

# I

*The commonplace book of the three fish*

‘There are only three possible answers to prayer: yes, no, and wait’ I read near the end of the fish commonplace book, which I have opened at random. It serves me right, because this quotation, from an unknown or traditional source, pulls me up like a douse of cold water. It applies not just to prayer—if one is prayerful—but to wishes whose longing gives the force of prayer. *Yes, No, and Wait. Wait* is the hardest. So hard it sometimes seems like a cruelty. *No* would be preferable since the quotation gives no indication as to how long the waiting for an answer might be. And the answer might still be *No* as if the facts on which a god-like decision is to be weighed are not yet available, but are assembling. Again, who knows at what speed? And how clever the structure of English is to place this . . . *and wait* at the end, with its extra word, the *and*.

There are situations, usually containing a wait endured, where a *No* becomes practically a positive. A diagnosis, for instance, or the resumption of a friendship. I think of the marvellous shifts of filial and fatherly emotion in Marilynne Robinson’s *Home* and remember, as a reader, how I almost longed for a finally slammed door or a footstep retreating along a path. ‘*And wait*’ is so seldom considered a virtue in novels, though it forms the underpinning of Proust. Each time your hand plucks a new volume of *Remembrance of Things Past* the ‘wait’ seems to rear its head again, held in description after description, given *weight*.

Keats's negative capability—'capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason'—is being attempted and the only comfort is that Keats himself was singularly unable to practise it. Fact and reason are the only things that can dispel a situation that is so wearying and wearisome that you doubt your own rationality.

This morning, at the garage, while my red Mazda was placed over a pit and the mechanic descended with his lantern, I thought it best to look as if I were writing in my notebook. Actually I was adding up the amount of money spent on postage for this year's income tax.

I started the fish commonplace book on 14 July 1996. This morning, without looking, I was trying to remember the quotation that begins it: *The Masochist's Week*. I could recall *Moanday* and *Tearsday* (for Monday and Tuesday), *Frightday* (Friday), *Sufferday*, *Stunday* (Saturday, Sunday) but not Wednesday or Thursday. *Woundsday* and *Fearsday*. I guess if this was read at the breakfast table at the commencement of each week or at the water cooler on Monday's first break a certain defiant optimism might arise. On Wednesday (Woundsday) for instance there might be only one wound to deal with and not the several that are implied in the name. And if, by some miracle, there were none, that everything—human relations, meetings, work targets—went well, think of the feeling of triumph.

It is important, when dipping into a commonplace book, to go from mood to mood: if the quotation is enervating, look for something as cheering as Mozart's 'Art lies in expressing everything, the sad as well as the gay, the horrible as well as the enchanting, in forms which remain beautiful'. There is an art in using a commonplace book that involves not lingering, some days, on the overly

profound quotation but settling for the humorous. Or just enjoying the juxtaposition of Montaigne's recommendation to 'live in a room with a view of a cemetery' with Gilbert and Sullivan's

*Though the night may come too soon  
We have years and years of afternoon.*  
—*The Mikado*

I've been trying to imagine the supposedly dead hours of the afternoon (which some find the most difficult hours to bear) as something to savour as the light begins its slow fade and perhaps a table lamp is switched on. It is the hour when one of Anita Brookner's inveterate walkers goes to stand at the window and gaze out at the street. The morning might have been wasted or triumphantly busy but the thought of whole days of unrelieved afternoon makes the mouth curl in a smile. Imagine if our allotted years were composed of just afternoons? And if they were, how young we should find ourselves, like those born in a leap year.

The three green fish on the cover have something of the resignation suggested by this quote from Rilke:

*Wer spricht von Siegen? Überstehn ist alles.  
Who speaks of victory? To hold out is all.*

I have a picture, drawn from reading, of Rilke, tired and feverish, travelling across a great northern plain. He is going to a warmer climate, to recuperate. A room in Castle Duino awaits him but already on the slow train he is beginning to experience the silence he longs for in which his brain can begin to rest and unfold. I guess 'unfold' cannot be the proper word, 'uncoil' might be better, stretching its labyrinthine coils, like someone waking in the dawn and stretching their toes towards the bed-end. A writer's brain tends to be a whirling thing and a long journey

on a cold train could be infinitely preferable to some conversations. Especially those conversations that seem little more than the exchange of planks of information. The planks (or bricks or buckets) are passed along a line, a little brick-dust sticks to the fingers or the water in the buckets sloshes and wets a sleeve but nothing is really added. I often hear conversations like this, particularly between men. What is being conveyed—besides a hearty slap on the shoulder or two palms slapping together—is obviously far below the surface of the words exchanged. But it seems hardly enough and silence, as Rilke thought, is infinitely to be preferred.

I am writing at the dining room table while outside the window the long, high deck of the house is being repaired. A stream of popular music and a hepped-up announcer's voice drift up from the garden where large planks are lying on the rose bed. Occasionally a head appears through the deck or there is a crisp 'Fuck!' as a piece of timber is discovered to be the wrong length. In the background the white Japanese anemones are moving in the grey autumn air.

*In a poem, each word has to be right and contribute to the whole; in a story only every sentence. In a novel only every page.*  
—Alison Lurie, *Real People*

I would infinitely prefer to be writing propped up on my double bed but that is not a suitable look for an employer of builders. Instead I hover about in the kitchen, planning the next tea-break. But what a comfortable place a bed is to write in. It's like getting inside an envelope. When it gets colder I will take a hot-water bottle and put it, not quite against my hip but close enough for the warmth to be conducted towards me by the warming sheets. (I'm not sure if this is a true instance of conduction, whether Egyptian cotton can replace metal, but it certainly feels similar.)

I like Alison Lurie's comment. The strange thing about prose and even the story is that it has the ability (when pages or paragraphs are removed) to join up again. Like those people (idiots) who claim a good hiding did them no harm. A page or more in a novel is excised and something like the structure of the new deck shows through, a new floor. Or in the story (frailer, more percipient) a sentence glides off, leaving its implied meaning with the sentence on either side. The reader can join them together and nothing is lost. But the poem, so bold and ardent in its intentions, can be fatally undone by the smallest flaw, like Achilles slain by the arrow in his heel where his mother's thumb pressed as she dipped him in the River Styx.

*The Portuguese talk volubly, listen with difficulty and interrupt without qualm . . .*

—Marion Kaplan, *The Portuguese: the land and its people*

This I did, with such stunning Portugueseness, a few nights ago at a dinner with two fellow writers. Occasionally I saw a surprised glance directed at me: I was finishing another's sentence. It was true I asked questions that required long answers: about the building of a house or foreign travel. I came home wondering if I should be ex-communicated. Perhaps they were already doing it in the car as they drove off and I walked up the drive. I've been trying to train myself to be a listener, to listen closely, to not think of something in return, even if it seems smart or encouraging. Listening so often means the ready remark must be jettisoned, even when it is a favourite. I felt like hanging my head or biting a small piece of soap. I half-started an apology by email and then abandoned it. I tried to remember if I had been interrupted and couldn't find any examples. I must do better at the next dinner.