The Longest and Darkest of Recollections

You are standing with your back to me, looking out to sea. A small stone is in each hand, and you are turning them over and over, like thoughts. As we start walking along the beach, you occasionally reach down and swap in a new stone until – by the time we stop for lunch – you have two stones of exactly the same size and shape, perfectly smooth and round. We talk about your memories of being a wartime evacuee in Cornwall, how you slept in a room with ten other boys, perhaps in a school or a farm.

Over lunch you show me a photograph of you and another boy, your best friend until he died aged 14. Albert? Alfred? You have never mentioned this until now. Instead of speaking, we both look at the photo for a long time. It's been folded across your faces, the wide smiles and the crease making lines across the paper. 'He had a beautiful sister,' you say. Memories are surfaced, like fossils agitated towards expression. An archaeology of the mind.

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Photography and memory are so entangled that it seems pointless to write of cause and effect. Aged three, I fell off a small pier and plopped down into the froth of breaking waves. A missed breath. Concerned faces peering down. And then a plunging hand pulled me up to safety. Your hand. When I was younger, you would delight in telling me this early rescue story. The memory has the force of an image. I'm telling it back to you to see if it's familiar. You have a line to the deep past, so I hope we'll make a connection there.

I recently heard a forensic scientist suggest that the most powerful images are the ones in our imagination.

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Standing on Westward Ho! beach after lunch, we watch a disciplined line of white t-shirts follow a man out of the car park and towards the beach. The man picks up a rock and tucks it under his arm. The line fans outs as it reaches the top

of a long pebble ridge, which banks down to the beach steeply in front of us. Descending the ridge, arms extend outwards almost in unison, as if on a high beam.

The large pebbles wobble, cracking and thudding against each other. Many are marked with delicate white lines as if drawn by millions of children on a school trip. I know this is anthropomorphic nonsense. 'A geologic rarity' booms the voice holding the rock, as if echoing the exclamation mark of the resort's name. He is telling the line about the unique origins of the ridge. The pebbles have been carried and smoothed by the sea from cliffs a few miles down the coast. They form a natural spit.

I first came here about twenty years ago. There is a photograph of four of us sitting in the dunes, sand in our eyes and our sandwiches. There was a man and dog passing by, stuck forever behind us. I didn't think geologically then.

The wind brings other fragments of local geology our way. 'The spit offers natural protection to the sand dunes. But it is disappearing at a rate of about a metre a year.' He drops the rock and gestures inland. 'In the mid-1700s, the bank was approximately 300m out in the bay. It has moved inland at a rate of about 1 to 1.5m per year for at least the last 200 years.' The rate of erosion has been calculated using paintings from the late 1700s and photographs from the mid-1800s onwards. 'We can work out land loss by triangulating landmarks on the shore to the vantage point from which the pictures were taken.' I calculate that the spot where we stand will be in the sea in about nine years' time.

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I once had a fall on my bike that seemed to warrant a trip to A&E. After an X-ray confirmed nothing worse than a badly bruised and cut knee, they put on a dressing and sent me home. I had a large piece of grit stuck under the skin that the nurse said would work its own way out. I watched the fragment obsessively over the coming weeks, like a scientist studying a rare specimen. Geologically slowly it edged along. Eventually my body rejected it. I had been hoping to keep it, this piece of the earth that had lived in me, but it fell out without me noticing. All this is indirectly recorded in a photograph.

The day after the fall, the school photographer came. I asked him not to include my plaster in the photo, but he explained that every portrait had to be framed just below the knee. This was my first experience of photographic inflexibility, a need for institutional consistency that seemed to have little consideration for the feelings of the subject. What would it matter anyway, since the school photographs would never be seen together? So when the photo was sent home, I cut my leg out. The excision is just as strong an index of the accident as the photograph itself. Mum felt this intervention keenly, as if it were a violence not just against the image but to the body itself. Once my knee had healed, she asked you to re-take the photo exactly as the original. I had to put on my school uniform – blazer and shirt with collars flat – and stand in front of a plain white wall in your office. An early photographic re-enactment.

