

I

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I AM HAUNTED BY WATERS. It may be that I'm too dry in myself, too English, or it may be simply that I'm susceptible to beauty, but I do not feel truly at ease on this earth unless there's a river nearby. 'When it hurts,' wrote the Polish poet Czeslaw Miłosz, 'we return to the banks of certain rivers,' and I take comfort in his words, for there's a river I've returned to over and again, in sickness and in health, in grief, in desolation and in joy.

I first came to the Ouse one June evening a decade back. I was with a boyfriend long since relinquished, and we drove from Brighton, leaving my car in the field at Barcombe Mills and walking north against the current as the last few fishermen swung their lures in hope of pike or bass. The thickening air was full of the scent of meadowsweet and if I looked closely I could make out a scurf of petals drifting idly along the bank. The river ran brimful at the edge of an open field, and as the sun dropped

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its smell became more noticeable: that cold green reek by which wild water betrays its presence. I stooped to dip a hand and as I did so I remembered Virginia Woolf drowned herself in the Ouse, though why or when I didn't know.

For a while I used to swim with a group of friends at South-ease, near where her body was found. I'd enter the swift water in trepidation that gave way to ecstasy, tugged by a current that threatened to tumble me beneath the surface and bowl me clean to the sea. The river passed in that region through a chalk valley ridged by the Downs, and the chalk seeped into the water and turned it the milky green of sea glass, full of little shafts of imprisoned light. You couldn't see the bottom; you could barely make out your own limbs, and perhaps it was this opacity which made it seem as though the river was the bearer of secrets: that beneath its surface something lay concealed.

It wasn't morbidity that drew me to that dangerous place but rather the pleasure of abandoning myself to something vastly beyond my control. I was pulled to the Ouse as a magnet is pulled to metal, returning on summer nights and during the short winter days to repeat some walks, some swims through turning seasons until they amassed the weight of ritual. I'd come to that corner of Sussex idly and with no intention of staying long, but it seems to me now that the river cast a lure, that it caught me on the fly and held me heart-stopped there. And when things began to falter in my own life, it was the Ouse to which I turned.

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In the spring of 2009 I became caught up in one of those minor crises that periodically afflict a life, when the scaffolding that sustains us seems destined to collapse. I lost a job by accident, and then, through sheer carelessness, I lost the man I loved. He was from Yorkshire and one of the skirmishes in our long battle concerned territory, namely where in the country we would make our home. I couldn't relinquish Sussex and nor could he quite edge himself from the hills and moors to which he had, after all, only just returned.

After Matthew left I lost the knack of sleeping. Brighton seemed unsettled and at night it was very bright. The hospital over the road had recently been abandoned and I'd look up sometimes from my work to see a gang of boys breaking windows or setting fires in the yard where ambulances once parked. At periodic intervals throughout the day I felt that I was drowning, and it was all I could do not to fling myself to the ground and wail like a child. These feelings of panic, which in more sober moments I knew were temporary and would soon pass, were somehow intensified by the loveliness of that April. The trees were flaring into life: first the chestnut with its upraised candles and then the elm and beech. Amid this wash of green the cherry began to flower and within days the streets were filled with a flush of blossom that clogged the drains and papered the wind-screens of parked cars.

The shift in season was intoxicating, and it was then that the idea of walking the river locked hold of me. I wanted to *clear out*, in all senses of the phrase, and I felt somewhere deep inside me that the river was where I needed to be. I began

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to buy maps compulsively, though I've always been map-shy. Some I pinned to my wall; one, a geological chart of the underlying ground, was so beautiful I kept it by my bed. What I had in mind was a survey or sounding, a way of catching and logging what a little patch of England looked like one midsummer week at the beginning of the twenty-first century. That's what I told people, anyway. The truth was less easy to explain. I wanted somehow to get beneath the surface of the daily world, as a sleeper shrugs off the ordinary air and crests towards dreams.

A river passing through a landscape catches the world and gives it back redoubled: a shifting, glinting world more mysterious than the one we customarily inhabit. Rivers run through our civilisations like strings through beads, and there's hardly an age I can think of that's not associated with its own great waterway. The lands of the Middle East have dried to tinder now, but once they were fertile, fed by the fruitful Euphrates and the Tigris, from which rose flowering Sumer and Babylonia. The riches of Ancient Egypt stemmed from the Nile, which was believed to mark the causeway between life and death, and which was twinned in the heavens by the spill of stars we now call the Milky Way. The Indus Valley, the Yellow River: these are the places where civilisations began, fed by sweet waters that in their flooding enriched the land. The art of writing was independently born in these four regions and I do not think it a

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coincidence that the advent of the written word was nourished by river water.

There is a mystery about rivers that draws us to them, for they rise from hidden places and travel by routes that are not always tomorrow where they might be today. Unlike a lake or sea, a river has a destination and there is something about the certainty with which it travels that makes it very soothing, particularly for those who've lost faith with where they're headed.

