

ANNE ENRIGHT

The Wren,
The Wren

VINTAGE

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For Claire Bracken

NELL

THERE IS A psychologist in Nevada called Russell T. Hurlburt who is interested in the different ways people think. In 2009, he fitted a young woman called Melanie with a beeper that went off randomly during the day, prompting her to record everything in her awareness at that moment, and she later reconstructed these mental events for his research.

On the third day of Melanie's experiment, as her boyfriend was asking her a question about insurance, she was trying to remember the word 'periodontist'. On the fourth day, she was having a strong urge to go scuba diving. On the sixth day, she was picking flower petals from the sink while hearing echoes of the phrase 'nice long time'.

Dr Hurlburt says that there are great variations in the way our inner lives play themselves out in our heads. 'My research says that there are a lot of people who don't ever naturally form images, and then there are other people who form very florid, high-fidelity, Technicolor, moving images.' Some people have inner lives dominated by speech, body sensations or emotions, and yet others by 'unsymbolized thinking' that can take the form of wordless questions like, 'Should I have the ham sandwich or the roast beef?'

I find this experiment very useful and attractive. No explanations are sought or given. Melanie thinks this way because that is the way that Melanie thinks. There may be no reason for Melanie to have the mind of a poet, with her sink full of faded petals, and her inner ear enjoying the words ‘nice long time’, where other people would see used teabags and think ‘my life is turning to shit’.

I wonder what was going through her boyfriend’s mind at these moments.

Let’s get insured!

or:

Why is she ignoring me?

or:

Oh my god her breasts.

or:

I need to insure this bitch before I murder her, goddammit.

or:

If we switched providers there could be significant reduction in costs. Perhaps if I made a spreadsheet she would see the potential risks and also the savings to be made.

or:

If I talk about insurance I don’t have to think about my erection.

If I talk about insurance I don’t have to think about my failure to earn enough money, in a system that screws you at every turn.

If I talk about insurance I don’t have to think about death, except usefully.

I am usefully in love, and I love being useful.

I want nice, I want ‘yes’.

I want to die now, all the time, and also in her arms.

*

Don't be silly, Melanie's boyfriend is, of course, thinking about the football. Because this is what men tell you they are thinking, if you ever ask them. And of course these men are telling the truth. Although, under the football . . . something else stirring, some big old lizard with a flickering tongue. Somewhere under the football. The painful pad of his right thumb, a slight itch on the bony bit of his skull. And under the itch, or beyond the itch, an opening. A gap. A place. The bang of a blue sky on some far planet (he is a boy, remember) where three moons rise and set.

And he has the ball, he runs with the ball, he's there, he's done it! Touchdown! Yes! Under the football, he is thinking, Vindication! Thousands of men surging as one man from their plastic stadium chairs, Yes!

Melanie, meanwhile, is sucking at her dental implant, which feels a little loose, and this tiny sound is just terrible for her boyfriend who is very sensitive to anatomically internal noises, especially ones inside other people, especially inside their mouths. Melanie's boyfriend is very acutely aware of the tongues and the saliva of other human beings and sometimes also the dog, at night, when it is licking itself. Apples are the worst. It is as though the slurp and chomp of other people's mastication happens inside his brain – no respecting that line between his inner life and the outside world. It is a complete invasion, like torture almost – while he is trying to sort out the post. Trying to sort the goddamn insurance.

But you know.

Melanie and her boyfriend. I wish them well. I think she is a dreamer and he is a treasure, he keeps them both safe. And in time – in time – they will each learn exactly what the other one thinks.

He thinks:

soft

that smell
She thinks:
a nice long time

We don't walk down the same street as the person walking beside us. All we can do is tell the other person what we see. We can point at things and try to name them. If we do this well, our friend can look at the world in a new way. We can meet.

When I began thinking about all this I was interested in empathy, like it's the solution (and it is! it is!) to pretty much everything. I thought about gender and empathy, religion and empathy, the evolutionary benefits of empathy. I had a big beautiful cake in my head called 'Feeling the Pain of Others' and I sliced it this way and that because I thought that emotion is the bridge between people, sentiment crosses space, sympathy is a gas, exhaled by one, inhaled by the other. Empathy! It's just like melting.

We can merge, you know. We can connect. We can cry at the same movie. You and I.

But some people can't do this – really quite complicated – thing. There is a gap.

