

*MIDDLE-AGE*

*A.W. METCALFE*  
*SCHOOL OF SOCIOLOGY,*  
*UNIVERSITY OF NEW SOUTH WALES*

Andrew Metcalfe teaches in the School of Sociology at the University of New South Wales. He is author, with Ann Game, of *Passionate Sociology* (Sage: London: 1996) and the forthcoming *Doing Nothing and Other Ways of Being*.

*MIDDLE-AGE*

When I open my wallet  
to show my papers  
pay money  
or check the time of a train  
I look at your face.

The flower's pollen  
is older than the mountains  
Aravis is young  
as mountains go.

The flower's ovules  
will be seeding still  
when Aravis then aged  
is no more than a hill.

The flower in the heart's  
wallet, the force  
of what lives us  
outliving the mountain.

And our faces, my heart, brief as photos.  
(John Berger<sup>1</sup>)

*In the Middle*

Though children aren't inclined to interpret them, classic games like hide-and-seek and tag are always metaphors for important processes and desires in life. My early games of tag were breathlessly important to me. Whether or not I ran fast, I ran frantically, desperate to avoid being caught in the middle. The dread wasn't reasonable, of course, because I'd survived capture many times and must have known that nothing would 'really' happen to me. Nevertheless, at the moment of launching myself across the playing field, the prospect of being caught in the middle was unthinkably awful. If it was unthinkable, there was no *I* to think it, and perhaps what was dreadfully thrilling was this proximity to the collapse of self. When I reflected on my life, I often thought of the course marked out by different versions of the game of tag, of the school tests and awkward social occasions that had yet to be passed. Growing up was the process of eluding capture and moving toward the state of being that we

called bar or home, and grown-ups were those who'd reached home by the time the games ended, never again having to expose themselves to such trials.

So, for as long as I can remember, I've waited to feel grown-up. I imagined arriving at the end of a quest for degrees, publications, houses, a name, and imagined finding there self-possession and freedom from the excruciating awkwardness of the *growing up* that was associated with childhood. But I've never felt I got there. University lecturers had seemed so mature and knowledgeable, and I'd become a university lecturer, but I'd not left behind the early childhood games. There was always a new game of tag, another chimerical home, more frantic lunging.

In the meantime, to my surprise, I've become middle-aged. In saying this, I'm trying to return the medium of interbeing to middle-age, shifting the term from a demographic and marketing to an experiential domain, using it in relation to a way of being that is not, in principle, about birth date. Most commentators talk of middle-age as a distinct chronological stage that forces us to farewell and mourn the loss of our childhood and youth. In my sense, however, middle-age is more likely a celebration of a rediscovery of the childhood we ran from in earlier stages of our 'adult' lives and careers. Whereas demographers and marketing departments identify discrete stages and categories, I'm interested in middle-age because it is a relation *between* age categories.

In Charlotte Zolotow's *I Like to be Little*, a girl tells her mother all the good things about being little. Finally, the mother says, 'I know something about being grown-up that makes all those things happen again'. Looking into her daughter's eyes, she explains 'When you're grown up, you can be the mother of a little girl like you'. The girl smiles and counters 'at night, after you kiss me and tuck me in, I can lie in bed and think of growing up to be like you. When you're little you know you'll grow up. Grown-ups already *are*. I like to know I'll grow up someday. But right now I like being little'.<sup>ii</sup> When you look *into* or *through* someone's eyes, the destitution of their face, where or what or who are 'you' and 'they'? Although Zolotow uses 'being little' and 'being grown-up' as distinct categories, such independence cannot adequately apprehend the fluidity of the relation. Grown-up slips *into* mother and mother *into* being little again; little slips *into* child and *into* (not yet being) grown-up.

Contrary to the conventional usage, which assumes that someone *is* a parent, and that the parent directs certain attitudes (e.g. care, nurturance, authority) to the one who *is* the child, 'parent' is a pole in a relation not always occupied by the progenitor. The offspring may be experienced as the progenitor's parent, or, when the relation is most alive, identifications with parent or child may be suspended, the parent and child present only as shadows of erstwhile identifications. Parent and child are not independent terms but shorthand ways of signifying a relationship *between* terms. If people *in* these relationships are not parents or children, not grown-ups or little, but in-between parent and child, grown-up and little, then the challenge is to conceive of the middle as the substantial flesh of life.

There are, nevertheless, asymmetries to this flow. Having only been grown-up in reverie, the little girl imagines that grown-ups are immaculate and omnipotent: grown-ups just *are*, she says. But the mother knows no such independence. Insisting that being a parent makes being little happen again, she implies that it is only people who haven't grown-up who fantasise it as a decisive departure from childhood: anyone who thinks they're grown-up isn't. Assigning the term 'grown-up' to this fantasy location, I'll reserve 'middle-age' for the playful non-position of the mother's life.

Experientially, middle-age isn't a stable condition that lasts for years or decades. It comes in moments of epiphany that crystallise from and dissolve back into the magma of existence, characterised by a way of being that is held in a particularly *open* relation to childhood, and old age, to birth, and death. Instead of being a span in linear time and causal history, middle-age brings a feeling for the eternity that holds past, present and future together but also exceeds any particular pasts, presents or futures. In my case middle-age has mainly come with parenthood, but there are countless ways to the experience, and many people come to its epiphanies much more easily than I have.

