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Beware Remembrance Sunday

Tim Parks

Wish You Were Here by [Graham Swift](#)

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1 DECEMBER 2016

Perhaps the finest piece of storytelling in this novel has to do with the death of a dog. Three characters are involved: Michael Luxton, a taciturn dairy farmer; Jack, his elder son, aged 26; and Tom, his much younger son, approaching his 18th birthday. The old sick dog, named Luke, was originally just a farm dog, then for many years Jack's close companion, but now more recently Tom's. The events are remembered by Jack, from whose point of view, although in the third person, most of the novel is narrated.

The men are not a happy threesome. It is only five years since Michael's wife and the boys' mother died. Vera had been the chief source of affection in the family; it was after her death that the dog mysteriously shifted his loyalty from Jack to Tom. Since then the Devonshire farm has been devastated by mad cow disease, or rather by the government reaction to it, the Luxtons' healthy herd having been slaughtered and incinerated in the great cull. Inevitably, the old dog's long illness reminds the men of Vera's death, the misery of the cull, the possible end of a great phase of their lives, bankruptcy, loss of the land.

One heavy, sullen August morning Michael drove the pick-up into the yard, fetched a spade from the lean-to and put it in the back, then went into the house, unlocked the gun cabinet between the kitchen and the stairs and carried the shotgun out to the pick-up too. Jack and Tom were both in the yard at the time, but felt from the way their father was looking and moving that they shouldn't speak. Then Michael went into the kitchen where Luke was by now confined to his blanket in a corner – beyond even padding his way to the door – and lifted him up and carried him out and put him in the back of the pick-up along with the spade.

Michael is going to shoot the dog. He tells the boys he doesn't want help, then changes his mind and invites Tom to come along. From that moment, everything Jack remembers is what he heard from Tom: how their father drove to the corner of a field, laid the dog down, loaded his shotgun, then offered it to Tom to do the killing; how Tom refused, or tells Jack he did, claiming that had he accepted the gun he would have shot not the dog but their father, who had taken him out of school at 16, forcing him to work on the doomed farm; and how Michael then blew the dog's brains out from close range, dug the grave together with his young son and finally went off to wash his hands while Tom heaped earth on the animal.

Jack is excluded. Jack lost the loyalty of the dog to his brother and now he misses its death. He hasn't even said goodbye. All he hears is the shot, but that comes through 'clearly enough, like something hitting his own skull'. Jack suffers, but without acting, without even making an effort to act. He would never have thought of setting the family free from the dying dog in this way or indeed of freeing the animal from its agony. Unlike Tom, Jack would never contemplate hurting his father to free himself from the farm and its now inevitable failure.

This incident, which neatly captures the positions of the three men in relation to each other and the world, is somewhat overshadowed by the melodramatic frame in which Swift sets his novel. The opening pages give us an older Jack gazing from a window through heavy rain at a seaside view, a shotgun on the bed beside him. His thoughts are of the mad cow cull, 9/11, the war on terror and the whereabouts of a certain Ellie. Emotionally charged allusions to intolerable recent events warn us that Jack is probably about to shoot himself, or Ellie, or both. Swift won't let us know whether he does so for 350 pages. In the meantime he unpacks Jack's biography. Or rather: Jack, while waiting to kill himself, to kill Ellie, or both, recalls his past, all of it, right back to earliest childhood, in some detail and employing many clever delaying effects that keep us on the edge of our seats. Various hints in the dog scene, for example, tell us that this was not the last ugly drama from which Jack was to be excluded.

This isn't the first time Swift has given us a man who feels unable to assert himself. Thirty years ago the main character of his first novel, *The Sweet Shop Owner*, was a husband bossed into nullity by his oppressive wife and as a result rejected by his

Joanna Biggs
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beloved daughter. In *Ever After* (1992), the protagonist, Unwin, occupies an academic post he is not fit for, provided for him by his charismatic stepfather, his feelings of inadequacy compounded by the contempt of the academic community, who exclude him. His natural father shot himself when Unwin was eight – another drama from which the main character is excluded while also being left to deal with the aftermath. In *Waterland* (1983), Tom Crick lives in the shadow of a complex cluster of dramatic events that leaves him with an obsession for explaining the unsatisfactory present by constant reference to the past, something that animates the idiosyncratic history lessons he gives.

