



was always frightened to take acid – even in Los Angeles in 1966–7, when everyone seemed to be doing it. You could see the way it was fucking people’s minds up right from the start, and being lucky enough to have occasionally accessed the realm of the imagination LSD was meant to take you to without chemical assistance, I wanted to make sure the itinerary for those visits stayed strictly under my own control.

At that time I was living in a glass house on stilts in Laurel Canyon, and my main concern was that I didn’t really know where the ground was. I’d long had an absolute conviction that I could fly – not soaring high through the clouds like I’d later get a scale model of Jonathan Pryce to do in *Brazil*, but skimming along happily just a few feet off the ground. The sense-memory I had of flying at that height was so intense that it was hard to believe it only came from dreams, and I suspected that one tab of acid was all it would take to get me demonstrating my supposed aerial prowess from an upper window with potentially fatal consequences.

People have sometimes accused me of not being able to distinguish dreams from reality, and it’s true that when it came to my recurring night-flights of fancy I had been mercifully spared the process of (literally!) disillusionment where you wake up thinking ‘That really happened,’ but then the vision gradually leaves you. I suppose if the mind really is more powerful than the body, then my brain could have convinced all those little muscles that this momentous event had earned its place in their individual memories – which is pretty much how it works for phantom limbs, but in that case you’re dealing with a nervous system trained over a long period of time to assume that certain things are going on down below.

Maybe all dreams of flying are just your subconscious response to the fact that your dad threw you up in the air a lot as a little kid. I know Freud would offer another, earthier interpretation, but I was never a big fan of his, being more of a Jungian myself. A Neil Jungian, that is. I’ve always really loved Neil’s music – Buffalo Springfield, Crazy Horse, all of it – as well as identifying strongly with his no-bullshit approach to the human psyche. So fuck you, Sigmund, I’m sticking with the ‘dad throwing you up in the air a lot’ theorem.

The first chance my dad got to throw me up in the air was in November 1940. I was born a month after John Lennon and half a year before my fellow

Minnesotan Bob Dylan (who took a while to realise that was what his name should be). In American terms I was a pre-war baby, because the land of my birth decided to sit out the first few dances of the Second World War, until the Japs marked our card at Pearl Harbor.

My dad, James ('Gill') Gilliam - who'd been in the last operational cavalry unit of the US army for a while before the war - tried to re-enlist, but they told him he was too old and his horse-riding skills would be no use against the Nazi *blitzkrieg*. In any case, his primary duty was to throw me up in the air a lot, so I'd have an excuse for all those flying dreams in later life. As a consequence of this enlightened intervention on the part of the US military (which would not be the last benevolent decision it would make on behalf of the male Gilliams, but more of that later), the war had no impact on my early life at all.

There was none of that formative trauma which is normally so vital to the evolution of the artistic mind (although that absence would in itself become traumatic in later life, proving a serious obstacle to any attempt to pass myself off as a Renaissance man). I arrived two years before my sister Sherry and eight-and-a-bit before my brother Scott, so I'd made sure my feet were firmly under the table before any competition arrived. I was smart, happy and in good health - in short all the things you'd want in a child. I'd later joke (and if a man can't use material he's been road-testing all his life in his own memoir, when can he?) that my father was a carpenter and my mother was a virgin, so what other choice did I have than to be the chosen one?



*I love the out-of-focus-ness of this kid. I was moving too fast for the cameras even then.* My mum's hair is the subject of the piece - look at those precise curls, and that's a really good parting - but the object of her attention is, well, what exactly? My parents appreciated what they had, and they always admired the creature, but they could never quite grasp the true nature of its identity . . . There's an element of vanity about Mrs Beatrice Gilliam that I find very interesting in retrospect. The meticulousness of her parting once almost got her lured off the straight and narrow. In the mid-1930s, when she was working

in a Minneapolis restaurant called Hasty Tasty, a smartly dressed woman kept admiring her hair and asking if she would come and do her and her friends' the same way, and my mum found out afterwards that this potential client was the wife of the notorious Minneapolis gangster 'Kid' Cann who used to procure local women for him and his good friend Al Capone.

There are a few family pictures of us outside rented houses in Minneapolis, but the first home I actually have memories of is the one at Medicine Lake, out of the city, which my parents bought and moved us to when I was four. The house was basically a summer cottage – not made for 40-degrees-below-zero winters, and not really meant to be lived in at all in the cold season, but it was all they could afford at the time, so we made the best of it. I remember my dad insulating the whole place and digging out the basement.