Whereas the western fantasy of growing up relies on metaphors of arrival, departure and distance, middle-age loses its essential liminality if presented as a stage, much less humanity's main stage. Being grown-up relies on the denial of an ongoing attachment to the momentous condition of childhood from which the grown-up feels excluded, but middle-age, having neither discrete content nor particular place, is the living bridge that both separates and connects childhood and old age. Instead of fantasising self-possession as a properly adult independence, derived from owning the self and therefore being beholden to no one,

middle-age is an uncannily possessed condition, haunted and inspired by voices that seem to come from within but do not quite seem ours. It's a condition that knows the world not through the grip of apprehension but through the touching or compassionate hand: it connects us to others who are old or young but doesn't let us speak in place of them. Rather than insisting on oneness, distinction and autonomy, it emphasises relationality, nothingness and the in-between.

The western 'mid-life crisis', then, is misnamed: it is a crisis (cross-roads) of growing-up that occurs when people reconsider their driving desire to get somewhere. For many it is not caused by but leads to middle-age. Only when you have let go of your attachment to getting somewhere, only when you've found or created yourself in the non-stage of middle-age, can you accept your childlikeness, without clinging to it. Gaston Bachelard insists that '*Childhood lasts all through life*. It returns to animate broad sections of adult life', but he also shrewdly notes that the role of the permanent child is usually only reintegrated in 'the last half of life when one goes back down the hill'.<sup>iii</sup>

In middle-age, I am not myself young or old, but these are conditions with which I'm vitally connected. I am not myself an independent agent in history, but I can carry and be carried by the tides and waves of history and generations. In middle-age I don't feel that I own my self, but nevertheless my self *is* possessed: I feel occupied, consumed, haunted, inspired by others. I look at a child in a park, at eyes filled with tears, at a school room, and, spellbound, see there my children, my childhood, my parents' childhood; I look in the mirror, at a gesture of the hand, at a photograph, and swoon at the sight of my parents, my death, my children's death. I pick up an old teddy bear, I hear a distinctive phrase, I hold someone's hand as they sleep so perfect and still in their sickbed, and am overwhelmed by my parents as children, my children as parents, my parents and children watching over me. Reading a book with my child, I dissolve into his world and spy on my own, gaining sudden glimpses of my own childhood, as if I were simultaneously seeing what my parents saw of me and what I saw, but hadn't seen before, as if in this limpid moment I could understand my parents, my child and my childhood, as if we were held, deliriously, ecstatically, spinning each other around, in the same moment, as if my child were muse and teacher who had casually given me my parents and my life as his gift, as if my child were my parent and my parents my children.

The mystic limpidity of this way of knowing is crucial. Staggering in its obviousness, the knowledge comes in unbidden flashes; it is not hard-won, deriving from an act of will or thinking ego, but comes from a relaxation of will, a receptive selflessness:

Man is a thinking reed but his great works are done when he is not calculating and thinking. 'Childlikeness' has to be restored with long years of training in the art of self-forgetfulness. When this is attained, man thinks yet he does not think. He thinks like the showers coming down from the sky; he thinks like the waves rolling on the ocean; he thinks like the stars illuminating the nightly heavens; he thinks like the green foliage shooting forth in the relaxing spring breeze. Indeed, he is the showers, the ocean, the stars, the foliage.<sup>iv</sup>

Despite intellectually knowing my parents' failings and idiosyncrasies, for example, it is only in middle-age, through my relation with my children, that I have been open enough to sympathetically experience my childhood from their perspective, and therefore to intuit how they experienced our relation. It's a shock to realise that they must have felt as incomplete and awed as I do as a parent! And this altered relation with my parents is crucial to whatever compassionate ability I have to *be* with my children, for the relation between parent and child is necessarily a reliving and reworking of the former's relation to *their* parents. In the parent-child relation, parents aren't the older but the middle generation.

Self and other, inside and outside, memories and premonitions, past and present and future: in middle-age these now exist in topsy-turvy reversibility that rends the heart and self and makes it impossible to mark out proper boundaries and property rights. I feel least alive when earnestly trying to make my own mark, establish my independence or define my position; I feel most vital and most like *me* when I'm least identified with my self, in and through the space *in-between* my self and other. This isn't an unusual or peak experience, but an ordinary experience of openness. Indeed, the psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott argued that psychological health could be defined as this ability to accurately enter the thoughts, feelings, fears and hopes of others and to allow others into us. Where the healthy person is creative and playful, the sick person is boring.<sup>v</sup>

The lightness of middle-age isn't, however, a weightlessness. As Milan Kundera observes in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, life becomes unbearably light when lived as a series of

unique and individual events, without a sense of eternity and repetition.<sup>vi</sup> It is ungrounded, unreal, insignificant. Middle-age comes between Kundera's opposition of lightness and weight, because, like someone floating on water, the person in middle-age feels lightness *and* gravity. The realisation that life is not borne by oneself alone brings a lightness of self and of spirit, but the awareness of bearing the carriage of others' lives gives a form of being that is soulfully attuned to the ground of eternal repetition. Questions of purpose and desire that once seemed urgent become insubstantial, but the need for grateful attention to the world ensures there is no absurdity or arbitrariness, no insignificance or carelessness.