Childlessness is a constant theme, a state that compounds a sense of inadequacy with exclusion from the ongoing process of history: Crick, whose wife can't have children after an early abortion, spends his life teaching other people's children but risks exclusion even from this surrogate fatherhood since history is no longer appreciated as a school subject; he is obsolete. Unwin opens *Ever After* with the warning: 'These are ... the words of a dead man.' Who is more excluded from the living than the dead? The whole of *Tomorrow* (2007) is a wife's monologue preparatory to a confession to her twin children that they were conceived by artificial insemination and that their father is not their natural father, something that, as she sees it, is a deep flaw in their otherwise happy lives. Now, in *Wish You Were Here*, Jack and Ellie – for she is his lifelong partner and wife – are again childless, though for a different reason. Jack feels Ellie has manipulated him, denied him the initiative; he feels he is always left to pick up the pieces of other people's more intense lives; he feels excluded.

In short, Swift has spent his whole writing career – it is hardly unusual – digging around the same distressed psychology, seeking to understand, express and dramatise a certain knot of negative emotions, a particular behaviour pattern. Freedom is always an issue. To act would be to be free. In the short story 'Learning to Swim' (1982), a fearful but proud young boy pushes away from his parents into the water and a terrifying life that is nevertheless 'all his own'. In the main, however, the gesture of cutting loose is fatally associated with disappearance and in some cases death. Even the positive note struck at the end of *Last Orders* confirms the equation of death with freedom: the friends scattering Jack Dodds's ashes hold 'their hands out cupped and tight like they've each got little birds to set free'.

Wish You Were Here offers three examples of people making a break for freedom. Ellie grew up on the farm neighbouring Jack's. When she was 16 her mother walked out with a 'mystery man' and was never heard of again. Only after the mother and her third husband are dead will Ellie receive a letter informing her that she has inherited a caravan park on the Isle of Wight.

In the early hours of his 18th birthday, a few months after Michael shoots the dog, Tom slips out of the farmhouse to join the army. He will never be in touch again and Jack, beyond writing three brief letters, will never do anything to contact him. The possibility of emails or social networks is never mentioned. There are no half measures in Swift's world: when someone goes, they go. Inevitably, this sudden and total absence has a profound effect on those left behind; they feel at once more isolated in their small, enclosed world and more afraid of what escape might entail. Ellie has suffered all her life from her mother's departure; Jack suffers Tom's silent absence. And how can Jack and Ellie ever break free now, when to do so would mean depriving their respective fathers of all remaining company and support? Escape is full of risks and always attended by guilt. Whenever he is in any way exposed to public view, Jack feels cripplingly guilty; he is obsessed by a need to efface himself. To act, for Jack, is to give offence; freedom is an imperative, but to seize it would be unspeakably cruel.

The third and most dramatic escape occurs when, once again, Jack hears a shot ring out: on the night after Remembrance Sunday, the first on which Tom is absent, Michael has left the house, gone to sit down under the farm's big oak tree and blown his brains out. Freedom, death and cruelty are superimposed. Excluded, Jack picks up the pieces. He feels guilty. He should have done something to prevent this.

Remembrance Sundays are important. Although Swift is frequently described as writing about 'ordinary', non-intellectual, non-charismatic characters (butchers, sweet shop owners, farmers), perhaps because these would seem to be people who have not freed themselves from their destiny (in this regard there is much that is Hardy-like in Swift's writing), and although he often tells his stories from their apparently 'humble' point of view, his novels are determinedly, even relentlessly 'literary': foreshadowing events, clever parallels, symbols and meaningful names abound. They abound, in fact, to the point of suffocation, as if Swift were re-creating the mental prison in which his characters are trapped.