We lived there for several years with an outside toilet, which we called a ‘biffy’. It was a two-holer – presumably to delineate us from the poor people, who only had one hole. You’d think we might’ve complained about having to troop out there in Arctic conditions, but it was normal to us. That’s the great thing about kids – normal is normal, so what are you complaining about? That’s just the way the world is.

Years later, once I’d run away to join *Monty Python’s Flying Circus*, I used to drive my parents crazy by referring to myself as ‘poor white trash’. They hated me doing that, because they weren’t poor white trash – they worked very hard. We didn’t have much money, but we never felt ourselves to be poor.

My dad did lots of different jobs to keep the grizzlies from the door. At one point he worked on the Alaskan highway – driving earth-movers – at another as a coffee salesman. Either way, he was away a lot, and the template of a hearth maintained by the mother, and a father who comes back from his travels as a glamorous figure, is one I have tried to build upon as an adult – to the extent that my wife Maggie claims she raised our three children as a one-parent family.

It’s intriguing how these patterns repeat themselves without one necessarily being aware of it. I never realised I was away that much when my kids were young, and similarly when I was growing up, I never felt like my dad wasn’t around. Even if L Ron Hubbard himself were to audit me, I don’t think he could come up with a memory of an absent father. Because Dad was always building stuff and fixing things up, we were constantly aware of his presence. Who could forget the day he finished work on the inside toilet and made a tree-house out of the remains of the old biffy?

The thing I remember most clearly about the winters was when Dad would tie an inner tube to the back of the car and whoosh me around the lake, whipping all over the place, shouting at the top of my voice. That was fantastic.

Those three destructive little words ‘health and safety’ had yet to reach Minnesota. My dad took me out shooting from a very early age. We had three



*Look at the wisdom in this child's eyes. And that's obviously a nice man standing behind him.*

My dad died in 1982, and what still intrigues me about him is that even though he was always doing things, and his work was normally very physical, he was incredibly kind and gentle. He wasn't pushy and aggressive and ambitious, like me, whereas my mother was the controlling and organising force. You can see there's real power in her, and she was definitely the disciplinarian of the house. If I had to be whipped - which I did sometimes (let's say if I was defending my tree house with a bow and arrow, and someone inadvertently got hit in the eye King Harold-style) - my dad would do it, but it wouldn't be his idea. I don't ever remember feeling that I'd been punished unfairly; getting spanked with a belt every now and again was just what happened. It wasn't just locking you in your room - what would be the point of that? There had to be something physical. I think there's something a little crazy about the age we live in now where you're not supposed to smack a kid or even shout at them. Maybe this is more true of boys than girls, but the need for physical limitations is very strong when you're growing up, because you're always pushing at them.



shotguns in the house - a 12-gauge, a 16-gauge and a 22. They were definitely there for hunting rather than protecting us from the evils of the world. You'd go out and get what you needed for the table, and then come back and pluck the pheasant or gut the sunfish you'd caught by driving onto the frozen lake, drilling a hole and plonking your line down.

Of course, the ice brought its own hazards. When you were out sledding and went over a bump, it was so cold that if your tongue touched the metal it would get frozen stuck. You'd have to walk all the way home holding the sled up to your face and hopefully get some hot water to get the thing off. That was some horrible shit, but it was absolutely standard.