The experience of middle-age has taught me about this space and time in-between the various oppositions and categories. This is the space and time that binds as it separates these positions. Whereas religious practices associated with muses, reincarnation, the dreaming and ancestor worship once seemed foreign to me, to be studied with the intellect and not lived through the body, they have announced themselves from the middle of my own life, first in my domestic and then in my anthropological life. I haven't suffered a complete conversion, or reached a new stage, for it feels like now I'm able to say what I've always known, even though I didn't know what I knew. Middle-age has taught me that ordinary life is haunted, that enchantment operates as the basic process of all social life. Much of ordinary life is spent in conditions of inspiration, wonder, enthusiasm and passion, which are reminders of our inveterate passivity.

\* \* \*

The first thing I'm aware of is the disturbed groan that comes from my own mouth. *Aah*. Only then do I become aware of what's happened a moment earlier. There's been a child's scream in the night. *I'm awake, I'm coming*. I tell myself this – or maybe I say it aloud – before I'm really awake, before I've collected my self and my thoughts. Collecting myself around the always prior claims of guilt and propriety, my first response often is to deny ever being asleep. Sitting up, eyes wide but unfocused, bed-covers thrown off, I have to compensate with this other sort of cover up. *I'm awake, I'm coming* must come before *Who am I?*, must come before the acknowledgment *I must have been asleep*, must come before *Where am I going? Who called me?* These thoughts are unutterably shameful. Before I'm aware of who I am, I'm already

aware of the lack – the thing I should have heard, the thing I’m fairly but not completely sure I don’t know. I am a sentry who was asleep at the post and therefore not a sentry. *I am sleep.* This is the nature of origins – I am hailed, interpellated, while asleep. (Unless *that* – the being asleep – was the dream.)

*Where am I?* The atmosphere is thick and undifferentiated, before the clarification of thin air or the crystallisation of space. I bump, into what I don’t know. Sometimes my limbs feel numb, unable to move until they resolve which part they are meant to play in locomotion. Sometimes it takes me a few moments to work out which house I’m in, if this is indeed a house. Where do I live? Where’s the gondola I was in? Which side of the bed have I been sleeping on? At some stage I will reach for the switch and let light produce a separation(connection) between here and there, me and the world.

*What time is it?* Given the reversible temporality of such awakenings, where the later comes first, where my keenest interest is in what I haven’t just been aware of, I’m equally unsure of what time I am. I feel an urge to somehow resolve the blackness of night into a stable Greenwich-based time. The microwave oven in the kitchen has an illuminated digital clock, and during midnight emergencies I’m drawn to its comforting certainty. It apparently performs its sentinel duties more reliably than I do, guarding the sleeping guard.

When I turn on a light in my child’s room, I turn the nightmare into a tableau that obscures the claustrophobic and undifferentiated qualities he’s probably experiencing through nightmare. He looks so alone and small, hunched in the furthest corner of his bed, in the furthest corner of his room. His arms flail as he fights off forces in and all around him, but I habitually patronise his experience, sure as I am that he’s alone in his room. In some ways he mirrors the way I sat up, shocked, in my bed, a moment before. But in his dishevelled state, with his unseeing eyes and his wordless howling, his face misshapen, his pyjamas awry, this child is beyond my reach. There’s a pane of autism that breaks my heart.

The child in the grip of a nightmare is a child possessed. As the demon rages through his body, he convulses, screams, lashes out, abuses, using tones and words unused before. Nothing, apparently, will console him: he struggles to escape the hug that would usually comfort him; he bites the hand that would stroke his head; he scorns the words of comfort and reassurance; to promises of safety and love he spits out claims of hate. Helplessly watching the writhing, no

longer sure if the child is awake or asleep, or what awake or asleep mean, or whether I am myself awake or asleep, in my own nightmare, I wonder if my child will ever return, if he has any inkling that nightmares end, if he has any of the techniques that adults use to reorganise their selves in times of collapse (can he pinch himself? can he tell himself to make the nightmare end? can he turn on the lights and settle his nerves? caught in the worst nightmares, can he even seek reassurance from loved ones? doesn't this presume the very situatedness and relational *embeddedness* that that he has lost?). The child's nightmare seems limitless: timeless, depthless, sideless, formless. Perhaps this midnight of the soul is what chaos is like. The familiar image of the oceanic is no match for this formlessness, for the oceanic remains contained, rocking cosily in its bed. Faced with these elemental forces that I can't control, I am a child terrified of the storm, or, more self-consciously, a child aware of his incompetent failure in a school test.

I pick up my child, though he struggles. He wants to be picked up and doesn't want to be picked up. I walk around the middle of night, trying to settle in a routine, going with desperate superstition through the repertoire of techniques that have worked in the past. I offer juice, fruit, a sweet, a book, a song, a look at the stars; should we walk, or sit, or stand?; would you like to be put down? would you like to go to bed?; did you have a nightmare? what scared you?; I try to pat him, to hug him, to reassure him. I'm trying to propitiate a strange God. If I get the ritual word perfect, it must work, I tell myself, but it doesn't. The child is the same but different. He's lost, I'm lost; we both flail without purchase. He's beyond me; it's beyond me.