For Jack Luxton, Remembrance Sunday is part of that prison. He grows up hearing from his mother the story of his two great-uncles, George and Fred Luxton, who died on the same day in the Battle of the Somme, one of the two – their commanding officer wasn't sure which – having performed an act of bravery for which, at random, George rather than Fred was posthumously awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal. Every November throughout Jack's childhood, Vera, 'like some diligent curator', polishes up

the medal so that it can be taken to the Remembrance Sunday service, where the Luxtons, with their two entries on the village war memorial, enjoy a certain celebrity. In a rare moment of conviviality afterwards, Michael will pull the medal from his pocket while standing neighbouring farmers a drink and say a few words about George's heroism.

This is the burden of expectation that hangs over Jack. But the younger Tom, who outdoes Jack in all manly pursuits, hunting and womanising in particular, but also in certain traditionally feminine activities (cooking and ironing), is the more likely hero. Swift goes to considerable lengths to draw parallels between the two sets of two brothers. Vera tells Jack that had his great-uncles survived the Somme, George would surely have broken his medal in two and shared it with Fred. When Jack and Tom go hunting, Tom shoots two pigeons to Jack's none, but gives one to Jack as they return home to protect him from their father's scorn. In return he expects Jack to cover for him when he escapes the farm for the army.

One can only admire the patience and resourcefulness with which Swift constructs all his interconnections (the frequent parallel between culled cattle and slaughtered soldiers is another), but the narration is more effective when straightforward. Even the scene where the dog is shot is weakened to the extent that the reader feels it has been worked hard to fit into a pattern. After the dog is shot, Tom will remove the filthy blanket from its basket, wash it and fold it, and the blanket will later appear on the father's bed the night he shoots himself – needless to say, with the Distinguished Conduct Medal in his pocket. Then, of course, Jack will remove the medal and make sure to have it in his pocket on a later dramatic occasion.

Still, the relationships between the main characters are convincing, and they are the core of the story. Brought together very young by the simple fact of being neighbours, Jack and Ellie find it hard to feel that they consciously chose each other. It's 'as if they'd been born together'. After the disappearance of Ellie's mother and the death of Jack's, the two widowers, each of whom needs his child to work his farm, allow the teenage couple a furtive sexual freedom, but only so as not to concede the real freedom of leaving to set up house together. Perhaps Ellie would break out with Jack, if Jack showed enough initiative or cruelty towards his father to grasp his freedom. He doesn't. The two become marooned in an adolescence prolonged into their late twenties, each the salvation and the jailer of the other.

After Michael kills himself and Ellie's father dies of cancer, the couple are hopelessly tied up in debt. At this point Ellie produces a now six-month-old letter announcing the inheritance of the caravan park. Hence, when Jack sells the farm and moves to the coast, it is at Ellie's bidding: part of a manipulative strategy, he feels, to persuade him to start a family with her. Having failed to take the initiative, Jack refuses to father a child.

Caravans fit the pattern. A home, but mobile and temporary, the caravan offers a compromise between domestic imprisonment and unconditional freedom. Jack remembers with fondness the two brief caravan holidays he enjoyed in his early teens with his mother and younger brother. It was on one of these that, with great effort, he wrote a postcard to Ellie: 'Wish you were here.' The title of the book recalls the ambiguous pleasure of desiring someone's presence while being happily away from them, of simultaneously having and not having a relationship. Again and again we are told that Jack feels one thing and its opposite too. Such mental states are hard to handle. 'Death ... was a kind of shelter' is one of Jack's more dangerous apprehensions.