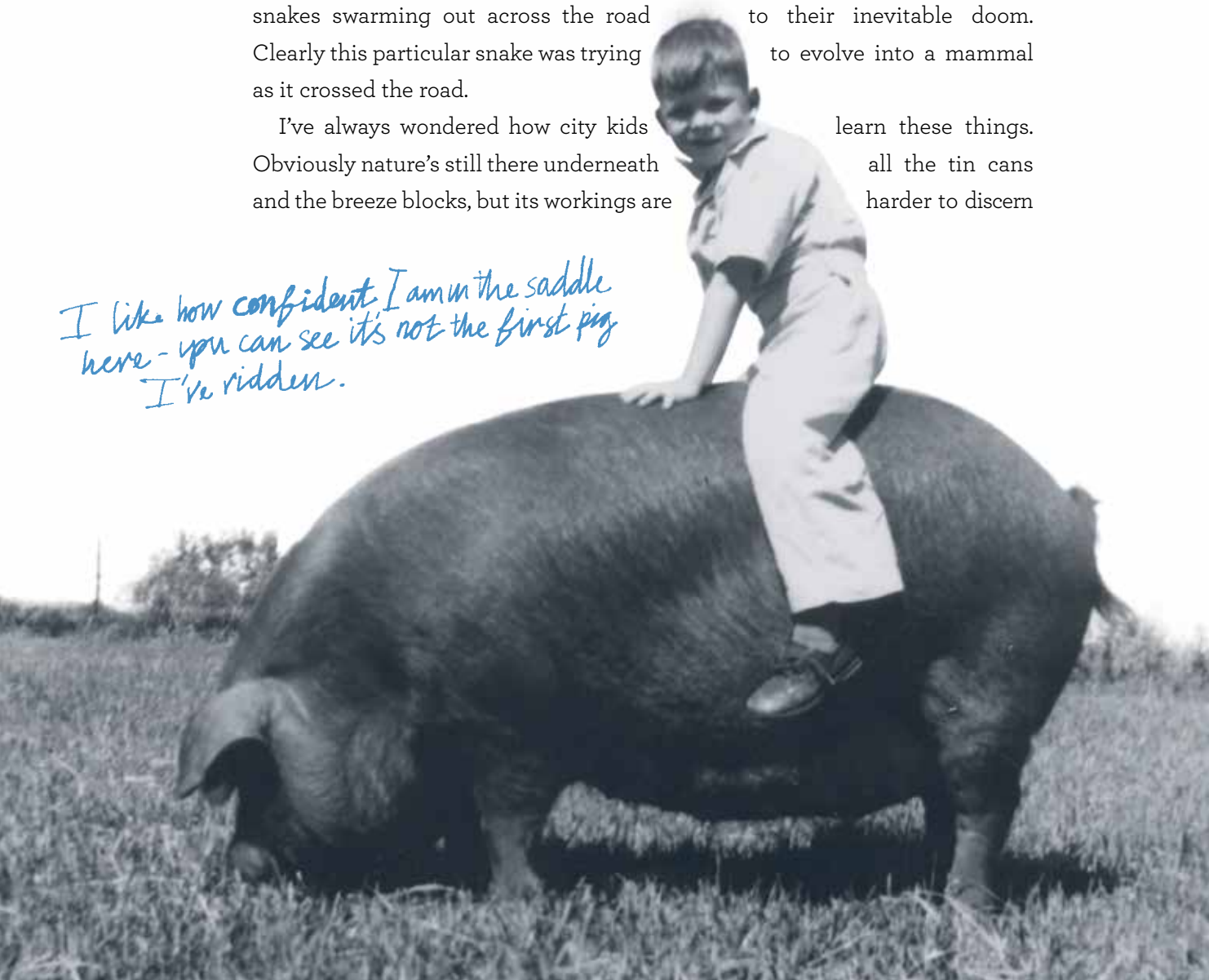
**Luckily, the dog falling on my head** was more of a one-off. In winter, when the snow ploughs would come down the road outside and heap the snow and ice up onto the side, we would tunnel into it to make a cave to play in. One day a dog climbed up on top of it and took a piss, and the piss melted the snow and suddenly the whole thing - dog plus piss - came down on my and my friends' heads. It was all quite elemental, but the great thing about growing up in the country is that you can't avoid learning about the functions

that our bodies have, and the fact that animals have insides, and that we eat them and they die. Frogs' legs were a great local delicacy in Minnesota – you hold him by the back legs, then whack him with a knife or an axe as he tries to jump, and you've got a nutritious snack. Food is immediate. There's a living creature, there's a dead creature, and there's a full creature slightly higher up the food chain. This is knowledge that has served me very well creatively.

Sometimes we'd go to a relative's farm on Sundays, and we'd see chickens get their heads cut off and still be running around afterwards. As a kid there is nothing more entertaining than that, because you are actually seeing life after death. These youthful farmyard experiences don't make you callous, they just give you a respectful understanding of how cruel nature can be. One of my clearest – and most upsetting – childhood memories is of a mother garter snake being run over by a car, and me finding its belly split open and all these baby snakes swarming out across the road to their inevitable doom. Clearly this particular snake was trying to evolve into a mammal as it crossed the road.

I've always wondered how city kids learn these things. Obviously nature's still there underneath all the tin cans and the breeze blocks, but its workings are harder to discern

*I like how confident I am in the saddle here - you can see it's not the first pig I've ridden.*





when cats and dogs are the only animals you come into regular contact with.

An ambivalence about the relationship between the rural and the urban has been a major underlying theme of the films I've made. On the one hand, I love cities for their architecture and as hothouses of culture and art. On the other, I hate them as man-made excrescences conspiring to obscure our view of the natural world.

I've tried to do my bit over the years to bridge that gap. While we were making *Jabberwocky*, I wanted to find some actual animal tissues for the skin of the monster, so I went to visit an abattoir near Shepperton in West London. When you've watched a big old cow walk in there on four legs, very much alive, there's something really shocking about the moment when it's given the bolt to the head, and this thing with all its muscles and its energy just turns to dead weight. To add to the fun, it was a small family-run abattoir – what Americans call a 'mom-and-pop operation'. So when the carcass was hoisted up in the air and all the intestines were coming out, who was there to clear up but this kid of ten or eleven who was home on his school holidays? Watching him scoop up all the slops and the blood, I did think that anyone who eats meat (as I do) should spend a few hours in a place like that at some point in their lives, just to understand the process you're part of.