The Ouse seemed to me then to be composed of two elements. On the one hand it was the thing itself: a river forty-two miles long that rose in a copse of oak and hazel not far from Haywards Heath, dashing in quick gills and riffles through the ancient forests of the Weald, traversing the Downs at Lewes and entering the oil-streaked Channel at Newhaven, where the ferries cross over to France. Such waterways are ten a penny in these islands. I dare say there is one that runs near you – a pretty, middling river that winds through towns and fields alike, neither pristinely wild nor reliably tame. The days of watermills and salterns may have passed, but the Ouse remains a working river after the fashion of our times, feeding a brace of reservoirs and carrying the outfall from a dozen sewage works. Sometimes, swimming at Isfield, you pass through clotted tracts of bubbles; sometimes a crop of waterweed blooms as luxuriant as an orchard with the fertiliser that's washed from the wheat.

But a river moves through time as well as space. Rivers have shaped our world; they carry with them, as Joseph Conrad had it, 'the dreams of men, the seed of commonwealths, the germs of empires'. Their presence has always lured people, and so they

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bear like litter the cast-off relics of the past. The Ouse is not a major waterway. It has intersected with the wider currents of history only once or twice; when Virginia Woolf drowned there in 1941 and again, centuries earlier, when the Battle of Lewes was fought upon its banks. Nonetheless, its relationship with man can be traced back thousands of years before the birth of Christ, to when Neolithic settlers first started to cut down the forests and cultivate crops by the river's edge. The ages that followed left more palpable traces: Saxon villages; a Norman castle; Tudor sewage works; Georgian embankments and sluices designed to relieve the river's tendency to overflow, though even these elaborate modifications failed to prevent the Ouse from rising up and cataclysmically flooding the town of Lewes in the early years of our own millennium.

At times, it feels as if the past is very near. On certain evenings, when the sun has dropped and the air is turning blue, when barn owls float above the meadow grass and a pared-down moon breaches the treeline, a mist will sometimes lift from the surface of the river. It is then that the strangeness of water becomes apparent. The earth hoards its treasures and what is buried there remains until it's disinterred by spade or plough, but a river is more shifty, relinquishing its possessions haphazardly and without regard to the landlocked chronology historians hold so dear. A history compiled by way of water is by its nature quick and fluid, full of submerged life and capable, as I would discover, of flooding unexpectedly into the present.

That spring I was reading Woolf obsessively, for she shared my preoccupation with water and its metaphors. Over the years

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Virginia Woolf has gained a reputation as a doleful writer, a bloodless neurasthenic, or again as a spiteful, rarefied creature, the doyenne of airless Bloomsbury chat. I suspect the people who hold this view of not having read her diaries, for they are filled with humour and an infectious love for the natural world.

Virginia first came to the Ouse in 1912, renting a house set high above the marshes. She spent the first night of her marriage to Leonard Woolf there and later stayed at the house to recover from her third in a succession of serious breakdowns. In 1919, sane again, she switched to the other side of the river, buying a cold bluish cottage beneath Rodmell's church tower. It was very primitive when they first arrived, with no hot water and a dank earth closet furnished with a cane chair above a bucket. But Leonard and Virginia both loved Monks House, and its peace and isolation proved conducive to work. Much of *Mrs Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, *The Waves* and *Between the Acts* was written there, along with hundreds of reviews, short stories and essays.

She was acutely sensitive to landscape, and her impressions of this chalky, watery valley pervade her work. Her solitary, often daily, excursions seem to have formed an essential part of the writing process. During the Asham breakdown, when she was banned from the over-stimulations of either walking or writing, she confided longingly to her diary:

What wouldn't I give to be coming through Firle woods, the brain laid up in sweet lavender, so sane & cool, & ripe for the morrow's task. How I should notice everything, the phrase for it coming the moment after & fitting like a

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glove; & then on the dusty road, as I ground my pedals,
so my story would begin telling itself; & then the sun
would be done, & home, & some bout of poetry after
dinner, half read, half lived, as if the flesh were dissolved
& through it the flowers burst red & white.

‘As if the flesh were dissolved’ is a characteristic phrase. Woolf’s metaphors for the process of writing, for entering the dream world in which she thrived, are fluid: she writes of *plunging*, *flooding*, *going under*, *being submerged*. This desire to enter the depths is what drew me to her, for though she eventually foundered, for a time it seemed she possessed, like some freedivers, a gift for descending beneath the surface of the world. As I sat in my hot little room I began to feel like an apprentice escape artist studying Houdini. I wanted to know how the trick was mastered, and I wanted to know how those effortless plunges turned into a vanishing act of a far more sinister sort.

Spring was giving way to summer. I’d decided to leave the city on the solstice, the hinge point of the year when light is at its peak. The superstitions about the day appealed to me: it’s when the wall between worlds is said to grow thin, and it’s no coincidence that Shakespeare set his topsy-turvy dream on Midsummer Eve, for on the year’s briefest night magic and misrule have always held sway. England is at her most beautiful in the month of June, and in the days before I left I began to feel

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almost maddened by my desire to get out into the flowering fields and enter the cool, steady river.