Having lost his 'birthright', the farm, Jack becomes a herder of caravans; he thinks of them as cattle. He is protective of them. He 'milks' them. He feels guilty when he leaves them. And he protects the holidaymakers; when they get drunk and argue, he calms them down. Protection and mediation are the two actions possible for a man like Jack, who remembers with unhealthy intensity rocking his younger brother's cradle. In running the caravan park he has brought together routine and evasion, found a role in the world that doesn't leave him feeling trapped or guilty. Once a year Ellie drags him off for a holiday of their own in St Lucia. Jack learns to wear brightly coloured shirts; he is in danger of enjoying life. Then news arrives that Tom has been killed in Iraq. There will be the harrowing business of recovering and burying the body. Inevitably, the past comes back; old tensions surface. Above all Jack senses that Ellie, now in her late thirties, will use this liberation from the last member of his family to insist on starting a family of her own. The relationship cracks. All too soon the last remaining Luxton will be in the bedroom with a loaded shotgun. True to pattern, the house, once a lighthouse, is called The Lookout. 'And it was lookout time now all right,' Jack, or Swift, tells us.

Perhaps halfway through *Wish You Were Here* I wondered whether Swift was dressing a fine story in the wrong clothes. It is not only the obtrusive patterning of imagery and the loud mechanics of melodrama; there is also Jack's remorseless lucubration. Here is a man of no special education, so much so that he is unfamiliar with the word 'hypocrisy', whose recall of events nevertheless involves, at every point, highly verbal and nicely nuanced distinctions of behaviour and motivation. About the farm itself and the deep nature of his attachment to it, we hear little and feel less. There is nothing of the intimacy with cattle that emerges from Nell Leyshon's fine play *The Farm*, nothing

of the engagement with land and with labour on the land that so wonderfully comes through in Gerbrand Bakker's novel *The Twin*. And though Swift has a great descriptive talent, we never get that extraordinary, Hardy-esque placing of figure in landscape. It is as if he were interested in the farm only insofar as it represents tradition and unrelenting routine and hence constitutes a setting in which to place a man who is to be torn between loyalty and the fear that he has been imposed on and is missing life. Even the introductory description of the farm immediately shifts to concerns with subjugation and courage:

It was deep, steep, difficult but good-looking land, with small patchy fields that funnelled or bulged down to the woods in the valley. They had one field up on the ridge where they grew occasional wheat and autumn feed, otherwise it was down to grass and like almost every farm for miles around: sheep or dairy, and they'd always been dairy – beef calves for sale, and dairy. It was hard work for the softest, mildest thing in the world. It was all about turning the land into good white gallons, as many as possible. And it was all about men being slaves to the female of the species, so Michael Luxton had liked to say, with a sideways crack of his face, when Vera had still been around, especially in her hearing. They were all bloody milksops really.

The passage is excellent, but rare. Far more often – and this is what stretches the novel to 350 pages – we have Jack's anxiously intricate analyses of his own and others' behaviour. Here he is at 13 writing the famous postcard to Ellie from the caravan:

When he sat down at the tiny pale-yellow Formica-topped table in the caravan and wrote his postcard to Ellie, it was with a mixture of honesty and guilt. Yes he really did wish she was there. But if he really wished that, how could he be so happy in the first place? Wishing she was there was like admitting he was happy without her. It was like saying he was writing this postcard because he'd betrayed her.

Avowedly 'poor with words', Jack is constantly reflecting on language. Here he is on the phone discussing the 'repatriation' of the coffin:

Major Richards had explained that Jack and Mrs Luxton would be sent further, full details of the ceremony. And of course a formal invitation. To Jack, the word 'invitation' didn't seem like a word that went with the army, though in this case it didn't seem like the right word anyway. Major Richards had said that meanwhile he'd continue to 'liaise' (which seemed a real army word) by phone and even, if convenient, by a further visit and that Jack shouldn't hesitate if there was anything he wished to ask.

After Major Richards visits the house, Ellie leaves Jack in the living room to go and make tea:

He heard the gush of water in the kitchen. It would have been a good inducement and a good moment to shed a few more tears while Ellie wasn't looking. And an opportunity – if that's how it was – for Ellie to do a bit of private gushing herself. But he didn't think so. He only imagined how her hand might be grasping the tap a bit more tightly and for longer than was necessary.