**It's crazy how isolated the Western world** has become from reality. Apart from anything else, nothing sets your imagination free like a direct connection to the planet you actually live on. When I think back to the landscape I grew up in, I know that across the dirt road passing in front of our house was a big swamp, and further down the road was a terribly frightening wood with a house in it that was sort of ruined and no one was exactly sure who lived there. Straight away, the mind goes flying. The swamp was magical too, because one year they cut down a load of trees and piled them up along the edge of the road, and if you crept down among the trunks you'd find all these wonderful mossy spaces to hide out in.

In 1966, my mum began to assemble a retrospective diary of family illnesses (in later years I have sometimes wondered if my relative freedom from health-related anxiety can be attributed to the fact that Beatrice Gilliam did all my worrying for me). In the entry for 1948, when I was seven years old, she wrote as follows: 'Terry had a number of terrible sieges with the croup. His temperature would be very high and he would see horrible creatures on the ceilings and



And then again, sixty years later, by a Spanish waterfall with Johnny Depp, trying - and ultimately failing - to film DON QUIXOTE.



(This was just before the moment in the documentary Lost in La Mancha where Johnny's got the fish in his trousers and he ad libs the line 'You're a fish - I'm a man.' ) How did I get from one place to the other? If you look closely at the first photo, you can see I'm actually standing by a tombstone, so maybe it wasn't so very far after all.

At one with nature in a summertime Minnesota variant of the Garden of Eden.

walls and think they were after him. I was so frightened that his mind wouldn't come out of these hallucinations ...'

Some might argue that these fears were not without foundation in the long term, but I have no memory of those particular hallucinations. I think she may have conflated my troublesome outbreaks of coughing with a recurring nightmare I started to have after seeing Alexander Korda and Michael Powell's *The Thief of Bagdad* at around this time. Cineastes will tell you what proportion of my films contain images inspired by that landmark of Arabian adventure, and I suspect more do than don't. The spider in it loomed so large in my dreams that I'd wake up in the night with my bedclothes strangling me like a suffocating web.

Luckily, not all my formative cinematic experiences were so traumatic. I'd go to the cinema and see *Snow White* or the bad boys' world in *Pinocchio* and think, 'This is a world I want to be a part of.' As a kid, once you've had your first taste of Robin Hood or 'cowboys and Indians' on celluloid, that's it, it's done - you just want to be on your horse, outspeeding the Sheriff of Nottingham or hunting down that Redskin (or Native American as you will later more respectfully come to know him).

I also read an enormous amount. My favourite books tended to be by a Scottish author called Albert Payson Terhune, who seems to be more or less unknown in Britain these days, perhaps because while he wrote a lot of excellent stories about loyal dogs, someone else wrote the most famous one - *Greyfriars Bobby*.

An early reading list... no Dostoevsky as yet, but plenty of horse and dog books. I can't date this exactly, but fellow Pythons would probably say, 'Maybe in your early twenties?'

We always had dogs in the house - usually setters, along with the odd spaniel - so these books did not require great intellectual leaps of understanding on my part. But the great thing about reading as a spur to the imagination (as opposed to say *Grand Theft Auto* - not that I don't enjoy that too) is that you're doing all the visualisation yourself. However good the author might be at painting a picture with words, the final stage of translating that mental picture from two dimensions into three is up to you.

It's the same with the radio, which was all-powerful in America at that time. There was a children's radio show called *Let's Pretend*, which was one of my very first gateways to the fantastical. It might seem a strange thing for a cartoonist to say - that radio was the medium that first taught him how to conjure up visuals - but it's certainly true in my case. Even later on, when I started to get actively interested in animation, the name of a voiceover artist like Mel Blanc still probably meant more to me than Chuck Jones' did. And once I started making films of my own, I loved doing the voices and sound effects every bit as much as the images.

**We didn't have a TV** during the time we lived at Medicine Lake, but I do remember going round to a neighbour's house to watch Sid Caesar's *Your Show of Shows*. Caesar was the one commanding your attention, but I realised when I went back to that show years afterwards that it was the less prominent Carl Reiner who was truly breathtaking.

Another comedian I discovered on that same neighbour's TV, who made a huge impression on me right from the off, was Ernie Kovacs. Even though I saw him ridiculously early in life - I was just ten or eleven years old and pondering