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The weather rearranges things constantly here. There are numerous references in local archives to climatic events that have disturbed the pebble ridge. The storms of 2014 flattened parts of it and moved it a few metres inland. The same storm exposed a 1950's rubbish dump, a stratigraphy of clothes and plastics flapping in the wind at the edge of the car park. But all this is recent history.

Local geologist Peter Keene responds to my enquiries about the origin of the pebbles. He explains the coast as a constant process of change, over many different timescales. 'The cliffs are made of Carboniferous Culm measures and, taken as a whole, are about 300 million years old. They are made of bands of two types of rock, dark bands of mudstone that are shale-like and soft, and bands of hard, fine-grained grey sandstone. Abrasion wears the sandstone down until rounded pebbles are produced. So in one sense the pebbles are 300 million years old, but not as pebbles.'

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'Do you remember when we lived in the pink house in Woodford?'
'I can remember it was pink, yes.'
'Anything else?'
'I painted it white, and your mother was upset.'
'She was upset with you about other things too. She says most of the time we lived there you were away working.'

I was three when we lived in that house. The only clear memory I

have from that time is this: you were going away, so I stayed with the girl next door. She was tall for her age and very pretty. I woke up in the night and it was pitch black. I wanted to go home. In my own bedroom I had a lamp on at night, so the blackness was unfamiliar. I started crawling across the carpet, trying to find the door. My head bumped into the corner of something. I lay down to wait. Though just next door, our home was absolutely beyond reach. I was sick all over the floor. Eventually I fell asleep. I know you don't remember this as I've asked you before. So, my earliest memory is an impression of fear. I can't go any further back. Before that is a Paleozoic void.

Psychologists have long puzzled over infant amnesia: our inability to remember our experiences as babies. Are these memories made and then lost, or are they never imprinted in the first place?

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About 8 vertical metres of water separate high and low tide. At its height, the tide licks the lowest pebbles on the ridge, turning them from light grey to black. Can you imagine how one day it might just keep rising and never stop? At very low tide, you can see traces of a 'submerged forest'. It's thought that these stumps formed a trackway 6,000 years ago, used by nomadic hunter-gathers to cross water-logged ground. Once someone found evidence of early kitchen scraps. I pick up a pebble marked with two almost completely parallel white lines, and wonder how much time separates them.

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Scientists have discovered that adult memories are buried rather than lost. They can be dug up! They gave some mice a gene for Alzheimer's, then put the modified mice in a chamber with normal mice and gave them all an electric shock. A few days later the normal mice were still too scared to go back in the chamber, but the Alzheimer's mice were happy to go back in. They had forgotten their bad experiences already.

The scientists experimented with flashes of blue light to stimulate certain brain cells. The previously unperturbed mice, which had displayed evidence of 'lost' memories, began to show fear when placed in the cage. The memories had 'returned'. The light flashes had forced neural connections in the brain. So memories are not gone, are not irretrievably erased, but are latent and accessible.

Another email from the geologist: 'The grey sandstone beds and even individual pebbles not infrequently have white stripes running across them. These lines are also made of quartz (SiO2), but this is a crystalline form, injected into weaknesses in the sandstone long after it was formed. Dating individual pebbles is difficult. Once formed, the pebbles on the storm beach at the foot of cliffs to the east of Hartland Point are driven by waves eastwards until they eventually form part of Westward Ho! Some pebbles on the surface may move quite fast, but if they get buried within the storm beach they might lie dormant for a very long time so to say how old they are is near impossible.'

A few days later, he emails a photograph. It's so unexpected. A rock that he has taken home from the beach and immersed in hydrochloric acid. The sandstone has been etched away leaving lines of quartz, a network of straining veins across the surface. A fossilized brain.