As a modern parent, I sometimes reassure myself that this is the child's unconsciousness at work, that nightmares are projections of the inner onto the outer. But this is proposed as my own bedtime story. It domesticates and reclaims the full strangeness of the experience. It's more comforting to think of projection than to deal with the collapse of a distinction between inner and outer. The child's nightmare is also the parent's, and not only because it occurs in the haunted middle of the night, in the leery middle of sleep. At one level, the child's nightmare is the parent's encounter with the nightmare of the wild; at another, it is the parent's encounter with the nightmare of ghosts and doppelgangers.

The child in pain is horrifying because of the utterness of the situation. Sages celebrate the ability of children to live in the moment, but when the moment is shaken from its relation to other moments, when it's no longer filled with the feeling that it could end, this aliveness is

part of a ruthless temporality which denies young children the consoling hope that losses can be made good, that every horror will pass and every joy will return.<sup>vii</sup> Living, stranded, in this unheld moment, unable to witness his own distress by taking a position outside it, my son has no detachment from pain. He is not in pain: where he was, pain is. His body loses its organisation; his skin loses its colour and elasticity; his face crumples and twists. Instead of its normal unbearable openness, my son's face is distorted, as deeply etched, as dramatic, as a Kabuki mask. My attention is split between this timeless, motionless pain and the surrounding writhing confusion. He doesn't kick so much as convulse unpredictably, like a fly dying on the windowsill. I am horrified by the apparent immediacy of the action, by the loss of the mediating space between us. Either way, still or convulsed, he loses the ability to relate. His eyes, ears and face close off from encounter. It's as if my son had been stolen and replaced with a changeling. In turning from me, he's been taken from me, effaced. I hold him tight, with the fear and foolishness of superstition.

The temptation I feel is to try to counter the nightmare's grip with a grip of my own. I hold my child as tight as I can, truly as if our lives depended upon it, trying to pin down the flailing arms, to stop the shocks that shudder the body. I want to hold him so close that there is no room left for the difference of nightmares, so that he has no room to get lost in. This response is based on the propriety that it is the parent's task to stop the nightmare, to arrest its progress; it is based on the assumption that the strength of their love will overpower alterity, forcing it to release its grip, thereby rescuing the lost child. This response represents a tussle about who possesses the child. It allows the parent to hide from the fact that the child is not theirs, and not them, that the strangeness can't be squeezed out. In trying to master the nightmare, ostensibly on behalf of the child, but always also on behalf of my desire to be a God-like or masterful parent, who can make everything all right, who can redeem any situation, I deny my child's difference.

The problem with this response is that it is primarily aimed at dealing with the common parental nightmare of letting the child down and losing control. The parent's controlling arms meet the nightmare's flailing arms in battle, on the same ground. When caught in this response, I eventually become overwhelmed by frustration and fear because of my ineffectuality. I lose patience, I panic, and panic is itself a possession. I find myself – and this is the appropriately passive term, for it is only later that I realise what I've done – I find myself fighting with the child, answering his insults, trying to somehow rouse him from his condition, righteously

tempted to respond in kind to his hair pulling and hitting. In short, I respond as a child does to frustration, ignoring the lessons I give my son about mediating such responses. In doing so, I ignore my child and address the nightmare: my child at this stage has apparently become peripheral. I am too busy childishly holding on to my identity as the parent who can save, who is in control.

Most likely, of course, the nightmare won't be overpowered this way, no matter how strong my grip, and I will have legitimated the child's fears by engaging in the battle and may have prolonged and heightened the experience for the child by allowing the nightmare to become tangible, in the form of my own body. But even if the nightmare ends, it is me who has ended it and not the child; the child has learned nothing from the experience except their inadequacy in the face of both forms of possession. Whether or not the nightmare can be overpowered, I have shown my own fear to the child, reinforcing the impulse to deal with otherness through panic and attempts at control, reinforcing what might be the child's own feeling that they and the nightmare are identical. Perhaps most important, I have forced the child to try to accommodate my fears and needs first: the child has to put its experience of fear and disorganisation aside to protect me from *my* nightmare, *my* fear.

To avoid this situation, I must release my attachment to being grown-up and a proper parent, and focus on my responsibilities in the relation. My task is not to get a grip on the situation, to fix it on behalf of the child, but to hold the child and let the child hold me, to allow us to carry each other, to be transitional objects for each other, to meet the child in a compassionate relation that recognises but doesn't get attached to my own childlikeness. This involves a relation that isn't at all like a grip. The holding relation doesn't attempt to pin down, to define; it waits; it is fearless and neither denies nor flinches; it is trustworthy. It attends to its own fears and through them it feels the fears of the child, but it doesn't engage with these fears. It neither denies nor gets attached. It trusts that in time the child will find or create the limit it offers, and the fearlessness and hope it exemplifies, and will be able to use this limit to find or create some form from the chaos of nightmare. It doesn't seek or expect to control this process, or understand how it occurs, or know where the child has been or what they have become. The parent cannot bring the child home, but I can provide a home when the child is able to use one.

This is the difference between holding and grasping, between holding and holding on, between middle-age and being grown-up.

