. Children to whom, throughout history, stories have been told, chiefly but not always at bedtime, in order to quell restless thoughts; whose need of stories is matched only by the need adults have of children to tell stories to, of receptacles for their stock of fairy-tales, of listening ears on which to unload those most unbelievable yet haunting of fairy-tales, their own lives; children – they are going to separate you and me. Lewis has seen to it. Forgive this emotion. I do not deserve your protestations. (We need our Cricky and all that stuff of his.) I do not expect you to understand that after thirty-two years I have rolled you all into one and now I know the agonies of a mother robbed of her child . . . But listen, listen. Your history teacher wishes to give you the complete and final version . . .

And since a fairy-tale must have a setting, a setting which, like the settings of all good fairy-tales, must be both palpable and unreal, let me tell you

3. About the Fens

WHICH ARE A low-lying region of eastern England, over 1,200 square miles in area, bounded to the west by the limestone hills of the Midlands, to the south and east by the chalk hills of Cambridgeshire, Suffolk and Norfolk. To the north,

the Fens advance, on a twelve-mile front, to meet the North Sea at the Wash. Or perhaps it is more apt to say that the Wash summons the forces of the North Sea to its aid in a constant bid to recapture its former territory. For the chief fact about the Fens is that they are reclaimed land, land that was once water, and which, even today, is not quite solid.

Once the shallow, shifting waters of the Wash did not stop at Boston and King's Lynn but licked southwards as far as Cambridge, Huntingdon, Peterborough and Bedford. What caused them to retreat? The answer can be given in a single syllable: Silt. The Fens were formed by silt. Silt: a word which when you utter it, letting the air slip thinly between your teeth, invokes a slow, sly, insinuating agency. Silt: which shapes and undermines continents; which demolishes as it builds; which is simultaneous accretion and erosion; neither progress nor decay.

It came first from the coast of Yorkshire and Lincolnshire, borne on the inshore currents which flowed southwards into the ancient Wash. In the blue-black clay which lies under the soil of Cambridgeshire are deposits of silt containing traces of shells of a type occurring on the beaches and cliff-beds of north-east England. Thus the first silts came from the sea. But to these marine silts were added the land silts carried by the rivers, the Ouse, the Cam, the Welland, which drained, and still drain, into the ever-diminishing Wash.

The silt accumulated, salt-marsh plants took hold, then other plants. And with the plants began the formation of peat. And peat is the second vital constituent of the Fens and the source of their remarkable fertility. Once it supported great forests which collapsed and sank when climatic changes caused water to re-immense the region. Today, it forms the rich, black, beet- and potato-bearing soil which is second to none in the country. But without silt, there could have been no peat.

All this was still happening not so long ago. In 870 the Viking fleets sailed with ease as far as Ely, through a region

which was still predominantly water. Two hundred years later Hereward, defending the same high ground of Ely, watched his Norman besiegers flounder and drown in the treacherous peat-bogs. The landscape was still largely liquid.

For consider the equivocal operation of silt. Just as it raises the land, drives back the sea and allows peat to mature, so it impedes the flow of rivers, restricts their outfall, renders the newly formed land constantly liable to flooding and blocks the escape of floodwater. For centuries the Fens were a network of swamps and brackish lagoons. The problem of the Fens has always been the problem of drainage.

What silt began, man continued. Land reclamation. Drainage. But you do not reclaim a land overnight. You do not reclaim a land without difficulty and without ceaseless effort and vigilance. The Fens are still being reclaimed even to this day. Strictly speaking, they are never reclaimed, only being reclaimed. Without the pumps, the dykes and embankments, without the dredging programmes . . . And you do not need to remind a Fenman of the effects of heavy inland rainfall, or of the combination of a spring tide and a strong nor'easter.

So forget, indeed, your revolutions, your turning-points, your grand metamorphoses of history. Consider, instead, the slow and arduous process, the interminable and ambiguous process – the process of human siltation – of land reclamation.