Jack, who doesn't know 'hypocrisy', casually deploys 'inducement'. He plays with the word 'gushing'. He does the novelist's – or perhaps film director's – work of imagining Ellie's hand on the tap. And he is supposedly recalling all this in an aberrant state, contemplating suicide with a gun beside him. During one highly charged argument, Ellie accuses Jack of being responsible for his father's death, and we have: 'He hadn't expected that. He wasn't sure if it further complicated or only clarified the situation. If it was even the nub of the matter.' 'Complicated or only clarified'. It seems Jack's poverty of language only applies when he has to communicate with others: his internal prevarications weave a web of fine distinctions that distance him from tough decisions. Since this is a very special, highly controlled and verbal mindset, you would expect the voice to change significantly when Ellie, an entirely different kind of person, takes over the narrative. It does, a little, but not much. Here are Ellie's thoughts on whether to cry over Tom:

So when that letter had arrived ... saying, with deepest regret, that Tom was dead, Ellie had felt her hopes fly up once again. Though she hadn't shown it. It wasn't so difficult to disguise the feelings she'd always disguised. On the other hand, she wasn't going to disguise them now to the extent of shedding false tears.

As she hurries to meet Jack on one dramatic occasion we have: 'Haste, in his case, would have been quite inappropriate, though so too would have been lateness, or any hint of evasion.'

When the dead Tom takes over the story for a single short section two-thirds of the way through, his contribution simply confirms everything we already know about him: he remembers the same experiences, holidays, girlfriends and letters that Jack has mentioned. Conveniently, this section also gives Swift a chance to describe getting blown up in an armoured vehicle as a strangely dreamy, even positive experience, and, again, one that fits with what we already know: 'He could think about being in a caravan, a caravan with just Jack and Mum ... But he was lying in Barton Field more or less where Luke had been shot and had known all along it was coming.'

Most curious of all, towards the end of the novel, Swift inserts a long section from the point of view of the wife of the family that bought the Luxtons' farm when Jack sold up. Unaware of old Luxton's suicide, she describes her spooky feelings around the oak tree. She also talks about her husband's affair and her sense that he has used the purchase of the farm to send her off for the summer and exclude her from his real life. Aside from making us wait a little longer for the closing melodrama and suggesting that the same behaviour patterns can be found everywhere, it isn't at all clear what this section adds to the book.

Jack is constantly in two minds. Perhaps it's Swift's intention to create the same ambivalence in the reader; at times, however great my attachment to plot, the literary web he weaves was so oppressive that I was tempted, like Jack, to abandon ship. But then I would have missed the fine account of the repatriation of the body, to mention but one of Swift's undoubted achievements, just as Jack will miss so much if he really does blow his head off.

Does Swift's writing habit have a similar function to Jack's interminable lucubration? Could it be that he can only write about his own mindset if he imagines it in these 'ordinary' folk, people as different from himself as possible, even at the risk of the story's not seeming entirely authentic? But perhaps stories are safer, more protective, when they don't feel entirely authentic. Did anyone, after all, ever really believe the plot of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*? There is so much that Hardy and Swift have in common: the humble, vulnerable characters whose parents die young, or thrust their children too early from the nest; the pleasure in rootedness and the yearning for escape; the submission to an oppressive destiny that gets mixed up with social inequality and dense literary patterning; the apprehension that any decisive initiative will end in catastrophe; the frequently expressed idea that only death will solve the dilemma, when, as Hardy has the uneducated Tess so beautifully put it, we shall all at last be 'grassed down and forgotten'.

Forced to take a break in my reading when yet another connection clanged (this time a 'wind-hurled seagull' is a 'whizzing missile' so that Jack's seaside drama can link with Tom's Iraq destiny), I found myself wondering whether 'only connect', that sacred literary imperative, isn't merely a product of neurosis, a desire to throw up a barrier between ourselves and reality and to make awfulness reassuring by giving it form. 'I don't care what you call it,' Crick says in *Waterland*, 'explaining, evading the facts, making up meanings, taking a larger view, putting things into perspective, dodging the here and now, education, history, fairy tales – it helps to eliminate fear.' If Crick is right, there are perhaps two ways a writer can deal successfully with the patterning habit: expose it, laugh at it, so drawing pathos from our need for it; or create the pattern so subtly and seductively that the reader is not aware of being manipulated. To fall between these two stools is fatal.