## *Love*

The home ownership, parenthood, financial autonomy and career that often accompany demographic middle-age in Western countries are usually associated with being settled, solid, safe, self-assured, complacent. Experientially, however, middle-age is an unstable in-between condition of nothingness *and* fullness. It is a form of invisibility, destitution and itinerancy. Think, for example, of the wonderful feeling of walking hand in hand with a young child. To hold hands you must first release your grip on the self: to experience the fullness, you must empty being of all the distinctions that distance you from the relation and the moment. Hand in hand, who is comforting whom? Instead of holding the child or being held by the child, what is experienced is holding, without subject or object. I *am* holding. It is an experience of lightness and groundedness. It is the very stuff of religion's binding-back.

Two people holding hands do not need to specifically name their love because, as carriers who are carried, as the invisible angelic in-between, as the mediation through which different worlds connect, as relations rather than identities, they are themselves love: they are the space occupied when *in* love, they are the reversible middle that connects and separates. Experiences of middle-age are rapturous because they involve transports of love; middle-age is itself the very quick and body and breath and inspiration of love. For those moments when they're *in* middle-age, people need not aim at love, because middle-age is a form of love.

In this middle space, my relation to apprehension, heroism and will changes. I can touch and hold without clinging, grasping, arresting, aiming. This question of grip and its release is a major issue in the domain of archery, which provides apt metaphors for the difference:

'You must hold the drawn bowstring', answered the Master, 'like a little child holding the proffered finger. It grips it so firmly that one marvels at the strength of the tiny fist. And when it lets the finger go, there isn't the slightest jerk. Do you know why? Because a child doesn't think: I will now let go of the finger in order to grasp this other thing. Completely unself-consciously, without purpose, it turns from one to the other, and we would say that it was playing with the things, were it not equally true that the things are playing with the child . . . . The right art . . . is purposeless, aimless!

The more obstinately you try to learn how to shoot the arrow for the sake of hitting the goal, the less you will succeed in the one and the further the other will recede. What stands in your way is that you have a much too willful will. You think that what you do not do yourself does not happen'.<sup>viii</sup>

It is aimless middle-age love that brings children into the world. According to Winnicott, for example, a baby lives in a condition of primary unintegration, 'experiencing' a disparate array of feeling states unintegrated by a self.<sup>ix</sup> This dispersal is tolerable, even pleasurable, if the child is periodically brought together through the mother's care. By literally gathering her baby in her arms, by holding, feeding, bathing and rocking him, the mother provides the containment that allows him to feel *something*; by putting herself in-between his bits, and in-between him and the world, and by intuitively anticipating and responding to his desires, and thereby upholding his magical ability to realise the fantasy that he and the world are as he desires, the mother affords both a viable self and an inhabitable world to the child.

When the parent isn't there to bind the infant and relate it to the rest of the world, the young child is threatened with abandonment, disintegration or suffocation. Berger writes beautifully of such experiences as a five or six year old:

Every time I went to bed . . . the fear that one or both of my parents might die in the night touched the nape of my neck with its finger . . . . Yet since it was impossible to say 'You won't die in the night, will you?' . . . . I invented – like millions before me – the euphemism See you in the morning! To which either my father or mother who had come to turn out the light in my bedroom would reply, See you in the morning, John.

After the footsteps had died away, I would try for as long as possible not to lift my head from the pillow so that the last words spoken remained, trapped like a fish in a rock-pool at low tide, between my pillow and my ear. The implicit promise of the words was also a protection against the dark. The words promised that I would not (yet) be alone.<sup>x</sup>

This provision of the world operates in both directions, though, for the child gives birth to the parent; if grown-ups can hear, children bring them the news of the middle-aged's place in the

world. *So this is why I'm alive, this is what life is about, this is what I was like, this is where that experience becomes useful.*

I am holding my daughter:  
 For this the line of my shoulder  
 was made, the curve at the base of my neck.  
 (Barbara Brandt<sup>xi</sup>)

By being there for the parent, miraculously anticipating the parent's need for comfort in the middle of the night, magically accommodating the parents' desire for a better understanding of their own parents and own childhood, marvellously teaching parents just what they need to know, just before they knew they needed to know, children afford to the middle-aged the inspiration they need to feel within them the pulse and scope of life. When parents sing lullabies to their young children, or when they fuss over nursery fittings and toys and books, providing homes for their children (and parents), they are equally being provided with homes by their children. The hugs that the mother gives her child are returned: she hugs herself, makes herself safe, is given access to childhood pleasures and daydreams. She is the parent to her child, and that child is located outside *and* inside.

The mother, then, fulfils her role by aimlessly setting aside what 'she' knows, for she couldn't intuit her child's needs from a position of autonomy. The mother is the nothing whose holding of the child allows him to feel some integrity, some thingness. By connecting him to the world, she allows him to learn of his separation. His integration is not simply an emanation of a primal oneness, but is a complex relation with nothingness. The mother's nothingness becomes the benevolent matrix, the stuff of both the cosmos and the child's self. Archetypically, this stuff is air, and the aura, energy, atmosphere or environment we feel in a bedroom is living proof of an implicit relational order. Accordingly, when we're healthy, the air in our home is full of love, holding us like a mother, allowing us to be alone but not lonely, to be unintegrated yet safe. When we're unhealthy, the air may be a thick and suffocating force or we may rattle around our houses like peas in a bowl, unheld, unconnected, disintegrating, unable to find any purchase.