Is it desirable, in the first place, that land should be reclaimed? Not to those who exist by water; not to those who have no need of firm ground beneath their feet. Not to the fishermen, fowlers and reed-cutters who made their sodden homes in those stubborn swamps, took to stilts in time of flood and lived like water-rats. Not to the men who broke down the medieval embankments and if caught were buried alive in the very breach they had made. Not to the men who cut the throats of King Charles's Dutch drainers and threw their bodies into the water they were hired to expel.

I am speaking of my ancestors; of my father's forefathers. Because my name of Crick, which in Charles's day was spelt sometimes 'Coricke' or 'Cricke', can be found (a day's delving into local archives) amongst the lists of those summarily dealt with for sabotaging drainage works. My ancestors were water people. They speared fish and netted ducks. When I was small I possessed a living image of my ancestors in the form of Bill Clay, a shrunk, leathery carcass of a man, whose age was unknown but was never put at less than eighty, a one-time punt-gunner and turf-cutter, who had witnessed in his lifetime the passing of all but the dregs of the old wild fens in our area; who stank, even with his livelihood half gone, of goose fat and fish slime, mud and peat smoke; who wore an otter-skin cap, eel-skin gaiters and whose brain was permanently crazed by the poppy-head tea he drank to ward off winter agues. Old Bill lived with his wife Martha in a damp crack-walled cottage not far from the Ouse and on the edge of the shrinking reed-filled marsh known, after the watery expanse it had once been, as Wash Fen Mere. But some said that Martha Clay, who was some twenty years younger than Bill, was never Bill's wife at all. Some said that Martha Clay was a witch . . .

But let's keep clear of fairy-tales.

The Dutch came, under their engineer Cornelius Vermuyden, hired first by King Charles, then by His Lordship, Francis, Earl of Bedford. Honouring their employer's name, they cut the Bedford River, and then the New Bedford River alongside it, to divert the main strength of the Ouse from its recalcitrant and sluggish course by Ely, into a straight channel to the sea. They built the Denver Sluice at the junction of the northern end of the new river with the old Ouse, and the Hermitage Sluice at the southern junction. They dug subsidiary cuts, drains, lodes, dykes, eaus and ditches and converted ninety-five thousand acres into summer, if not winter, grazing. Practical and forward-looking people, the Dutch. And my father's forebears opposed them; and two of them were hanged for it.

Vermuyden left (he should have been rich but the Dutch Wars robbed him of his English fortune) in 1655. And nature, more effectively than my ancestors, began to sabotage his work. Because silt obstructs as it builds; unmakes as it makes. Vermuyden did not foresee that in cutting new courses for the rivers he reduced, not quickened, their flow; since a divided river conducts at any one point a decreased volume of water, and the less water a river conducts the less not only its velocity but also its capacity to scour its channel. The Earl of Bedford's noble waterways gathered mud. Silt collected in the estuaries, where the current of the rivers was no match for the tide, and built up against the sluices.

And Vermuyden did not foresee one other thing. That reclaimed land shrinks – as anything must shrink that has the water squeezed out of it. And peat, above all, which absorbs water like a sponge, shrinks when it dries. The Fens are shrinking. They are still shrinking – and sinking. Land which was above sea-level in Vermuyden's day is now below it. Tens of feet below it. There is no exaggerating the dangers. The invitation to flooding; the diminution of the gradient of the rivers; the pressure on the raised banks; the faster flow of upland water into the deepening lowland basin. All this, and silt.

In the 1690s the Bedford River burst a sixty-foot gap in its banks. In 1713 the Denver Sluice gave way and so great was the silting below it that the water from the Bedford River was forced landwards, upstream, up the old Ouse to Ely, instead of discharging into the sea. Thousands of acres of farmland were submerged. Cottagers waded to their beds.

And at some time in all this, strangely enough, my paternal ancestors threw in their lot with the drainers and land-reclaimers.

Perhaps they had no choice. Perhaps they took their hire where they were forced to. Perhaps they responded, out of the good of their hearts, to the misery of inundated crops and water-logged homes. In 1748, among the records of wages