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Letters

Vol. 33 No. 13 · 30 June 2011

Tim Parks criticises Graham Swift for letting characters in his new novel, *Wish You Were Here*, use words such as 'inducement', even though they are meant to be 'poor with words' (LRB, 2 June). Parks goes on to wonder whether Swift 'can only write about his own mindset if he imagines it in these "ordinary" folk, people as different from himself as possible, even at the risk of the story's not seeming entirely authentic?' This could be a useful guess about Swift's personal pathology, but I'm not sure it supplies us with a good rule for how novelists should treat their 'ordinary' characters. Swift would hardly be alone in giving his characters inner monologues they would find difficult to express in reality. Reading Philip Hensher's *The Northern Clemency* recently, I've been struck by the highly sophisticated thoughts of its children, housewives and suburban adulterers, many of these thoughts couched in language that the narrator himself might use. The same could be said of Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom*, a saga of provincial family angst that has plenty in common with *The Northern Clemency*.

To allow yourself a wider vocabulary than your characters, even as you grant the reader access to their interior lives, is not to disrespect their authenticity; it is simply to acknowledge a complexity of thought that outstrips the character's eloquence. We all have notions and feelings that we can't express. Part of what a good novelist does is to bring these to the surface and give form to what remains outside consciousness for the vast majority of people.

Dai George

Harrow, Middlesex

Vol. 33 No. 15 · 28 July 2011

In a review of Graham Swift's *Wish You Were Here* I suggested there was a discrepancy between Swift's description of his main character, Jack, as 'poor with words' and the man's

constant and sometimes highly nuanced internal monologue (*LRB*, 2 June). Dai George rebukes me, claiming that 'part of what a good novelist does' is to 'bring to the surface' thoughts the character entertains but cannot express (*Letters*, 30 June). The question is a fascinating one. Is thought that is expressed in words in an interior monologue the same as thought which finds no words and perhaps doesn't look for them or want them? Can certain ideas and forms of lucubration be entertained at all without words? If they can, is there a way of evoking them in a novel without confusing, as I believe Swift does, the articulate mind suffering from the pressure of an articulate language-driven monologue (Bernhard's characters, Beckett's) and the equally complex figure whose mental life is perhaps largely free from language. In his recent collection of short stories, *The Empty Family*, Colm Tóibín lovingly evokes the lives of Pakistani immigrants in Barcelona, using close description of movement and body language, dialogue and narrative detail to suggest a rich inner life without ever supposing that this has become an internal monologue. D.H. Lawrence was a master of such suggestion. The temptation for the novelist, who lives so much in language, is to imagine that all thought is expressed in words, words like his or her own, and indeed that word-driven consciousness is somehow superior. Perhaps the real achievement when evoking the inner life of a character who thinks of himself as 'poor with words' would be to suggest how rich he is without them.

Tim Parks

Milan

Vol. 33 No. 16 · 25 August 2011

Tim Parks writes about the discrepancy in novels between the way a character is described and the way his interior monologue sounds (*Letters*, 28 July). I've always been puzzled by how someone as idle and ill-informed as Bertie Wooster is able, as ostensible narrator, to deliver, in subtle and nuanced prose, novels as perfectly and painstakingly constructed as, for example, *The Code of the Woosters*. I don't know whether one can call up at Colindale, for the purpose of comparison, the copy of *Milady's Boudoir* in which Bertie's only piece of journalism, 'What the Well-Dressed Young Man Is Wearing', was published. I suppose the readiest explanation is that Jeeves did Bertie's writing, as so much else, for him.

Joe Kerrigan

Huddersfield

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