These days, I think there is a real gap between me and the next person, there is a space between every human being. And it is not a frightening space. The empty air which exists between people might be crossed by emotion, but it might not. You need something else, or you need something *first*. This is the thing Russell T. Hurlburt was talking about when he discussed different kinds of mental experience. People are different and they think differently. Now, I think the word we need is 'translation'.

It took me a long time to get to this point of happy separateness. When I was a child, I thought we were all the

same. Like, I had telepathic powers and *you* had telepathic powers and that was so nice. We were all together. So it was hard – it was very lonely – to discover that this was not true.

But, listen:

That girl who gave birth in a toilet who did not even know she was pregnant? How could that happen? we say, and of course she was in denial. She was poor.

That is one girl.

Then there is the other girl – and she has pain, not just before and during childbirth, not just before and during her period, but when she ovulates. A girl who feels the actual egg flopping into the fallopian tube. *Mittelschmerz* – it has a name in German so it must be real. I knew one of those girls at school. She felt everything. She was distracted in class by the tenderness in her breasts the week before, by cramps in her stomach, four, three, two days before, and by the whole shebang when her period finally showed. Every month, it was a ten-day event. A third of her life. Tampons did not go in. Pads did not suffice. She fainted. She stained. She took iron tablets. She went to bed and her mother said, Oh dear. And really, she said, she dreamed of taking her pants off and sitting on the earth itself, because then she would know there was enough underneath her to take it all in. This was Maya, my friend, who was always in some kind of pain, and who was so often fobbed off and denied and made to feel she was wrong about herself, about her own sensations. And I think that is something pain does to you. The pain makes you feel accused of making the pain up.

Even the way you open your mouth to say, It hurts.

You say, It is inside me. This pain. Please try to imagine how it feels. Though I am not imagining how it feels. That is the difference between us.

Maya would really know if she was pregnant, that's all. I

don't think she would be shocked and surprised to see a baby coming out of her after nine months of it kicking her guts and sitting on her bladder. *I thought it was indigestion!* That is not what Maya would say. I think she would say *Gaaaahh!* For nine months straight.

Gaaaahh!

Some people have bodies that are a bit dumb. And other people have bodies that are loud, talky or slightly bonkers; bodies that are always declaring themselves and sharing their news. *Oh no, itchy!*

Gaaaahh!

Mine has always been alright. I have always had an alright body to live in, move about in. I mean, I look in the mirror and, whaa-aat? But walking around: sex, food, noises, those things? I have always been fine. I eat. I run. I love running. It feels like flying to me.

This is a roundabout way of saying that I fell in love when I was twenty-two years of age, and it was a complete surprise. As if this tender beast had been inside me all along, kicking and turning, and I had not known it was there.

Gaaaahh!

I say 'fell in love' because that is the technical term for what happened. There was no gap, no need for translation. I felt understood, merged. And this feeling was euphoric.

A year out of college, I was poking my snout and whiskers into the fresh adult air and I knew how to be, I want to remember that. My body was not on mute. I knew how to enjoy sex, eat, get drunk and recover, touch myself, touch someone else. I knew how to dance, get a little out of it and have big deep stupid discussions; a sweet overnight session with a girl I liked, or something more demanding and chaotic with a guy, who was usually someone I did not like so much – a kind of antagonism there, truth be told. Sex with

a guy always felt a bit like fighting, you could get hurt, or realise that you *had* been hurt when the hangover hit. Hard to say what you felt at the time. (Am I a masochist? Oh, I can't remember.) But actually, emotionally, it was the girls who could break me, especially if they did that chilly, disdainful thing, which was exactly what attracted me in the first place. But there you go.

I had a great gang from Trinity, we found each other on, like, day five. A guy cycled across this beautiful grass you are not supposed to even walk on, in his long coat and Byronic (his word) hair and we were three girls watching him, me, Lily and Shona and he was Malachy, clearly gay, clearly a laugh, and he sat down almost beside us, and we all knew what we had to do, now.

Malachy's father was in property, so he had a boxy flat in the city centre that we slowly trashed over the course of that first year, though it was not the drinking and late nights I liked, it was waking up to a long stupid day of breakfast followed by nothing much, hanging around, rolling thin little joints. And just before we got too drifty, it all made a massive amount of sense. We knew how to fix it – the great theft of our future by the planet-fuckers of the past – or we knew we were finished before we had even begun. It kind of alternated. What held us tight was some dream we had of mankind getting *ahead* of its stupid self, of us in particular getting ahead of the too-lateness of our times.

Chiddik. Chiddik.