The separation anxieties that John Berger suffered are normally handled through the use of transitional objects. These objects are relational bridges, in-between me and not-me,

in-between subjective and objective, allowing people to feel that they're separate from their mother and the world *and also* connected to and at home in the world. The typical transitional objects of young children are teddy bears, blankets, string, imaginary friends, thumbs, but grown-up life remains reliant on relations with objects that are at once us and not-us. This remains the basis of the feeling of belonging in the world.

Solzhenitsyn's *The First Circle* gives a perceptive account of these transitional relations when describing the arrest of the high level U.S.S.R. diplomat, Innokenty Artemyevich Volodin.<sup>xii</sup> Taken to an M.G.B. detention centre, Innokenty is systematically disorientated, stripped of his power, status, clothes, hair, routines, privacy, identity and sleep. Nine times in 36 pages, guards order Innokenty to keep his hands behind his back. At one stage he tries to sleep by resting his head on his arms on a table, but a guard tells him it's forbidden to rest his head. When Innokenty is finally given a mattress, he is so touched and relieved that he regrets having thought so harshly of his guards up until then. With a pillow, mattress and blanket 'he now lacked nothing':

He was just about to drift off into that deep sleep once known as the arms of Morpheus, when the door opened with a crash and squint-eyes said:

'Take your arms out from under the blanket!'

'Take them out?' cried Innokenty, almost in tears. 'Why did you have to wake me up? It's hard enough for me to get to sleep.'

'Take your arms out,' repeated the warder, unmoved. 'Your arms must be outside the bedclothes.'

Innokenty did as he was told; but it proved to be no easy matter to fall asleep while keeping his arms above the blanket. It was a diabolical rule: a person's natural ingrained habit is to keep his arms covered when he sleeps, to hold them close to his body. For a long time Innokenty tossed restlessly as he adapted himself to yet another form of humiliation.<sup>xiii</sup>

Why is Innokenty humiliated by this rule? Presumably in part because he's forced to admit that his composure isn't the expression of an original integrity but relies on irrational and 'childish' ways. Presumably, in further part, because he's forced to admit his dependence: he cannot will sleep but must wait for it to cast its spell. In feeling abandoned, like a motherless

child, Innokenty is made to face the magical fantasy that underpins his normal sense of control.

But it is worth taking this question further. By insisting that the embarrassing moment of discomposure is aberrant, shame remains proud. It is a defensive manoeuvre, brought on as a way of reclaiming mastery as a natural birthright from which the humiliated person has only temporarily fallen. In contrast to humiliation, the nothingness of unintegration is a resource and a form of nourishment in which one can be dispersed and various because the environment is safe, cradling, and not insisting on clear identifications.

Pondering this, I wonder what shameless or apparently unprotected unintegration might be like. For Michel Serres, this nothingness is the primal condition underpinning our lives. Recalling that *arche* means origin, he describes the poor and homeless person as the Archangel, who disturbs us with the reminder that we all begin and end life in states of abject destitution: ‘they don’t say much, they reach out a hand, they disappear . . . and then suddenly re-appear on a street corner: they are phantoms but they are real, in the sense that they pierce through our illusory realities’.<sup>xiv</sup>

But it is easy to lose sight of the Archangel. The Biblical King Balaam, astride his donkey, intent on reaching his destination, was incapable of seeing the Angel barring his path. His donkey saw the Angel though, and three times refused to pass, for which he suffered three whippings. Only when the donkey threw its master could Balaam see (*Numbers 22*). Perhaps the sovereignty of grown-ups is itself a blindness, sometimes to the invisible. And perhaps only people themselves in an abandoned and open condition are able to see Serres’ Archangel, in moments of rapture and revelation, when, fallen, the scales fall from eyes no longer theirs. The experience may be a blessing of nothingness. In the (non-)condition of middle-age, when I too feel a bearer of life, I’ve momentarily had limpid glimpses of what Serres might mean by sacred destitution. I sometimes feel I’ve been brushed by the ethereal wings of the archangel of birth and death.

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I date my father’s final illness from Christmas seventeen months ago. After this he was never again ‘himself’. The usual commotion of young children and Christmas Day was occurring

outside, but I was surprised to find him sitting inside, alone, on his favourite chair, resting, almost asleep. He looked frail, almost infantile in bearing, and very tired; his eyes were haunted, ragged. Was that panic I felt in them? I was ashamed of feeling slightly annoyed, as if he weren't trying hard enough, as if I were terrified of this display of a weakness he couldn't control, as if I feared that *this* would finally be what brought about my growing up. I remember an airless, breathless claustrophobic feeling, as if I were trapped in a tent whose supporting pole had collapsed. *This* was undoubtedly a form of panic.