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I was once playing a game of 'hit-the-stumps', a regular after-school pastime for bored Essex teenagers. This involved hitting two different tree stumps on the edge of a pond with a single stone. Once, failing to let go properly, I managed to throw my school book into the pond too. I waded in ankle deep to retrieve it and found a drenched leather handbag at the bottom. I had a look inside, before taking it to the police. There was small zipped plastic folder with photographs of different mountain peaks. Each of them had an arrow pointing towards the top: a record of summits climbed, or a photographic dream of some kind.

Unrelatedly, but probably not that long before, I had been in the car with my Mum and we'd hit black ice and skidded off the road into the edge of the forest. A number of passers-by were helping to push the car back onto the road. I suddenly started crying, a mild aftershock I suppose, and the extreme cold made my eyelashes stick together. A man tried to distract me. He went to his car and got a road atlas from the glove compartment. He showed me a road trip to France he was planning with his daughter.

Something made me doubt that it was true. Or maybe that's a feeling I've added later. The objects of

these memories – the arrowed peaks and the future journey – have now become entangled in this mining of the past.

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A new email arrives from my geologist. 'During the last ice age, which ended about 18,000 years ago, the sea was about 120 metres lower, so no new pebbles were added to the ridge at all during that time. But before that, during the warm period, which peaked at about 125,000 years ago, there were high sea levels. In North Devon it created sea levels about 8 metres (25 feet) above present sea level. This high sea level flooded Northam Burrows so there was no Westward Ho!'

In the 1980s, the council imported hundreds of Grey Elvan boulders from Dartmoor to try to slow the erosion. This rock armour, as it's called, with its rusty tones and jagged edges, feels like a material intrusion, out of place on the soft sands. About 200 years ago, residents developed a local response to the problem. The community would gather once a year and pot-wallop. The original pot-wallopers were men who had been given the vote on the grounds that their hearths were large enough for a pot to feed the whole family.

In Northam, neighbour to Westward Ho!, the pot-wallopers were obliged to maintain the pebble ridge in return for grazing their animals on the common. Once a year, all the pot-wallopers gathered to collect stones from the bottom of the ridge and carry them back to the top. This became a whole family affair and long after the franchise was extended beyond men with big pots, the term pot-walloping was used to describe the annual hauling of stones up the ridge. Eventually the ritual fell out of practice but was revived for a few years in 1922, the year that Alfred Stieglitz wrote that 'photography should not be despised as a matter of mere mechanism'.

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Robert Smithson understood how the body and the earth are connected. In 'Sedimentation of the Mind', he proposed a form of abstract geology in which the mind and the world are irretrievably entangled. He describes 'muddy thinking', 'mental rivers', 'cliffs of thought' and 'ideas that decompose into stones of knowing'. For Smithson, corporeal and geologic forces and processes are not just comparable but contiguous. There is an exchange where the distinction or line between our body and the non-body collapses. Different qualities of matter mingle.

I suddenly remember to show you something. It's a photograph of you and your mother, montaged from two different images so that you are framed together across time, both in your early 80s. The scale is aligned so your shoulders are level with hers, but the backgrounds are different. This discontinuity feels right, a gesture that acknowledges the image's impossibility. You asked me to do it some time ago, as a study in resemblance. I am paraphrasing now, but you talked then about the future becoming more like the past. I have been meaning to send it to you for ages.

Now we look at it, side-by-side, on my phone. We are now almost the same height and I can feel the gentle pressure of the top of your arm on mine. The screen feels too small, and the sun is shining off in difficult angles. You nod and then your gaze drifts upwards, drawn to the horizon. I understand that in some way, because of the screen or the picture itself, you don't want to look. Perhaps this re-ordering of time is felt as too much of a transgression. Then, quite suddenly, you look delighted. 'I'd like a copy of that. Can you get it framed for me?'

Liz Orton, March 2017

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