Falling Memory

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Unlike most memories, I know exactly how this one was triggered. This doesn't mean I understand the intricacies involved in the complex cellular transactions that make remembrance possible. The way in which the past is stored in the incredible honeycomb of processes that is our brain, and how we retrieve from its labyrinths our pictures of all the time we've passed through, of every moment prior to this one, belongs to a language in which ordinary discourse is not fluent. I know nothing of the biochemistry involved in remembering. My knowledge of this particular memory's provenance extends no further than the shallows of self-consciousness. In plotting its genealogy – or at least the short stretch of its bloodline I can see – I am, therefore, only dealing with the face values of recall, not the underlying elements that shape their features into the familiar likenesses we recognize. Such obvious physiognomy reveals nothing about the genetics of memory, but it does cast light on the manner in which we unravel our histories into a series of fractional images, from whose threads we can weave up again at least some part of the fabric of what happened. Such re-weavings provide neither the tapestry of documentary nor the fabrication of imagination, but a tightly spun mix of both – a reminder that experience and interpretation are intimately conjoined and that what we take to be reality is conjured from their intimate entanglement. We are so entwined with the world that to think us capable of offering an account of it unmarked by the shadow of our presence is as odd a conceit as supposing fish could engineer a land-dweller's vision of the ocean.

As I've grown older, I've become fascinated by the way in which memory unobtrusively chips from some of the moments we've occupied a few razor-like fragments. Their edges are as naturally honed as flakes of flint. These splinters seem to leave such deep incisions on remembrance that they remain with us for as long as we are here, becoming so much a part of us that, if we ever lose them – through age, disease or injury – people will judge us less than complete and say something like, "he's not himself anymore". Given this closeness of connection between memory and identity, perhaps if we could *consciously* decide where to strike the flint of experience, which slivers to hoard and which to disregard, we might change quite radically the type of person we are. Alas (or should this be "thankfully"?), deliberation has little authority in this realm. I do wonder, though, if *as a culture* we give enough attention to the mechanisms of formal, corporate memory, which do so much to determine the ethos of society. Sometimes education's knapping seems to follow an ill-chosen seam of priorities.

Many of our most durable memories are, unsurprisingly, taken from life's most striking flints – love, death, novelty, pain, betrayal. Some, though, are chipped from far less obvious sources. The memory on which I wish to focus came about like this – rather, its *recall* came about like this, for its original forging, like all our memories, was on the anvil of what happened. I was thinking about meeting my brother at Edinburgh Zoo. It was nearly a year since we'd last seen each other and the summer – when we'd promised we'd make time – was beginning to look complicated. I'd be in Ireland when he was in Norway; he'd be in Ireland when I was in Scotland. It seemed likely, though, that for a few days in July he'd be in Newcastle and I'd be in St Andrews. Edinburgh suggested itself as a good midpoint for a rendezvous and a day at the zoo seemed likely to appeal to both our families. As we spoke about it on the phone, I found myself remembering the last time I'd visited the zoo. So, I can pinpoint quite exactly how the memory I want to talk about was brought back into mind. It was fished from the past by casting the fly of the same place, soon to be revisited. Except that this memory, the memory of a fall, has nothing directly to do with the zoo. It's just that the mind has caged it there alongside the animals and I don't think there's anything I can do now to free it from this erroneous conjunction. It's as if, somewhere along the way, memory itself has stumbled, fallen, spilled the shards it was carrying and picked them up again with zoo and fall clutched so tightly that they've fused together and now seem like twins sharing a single moment when, in fact, these temporal siblings are separated by several days.

The last time I was in Edinburgh Zoo was twenty years ago, when I took my mother. She was in her early seventies then and newly widowed. I have little memory of the day itself beyond her likening the chimps to children in a playground, our being impressed by the acrobatics of the gibbons, and the almost hypnotic magnetism exerted by a giant serpent lying sluggishly behind its glass like some gross slab of naked, elongated gut. The mere fact of its comatose existence was both repellent and fascinating – as if entrails had escaped a body and this piece of fugitive tubing had somehow become independently alive. But the chimps, the gibbons and the other animals, even the snake, are only dimly lit pictures now. They exist in the twilight of the vaguest recall. Pulling them from there with words, however carefully chosen, bestows more light upon them than they warrant. Description, even while emphasising darkness, acts to impart a level of illumination alien to these crepuscular memories. They blink their eyes uncomfortably in the unnatural light that writing introduces.