I remember visiting my father seven months later, after the craniotomy, after a nurse had rung to ask me to bring him more pyjamas. My father excused himself and went to the bathroom. He was there a long time. A long time . . . . (Should I call out?) . . . . *Are you all right? Can I help? . . . Are you sure? . . . (What's happening in there?) . . . . Are you sure there's nothing I can do?* When he finally emerged, his pyjamas were in disarray, and he thrust a bundle of clothes into my hand and asked me, urgently, quietly, to fix them for him. Don't tell the nurses, he said. He didn't say what the problem was, but I could guess, from the smell. He didn't use the word incontinence, then or later.

Nappy pads signified all the other forfeits of adulthood that my father suffered in hospital. When he lost his self-control and self-reliance, he lost the space needed to be a grown-up: he was tortured by the collapse of his sense of boundaries, of the separations of clock time, of a realm of privacy separated from the public domain. He needed help with feeding, dressing, washing, shaving and combing his hair, he couldn't move readily or independently, he couldn't control his finances, he lost contact with the world beyond the hospital. He was treated like a small child, and for most of the rest of his life, he struggled fiercely against the intolerable shamefulness of this condition. Anger, pettiness and embarrassment predominated during the early weeks of his radiotherapy, sometimes interspersed with times of fantastic hope, but gradually lapsing into hopelessness and an unquenchable desire for sleep. At the time his tiredness seemed a reaction to the radiotherapy, but lately I've realised how depressed he was, and how his moments of shame and panic were attempts to defend himself against the nothingness that he feared would be worse.

I don't want to be a burden to anyone, he said at first, fiercely. His family felt both spurned and unacknowledged, though still called upon. We visited him daily, but often he didn't or wouldn't wake for us, and often he sent us away after a short time. 'It's time you went', he'd

say, ‘go back to your family’, as if he resented us and our presence because they reminded him of what he had lost, as if he sought some pretence of mastery by pushing away the maternal holding that was inevitably going to be taken away.<sup>xv</sup> Often he’d fall asleep during visits, with a kind of belligerence. If we came at 4 p.m., having left work early, he angrily asked why we’d come in the middle of the night. If I tried to hold his hand, he’d say ‘Cut it out. I’m not that sick yet’. If we tried to help manoeuvre him around his ward, from the chair to his bed, or if we tried to carry out one of his urgent minor errands, he criticised us for our incompetence. When the physiotherapists told him he was doing well, he mocked them ‘Don’t give me that rubbish. I’m not a child, you silly girl’. When they encouraged him to exercise his paralysed muscles, he said ‘You do it for me’. When nurses urged him to spend part of each day out of bed, in a chair, he told them to leave him alone to sleep. When we told him of the optimistic pronouncements of the specialists, he said ‘What would they know?’ He sometimes said that the physiotherapists had it all wrong. Exercise wouldn’t help. Instead he’d simply wake up one morning and just feel the will and capacity to stand and walk again. Night was not only a balm, he fantasised it as a place of black miracle.

All day became night for my father, and I wonder what fear he had when going to sleep at night. Did he worry, as I did every night, that he might not waken? Just as likely, his fear was that he *would* awaken and find nothing had changed. But perhaps, most likely, he was so scared of wakefulness that sleep held no fear, only relief. It was best to *be* sleep. By *being* a black sun that swallows its grief and loss, so they didn’t have to be faced in the light of day, he kept his mourning hidden, cryptic. In this self-incorporation, my father was both consumer and consumed.<sup>xvi</sup>

\* \* \*

When he knew he wasn’t returning home, my father’s hope settled briefly on an alternative fantasy, of a rehabilitation hospital that might allow my mother to share his room and look after him. This would be some reinstatement of the home of their long marriage. Having lost most of his pride and shame, and most of his boundary battles, his depression had lightened, and when the rehabilitation hospital fantasy faded too, he said that all he really needed was ‘just to have a lifestyle’. This turned out to mean a routine, and this meant the guarantee of separations in space and time. ‘I just want a room with a bed and a chair and a nice window. I want to know where I’ll be at breakfast, and I want to be moved somewhere for the morning, and somewhere

for the afternoon, before going back to bed'. These routines and separations were sufficient to give him a home where he could live with safety and dignity. They allowed him to fill the room, to scatter his faculties, to appreciate and savour the in-between, to hold open a space between sleep.

Instead of a rehabilitation hospital, he was sent to a palliative care hospital for the terminally ill, and in the few months there he faded toward an unresistant transparency. The longest staying resident in a ward of six cancer sufferers, his only privacy came from the curtains that nurses occasionally drew around his bed. Over time he seemed to take on the quality of the curtains, a thin membrane just able to register, lightly, the mysterious movements of air. Front and back, inside and outside, and home and away lost their significance. Without boundaries or purposes to defend, with nothing to lose, he seemed to have nothing to fear. It wasn't that he was trapped defensively in hopelessness, but that he'd left hope behind.

Even though my father was now even less capable of a home, of a secret safe place separated from the world, he seemed to find a home in his destitution. Transit lounges have been a particular nightmare for me, but my father's ward occasionally gave me a vision of the transit lounge as a space of unutterable tenderness. Because he was safe, he didn't seem troubled by public displays of unintegration. Memory loss, incontinence, paralysis, dependence and his declining capacities were met with a wry lop-sided grin that became dear to the nurses and his family, whether it registered underlying dispositions or the paralysis of facial muscles.