I also spent time, when I was very stoned, going deep into the birdsong coming from the evergreens outside Mal's window. Six huge pines with red trunks and spreading branches – they had to construct the complex around them. The price of three residential units, each one. Nature as museum. The trees were a reproach to us, as we lolled about

in a concrete box, honeycombed with other glass-fronted boxes, watching the freedom of the birds in their branches, listening to the wind comb through.

I began to think I could talk to them.

Fink fink

Pink pink

Qwer-wer

Skrawww

When I got sad, I wasn't worried about the end of the world so much as about very small things – which may just be my anxiety style. All through college, I was unfashionably fretful about the nightjar, which is a bird we used to have in Ireland and don't have much anymore. It's just this drab little thing. The nightjar looks like a pine cone with big night eyes. The mottled plumage matches the bark of a particular tree, and this is one reason you don't see the nightjar, the other reason is that, when you go looking, it is already getting dark. And the third reason you don't see the nightjar is because it isn't there – not anymore. There are almost none left. The most recent Irish sighting was at Inchy Bridge, Timoleague, 'when a male was observed hawking for insects over typical breeding habitat on three nights between 1st and 8th June 2012'. Anyway, it is a little migrant that feeds on insects at dusk, and now the insects are gone or the habitat is gone, and its call is a distant sewing machine, shifting down a gear and then up.

Churrrrr. Chirr.

Thick cloth. Thin.

Thick cloth. ThinThin.

Of course, because I am online – as opposed to shivering in a bird-hide in the foothills of the Knockmealdown mountains – my sadness about the nightjar segues very quickly to an interest in the raven's cronk which is a

location call and its rasp which signals anger, apparently. I would like to make a dictionary of bird sounds. I could start with the word ‘syrinx’, which is the anatomical box below the larynx and this is the mechanism throwing those huge noises out of that teeny-tiny bird.

The nightjar, by the way, can ventriloquise. Its song sounds as though it is coming from the other tree. This must be confusing, when mating with a nightjar – you’d have to land on a lot of other trees first.

So, this is me. I look at a video clip of a talking raven while my friend Lily worries about fascism, and while my friends are breaking the back of the patriarchy I start to cry about the unbearable fate of the bees. Later, when we are very stoned, I play clips of snail sex with the sound turned up really high. I tell my friends they are fixated on *The Man* and that I am not fixated on *The Man*. My friends were all about authority. And I was all about roots and tendrils. They did surveillance culture, I did the weather.

I was interested in the nightjar, in that tiny little heart-break bird, and for a very long time that amount of dread was enough dread for me.

So.

His name is Felim. He lives in Dublin but he grew up in the country. His mother says the rosary every night, a fact I found amazing and also hilarious until he told me it wasn’t.

But that was later. (All the things Felim accused me of were true, by the way. I suppose I should say that first.)

So Felim’s mother is religious, his father works the farm. He was reared on soda bread and rashers and is six feet three in his socks, very fit from hauling bags of feed, and his party trick is to pick people up by the head. This was, in fact, how we met. It was in a nightclub – he lifted my friend

Lily up by the head and put her down again, and I tapped him on the shoulder to do me next. He assessed the job, turned me round and cupped both hands under my chin, from the back. His thumbs pushed into the curve at the base of my skull and I felt my spine stretch as he pulled me clean off the floor. A feeling of ritual in there, some initiation. Quite a rush. When I landed again I was shrieky and coy. Like one of those girls – the shrieky, coy kind of girl.

I shouted up at him, over the music: Are you trying to pick me up or what?

What?

Are you trying to pick me up or what?

I was making my way out in the big bad world, and for some reason this involved a lot of staying in. Mornings were spent in bed, surfing and typing, meeting deadlines for agency work, which I got through a friend of Lily's in London. I was producing content non-stop and also trying to work up a Twitter following, just when everyone I knew had moved over to Instagram. The pay was terrible. Mostly I wrote travel pieces about places I had never been. I looked out at the grey Dublin sky and they poured out of me: *Nusa Lembongan is the Goldilocks island between tourist Bali and the hipster heaven of Gili Trawangan*. The agency also threw me the occasional bone, which is how I started doing stories about yoga breaks and spa experiences for an actress/eco-influencer called Meg. She liked the tone so much she wanted other stuff: a piece on sunscreen and the planet, the difference between sisal and paper panama hats, palm oil in your moisturiser, silica in your eye cream. I started a running dialogue – a mini soap opera – for her Maltipoos. This should have been fun, but it was surprisingly hard to do.

– *Don't judge me.*

– *Mood.*