What memory has chosen to preserve most vividly from our visit to the zoo (though "chosen" is a misnomer here), is an exact picture of the texture and colour of the tweed coat my mother was wearing, and a sense of unaccustomed absence. This sense – almost like vertigo, as if we were marooned on some high, precariously swaying platform – struck me most forcefully as we sat together in the taxi on our way back to my flat in Marchmont, one of Edinburgh's so called villages. In the failing light of a winter's afternoon, as the driver skilfully negotiated the heavy traffic and told us intermittently – between bursts from his control room's radio – about taking his grandson to the zoo on a too hot

day in the summer, we looked out at the Pentland Hills in the distance and thought about loss. My father's death was still leaning the weight of unaccustomed emptiness upon us, prompting silent reverie and talkative recollection in about equal measure. In the taxi, neither of us said a word. My mother sat huddled in her brown tweed coat, the collar pulled up against the cold. Although I didn't know it then, the flecks of yellow, blue and green in the material were firing themselves like tiny, invisible harpoons deep into my recollection.

She stayed perhaps a week. I recall very little of that time except for the strangeness of her being there alone, our visit to the zoo (at least those splinters of it that I've mentioned) and her fall. It is this last incident that is best preserved – held in the mind as pitch-perfect as the colours of her tweed coat. Though it happened several days after our trip to the zoo, memory has telescoped time so that whenever I think of Edinburgh Zoo now it's as if I can walk along the caged exhibits and stare at gorilla, giraffe, zebra – and then, in a special enclosure, "Parent, falling".

What interests me about this memory is the symbolic weight it possesses. This was not something that struck me at the time, and writing about it now will, I know, further fix things in the mind in an artificial manner, give them a texture and prominence likely to change their original gravity. Perhaps this will merely result in distortion, but I prefer to see it in terms of introducing that sharper focus which retrospect and reflection sometimes allow. Far from being some trivial anecdotal fragment that has no interest outside the little stories that comprise my life and my mother's, her fall seems to be one of those found symbols – a mundane metaphor happened on by chance – that says a great deal about our situation. In fact it says more, at least to me, than many traditional religious symbols. Comparing it with them, it strikes me as odd that people searching for some meaning to sustain them should cherish symbols drawn from such unlikely places – cross, dharmachakra, dancing Shiva, yin and yang. We're hedged round with more direct and immediate symbols all the time, in our greetings and partings, in our first steps and fallings down. Our everyday existence holds up far more accurate mirrors to life's likeness than the strange reflective surfaces that theologians try to polish into existence with the artificial abrasive of their doctrines.

We were crossing Warrender Park Road at its junction with Whitehouse Loan. Whether Mum just slipped on the cobblestones, had a weak turn, or fell as a result of a knee problem that was then only beginning to manifest itself but which would soon become a permanent affliction, I was never able to establish. She brushed aside inquiry with angry impatience, as if talking about it would reinforce what she took to be a sign of weakness, as if words would confirm and enlarge the event whilst the deliberate bestowal of silence might magic it away. Whatever the cause, she fell with sufficient force for the breath to be knocked out of her body with an audible "whumpf!" I helped her up and supported her across the road to the pavement on the other side, where she sat on a low wall knobbled with the vestigial remains of iron railings. It took her only moments to recover. She assured me impatiently that she was all right, wanted no fuss

and was ready to go on. A woman in a green anorak walking a small dog, who had been quite close behind us and must have seen everything, looked over but continued walking briskly, tugging on the lead as the dog made to approach us. Some schoolgirls deep in chatter stared without much interest as they waited at a bus-stop on Whitehouse Loan. Two cars slowed to let us cross, then sped away.

I was relieved she'd not broken anything, that there were no cuts pouring out blood, and that she felt strong enough to walk back to the flat, which was only a few minutes away. Despite the absence of any visible sign of injury, it had clearly been painful and come as a jarring shock. But her chief hurt was one of dignity, composure and self-confidence. Perhaps, having kept her grief so tightly controlled after my father's death, she was shaken to have this little drama of collapse, of momentarily not coping, suddenly imposed upon her so publicly. Perhaps in this fall she had some premonition of the other falls that lay ahead and would, eventually, make living at home impossible. She was, as the saying goes, "fiercely independent" and a fall constitutes a serious blow to such a spirit. It's a very obvious reminder of how we can be laid low without warning and have to depend on others to get back on our feet again.