Like any homeless person, his lack of storage capacity ensured that he travelled light. He couldn't hold onto memories, or keep track of time or social debts, obligations and assets, and as a result he let life flow through him, as if he'd become empty, as if he'd let go of the desire to be self-contained. His shameless destitution meant that he could accept love and care openly, allowing his helpers the blessing that comes from feeling love's unrestricted and unresented flow. I read Serres' *Angels* on the chair beside him. He and Serres were there to teach me how to understand each other's accounts of love and nothingness and my own epiphanic experiences of tenderness toward my parents and children. We didn't know where my father was, by this stage, for it didn't seem he was lost in thought, reverie, recollection or any place we recognised. Nevertheless 'he' had gone somewhere, had left us, and clearly he wasn't likely to come back.

Although my father's needs were enormous, they seemed simple now he had so little ego to defend, and they were so easily and miraculously met by the nurses that I noticed them less than before. He drifted in and out of sleep all day, but it was no longer depressive or defensive, and he'd come out of it as easily as opening his eyes, without needing to return or wake up. Sleep and wakefulness seemed separated only by the thickness of his eyelids. And when he opened his eyes, and found you beside him, he'd hold you tenderly in a warm crooked smile, whether or not he recognised you personally. And somehow, without talking, or with only a few whispered words, he let you know that he'd like you to hold his hand. There was no desperation in the grip. He just wanted to touch others. By now, the body that responded to his will, that was 'him', had been reduced to his face and right hand. His hand stayed close to his face, never venturing into the areas of his body that he'd vacated.

It's hard to talk in terms of my father making decisions in his last weeks. I can't imagine he had the reserves or self to do so. Nevertheless, he finally refused to open his mouth for food or medicine. He didn't protest, but didn't comply with the efforts of his carers. The form of being that had been him just switched off.

Throughout these months, when he was 'by himself', his face was still comforted by his hand. They slept together, his hand cradling his face, his face comforting his hand with its weight. This was all the home he needed. When he drifted into his final sleep, his hand was there to help him fall, and it stayed to nurse him to the end.

\* \* \*

*I heard a ringing. Can't be the alarm clock. The phone, it's the phone. Something's happened. I stumble from bed, not yet myself. But it's the weekend, isn't it? What time is it? I'm coming, I'm coming. I wonder if it's been ringing long. Light switch. Only 4.30 . . . . Hello . . . . Yes. It's me, speaking. (Oh, no. Oh, no. Oh, no. [So this is it. This is how it happens, this is what it sounds like. I've been waiting so long. How odd, how unreal. Why today, why now?]) What's she saying? What do I do? What does she want me to do? Who do I tell? Would they be awake? [Is this the end?]) What do I ask? Who am I? What time is it?)*

The nurse's voice holds but doesn't squeeze or push me. It's like an exoskeleton. It can wait. It's calm. It attends. It waits. There's no hurry, no panic. It protects me while I gradually

rebuild my vertebrate structure. It's the environment in which, after dissolution, I regrow a crystal structure.

*Is it all right if I, if we, come up and see him now?*

## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> John Berger, *And our faces, my heart, brief as photos* (London: Writers and Readers, 1984), p. 5.

<sup>ii</sup> Charlotte Zolotow and Erik Blegvad, *I Like to be Little* (New York: HarperCollins, 1987).

<sup>iii</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Reverie*, trans. by D. Russell (Boston: Beacon, 1971), pp. 20, 108.

<sup>iv</sup> D.T. Suzuki, 'Introduction', in *Zen in the Art of Archery* by Eugen Herrigel (New York: Vintage, 1989), pp. xiii-ix.

<sup>v</sup> D.W. Winnicott, *Holding and Interpretation* (New York: Grove, 1986).

<sup>vi</sup> Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, trans. by M.H. Heim (London: Faber and Faber, 1985).

<sup>vii</sup> John Berger and Jean Mohr, *A Fortunate Man* (London: Allen Lane, 1967), pp. 113-14.

<sup>viii</sup> Eugen Herrigel, *Zen in the Art of Archery*, trans. By R.F.C. Hull (New York: Vintage, 1989), pp. 30-1.

<sup>ix</sup> D.W. Winnicott, *The Maturation Processes and the Facilitating Environment* (London: Hogarth Press, 1965); *Playing and Reality* (London: Routledge, 1991).

<sup>x</sup> John Berger, *Keeping a Rendezvous* (New York: Pantheon, 1991), p. 46.

<sup>xi</sup> Barbara Brandt, *The Snow Queen Takes Lunch in the Station Café*, in B. Brandt, M. Heald and R. Leach, *Shorelines* (South Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press,

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1995), p. 18.

<sup>xii</sup> Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *The First Circle*, trans by M. Guybon (London: Fontana, 1970), pp. 630-666.

<sup>xiii</sup> Solzhenitsyn, pp. 664-5.

<sup>xiv</sup> Michel Serres, *Angels: A Modern Myth*, trans. by F. Cowper (Paris: Flammarion, 1995), pp. 17-20, ellipsis in original text.

<sup>xv</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Beyond the pleasure principle', in *A General Selection from the Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. by R. Rickman (New York: Anchor, 1957), pp. 144-8.

<sup>xvi</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun*, trans. by L.S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989).