Seen in one light – the light that normally illumines our doings – her fall was unremarkable. Unfortunate, yes, but completely mundane, just one of those things that happen from time to time, an entirely forgettable accident. Seen in another light, the one whose rays essayists are keen to harness, it takes on a kind of archetypal colouring. It becomes something more epochal than individual, as if, far from being just some haphazard incident, it is following the exact steps of an ancient ritual dance, laid down over centuries, in which all of us take part. Someone falls, someone helps, others go by unconcerned, engrossed in their own business. So much of what happens to us, so much of the human situation, is wired into these bland circumstances. There are echoes here of something elemental, of the tribe, of how things have been since we sat around smoky campfires at the mouths of rank-smelling caves. This fall carried with it ancestral echoes, re-enacted a key part of our human drama, confirming in this individual reiteration a theme sung by our species. We are fated to fall, as much as to stand and walk. When we do, we must rely on whatever help is at hand. We all fall down. Our collapse, however catastrophic it might be to us, is of little concern to anyone beyond our immediate circle. Most people ignore us, as we ignore them. Life goes on though individual lives falter, fall and come to the final drop of death. Our high tragedy or farce is just background detail for someone else's ordinary day.

Chekhov once said:

> I am able to write only from memory, I never write directly from observed life. I must let the subject filter through my memory, until only what is important and typical in it remains in the filter.

It's easy to think of memory in a way that does it little justice. Without memory, a sentence could neither be written nor read; a word begun could not be finished; the

mind would be unable to trace the lineaments of a single letter. Memory lays down the continuity of perception, the baseline along which we walk. It provides the gravity of continuance that links one moment to the next and so allows time to flow so smoothly that we can navigate its waters without noticing they're there. Memory provides the stepping stones of duration without which things would disappear into a chaos of pointillism and any sense of who or where we are would be blown away by the buckshot of a billion separate instances, each one bladed with the abruptness of its own ending and beginning. Sense could never scale the serial precipices of perception diced into so many pieces. There would be no handholds of custom to guide us. Memory is too often reduced to a simplistic caricature in which we turn the pages in some neat album showing scenes from years gone by. The truth is that we consult memory's images all the time. So, even if Chekhov had been able to write "directly from observed life" this would still have relied on remembering as much as on immediate perception. The two are tied together as tightly as experience and interpretation.

However it might seem to underestimate the territory of memory's operation, Chekhov's comment points to one of the characteristics that make some memories particularly indelible. Looking at my memory of my mother's fall and at other nuggets that are similarly lodged in the deep strata of the psyche, I've come to realize that the most durably preserved of my memories are those most weighted with the elemental, those that are important and typical in terms of reflecting themes in the human story. It's as if my meaning-hungry mind, ever eager to find (or make) sense, scans my experience for those aspects of it that speak of circumstances beyond my own. As I try to parse my history into some semblance of sense, I reach for those fragments that come heavily weighted with the ritual of what went before, what will come next, those that are most steeped in the dye of our humanness. Things that relate only to the peculiarities of my particular situation are often just filtered out, leaving memory with a kind of Chekhovian substrate of more essential significance.

Now, in writing about this flake chipped from what happened twenty years ago on an Edinburgh street, I can feel at my back an ancient doppelganger, imagine its breath rippling the hair of the ghost of a future in which I will no more have a place than I have one in the haunted past. But in that past and future sons still walk with mothers and ageing parents fall, and people walk past, absorbed in their own lives. Between the ancient and the yet-to-be, the uniqueness of our momentary lives seems at once affirmed and crushed by the sheer weight of repetition, as life after life, death after death, birth after birth sets things on the scale of the archetypal. The dust of our insignificance stipples the surface of the very symbols that yet seem to suggest some glints of meaning in life's strange mosaic. In mundane moments so much that is essential to our human story is acted out. The seemingly incidental is drenched in the elemental.

In *The Gutenberg Elegies*, his meditation on the fate of reading in an electronic age, Sven Birkerts asks: "How does a reading memory differ from the memory of an actual event?" It's a good question, because it raises the spectre of false memories, of

our not being able to distinguish between first and second hand experience when we look back at things, the risk of confusing the real and the imagined (not forgetting, of course, that the real is already imagined). The fact that my memory has spliced together into seeming continuity two memories that I know do not belong so closely together – the fall and the zoo – is likewise a prompt to doubt the reliability of what we remember. Thinking about the fall, it sometimes feels as if this memory has been buried in the wrong grave and in exhuming it from there I should brush particles of alien earth from its remains and lay it in the right lair (that oddly cosy Scottish term for grave). But however much I try to lay it down in its own dedicated place, mark it with its own separate and separating memorial, I know it will soon lie in the zoo plot again. There seems to be no gainsaying memory's wishes on the question of this particular interment of the past, however addled they appear to be. Will I always remember that this is not how things were, that the real sequence of events was played out differently, or will I come eventually to believe, as memory falters, that the fall happened at the zoo?

Doubt about the reliability of memory quickly becomes doubt about the reliability of *ourselves*, stressing again the intimate connection between identity and remembering. This kind of doubt darkens in hue as we grow older and encounter occasions where we remember something but no one else does, or where we have no memory of occupying moments when others tell us we were definitely there. When such things happen, how do we determine the truth? If there is no memory of an event filed and enfolded safely in the Venus flytrap of the brain's delicate maze, can we avoid getting lost in a buzzing tangle of fact and fantasy where we're unable to distinguish between the bees and wasps of actual experience and the sting-less mimicry of imagination? How are we to know if something really happened? How much credence can be given to the memories of individuals who have forgotten so much? Birkerts's question is put to the reader. But it can be adapted to interrogate the writer too: "How does a *written* memory differ from the memory of the event it describes?" In putting into words what I remember about my mother's fall, how can I be sure that, in trying to fix this fragment in language, I am not wording into existence something I will hereafter remember as the way things really were? One tries to be accurate, of course, but it would be naïve to suppose that the literary is the same as the literal, that words can represent the real with such point by point exactitude that nothing is left out and nothing is left over.

"I'm eighty-six, you know". This was all the respectably dressed lady said as she lay on the pavement outside the church. My father ran to help and, kneeling down to see if she was all right, received this information. I would have been no more than ten years old. We'd just left the morning service at Railway Street Presbyterian Church in Lisburn, the County Antrim town where I grew up. It was winter, a frosty morning. Not far ahead of us, this elegant elderly member of the congregation slipped on a patch of ice and was laid out on her back in all her Sunday best, lying helpless on the cold stone of the pavement. Several others also rushed to help and soon she was back on her feet – nothing broken, no bleeding, no perceptible injury, just the profound shock of the fall.

This is to reach much further back in time than my mother's fall in Edinburgh, and it's a memory that was prompted by writing this essay. If it does not sound too strange, I hadn't realised I'd remembered it (I'd forgotten that I'd remembered it?). Until prompted by the cue of these sentences, it had slipped my mind – a curiously apt locution in the circumstances. And yet I'm quite sure that it happened, that it was real, that this refers to a lived event rather than one I've read about or imagined, even if there is no longer anyone to substantiate my version of history. In the end, we are often the only eyewitnesses we can call upon to determine how things were. If we doubt our own testimony, history's foundations tremble.

Writing may seem able to retrieve things from oblivion for a while, but it is powerless to stop our falling. What I've written here is more the wave of a falling man than any "triumph over loss and death", which Charles Baxter claims is what remembering amounts to. We are all falling, and unlike those dreams of falling where, always, we waken before hitting the ground, there is nothing to stop or cushion our fall. Any handholds time seems to offer us are no more than illusions. The eighty-six-year-old outside the church has fallen into annihilation long ago, as have the chimps and the gibbons we watched at the zoo, as most likely has the talkative taxi driver who took his grandson there on a too hot summer's day. Perhaps the enormous boa constrictor is still alive, such creatures have a look about them of accommodating ancientness, but it too is falling through the seconds and minutes, even if it is plummeting through time at a different rate than we are.

I don't give any credence to the notion of "The Fall" – the Christian belief in the fallenness of humanity, the view that all of us are marked with sin as surely as a tiger is marked with stripes. I do believe, though, that we are all falling, unstoppably. Remembering may offer a temporary bulwark of sanity and solace, soften the wind of time as it whistles past our ears, muting its banshee screech into something familiar, something that does not make our hair stand on end in horror at what it betokens. But memories too are rushing with us towards extinction. We are all somewhere on the trajectory of mortality's fell stoop. Writing cannot provide the impossible redemption of everlasting memory, the gravity of permanent remembrance that might anchor us and keep us from drifting away into the weightlessness of non-being. It cannot stop us falling. All it offers, but this is a considerable gift, is a way of momentarily articulating and shouting out our glee, our terror, our puzzlement and pain, as we move, inexorably, to join the infinitely expandable ranks of the already fallen and forgotten.