My flat began to fill up with anxious lists. I purchased a rucksack, and a pair of lightweight trousers with blossom printed jauntily along the waist. My mother sent me a pair of sandals of unparalleled hideousness that she swore – falsely, as it turned out – were designed to prevent blisters. I spent a pleasant afternoon booking rooms in pubs along the route, including the White Hart in Lewes, where Virginia and Leonard Woolf bought Monks House at auction and then, in the excitement of the moment, had a brief and violent fight. I also bought a vast quantity of oatcakes and a large slab of cheese. I might lack variety, but I wouldn't starve.

In all this time I'd barely spoken to Matthew, and the night before I left, I did a forbidden thing. I rang him and at some point in the tangled, recriminatory conversation that followed I began to weep and found I couldn't stop. It was, though I didn't know it then, the nadir, the lowest point of that dismal spring. The next day was the solstice; after that, though the days began to shorten, something in me started to lighten and lift.

II

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THE SWIFTS WERE THERE WHEN I woke, rising as if from deep water, rinsed clean by sleep for the first time in months. The swifts were there, and a fox in the car park of the hospital, a scrawny, mottled orange-grey fox, who sat and scratched in the sun and then slunk back into the shadows of the old incinerator. It was 21 June, the longest day of the year, the sky screened by fine cloud, the sea swaddled in mist. My pack was ready at the bottom of the bed, stuffed with neat layers of clothes and maps, the side pockets bulging with bottles of suntan lotion and water, a battered copy of *The Wild Flowers of Britain and Northern Europe* and a rusty Opinel that no longer locked.

I sang as I made the coffee. I felt almost weightless after last night's tears, as if they'd dissolved a burden that had hobbled me for months. That afternoon I planned to walk from Slaugham to where the Ouse began, in a little clay ditch that ran at the foot of a hawthorn hedge. And from there I'd take a long curve south

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by south-east, crossing and recrossing the stream day by day until I reached Isfield, where the path and the river ran as one through the low chalk valley that led to the sea. A week would do it, I reckoned, with plenty of time for detours on the way.

The night before, I'd spread three Ordnance Survey maps across the floor and drawn a skittering Biro line along the route I thought I'd take, patching together footpaths and lanes to get as close to the water as I could. But no matter how much I deviated from the official Ouse Way, which seemed positively hydrophobic at its start, for the first three days I'd see water only in glimpses. There are no automatic rights to roam riverbanks and much of the land the Ouse coils through is private, strung with the barbed wire and *Keep Out* signs by which England's old divisions are maintained.

I got the same train I used to catch to work, the Bedford service, which inches in and out of London, hiccuping to a halt at each of the little country stations. Haywards Heath would be the best bet, I reckoned. From there I'd take a cab to Slaugham, where I could leave my bag at the Chequers and search for the water unencumbered. I leant my head against the grubby window, drinking in the light. The line was trimmed with a ribbon of wasteground, full of the everyday plants the eye elides: brick-pink valerian, rosebay willowherb, elder, bindweed and marguerites. Outside Hassocks I caught the yellow flare of evening primrose. When it's hot, you often see a fox coiled here, a rust-spot amid the metallic glint of poppies. Today nothing stirred but the wood pigeons, clapping their wings and calling out their five syllables over and again.

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The Chequers was a pretty white pub on the edge of the village green. Inside, it was deserted and stupefyingly hot. A Polish girl showed me to my room, pointing out the fire escape where I could gain access after hours. I flung my bag on the bed and went into the fields empty-handed, my pockets weighed down with maps. The air seemed to have set like jelly, quivering as I pressed against it. I climbed south between paddocks of horses, past empty, secretive gardens littered with abandoned tricycles and trampolines. By the time I reached Warninglid Lane the sun was the highest it would be all year and there were circles of sweat staining my T-shirt. As I came out from under the pines, the heat hit me smartly across the face. There was a rabbit by the verge, its guts unslung and draped across the road, the dark beads of excrement still visible beneath the puckered skin.

I'd looked at this square of the High Weald on maps for months, tracing the blue lines as they tangled through the hedges, plaiting eastward into a wavering stream. I thought I knew exactly where the water started, but I had not bargained for the summer's swift uprush of growth. At the edge of the field there was a hawthorn hedge and beside it, where I thought the stream would be, was a waist-high wall of nettles and hemlock water dropwort, its poisonous white umbels tilted to the sky. It was impossible to tell whether water was flowing or whether the ditch was dry, its moisture sucked into the drunken green. I hovered for a minute, hivering. It was Sunday, hardly a car passing. Unless they were watching with binoculars from Eastlands Farm there was no one to see me slip illegally across the field to where the river was marked to start. To hell with it, I thought, and ducked beneath the fence.

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The choked ditch led to a copse of hazel and stunted oak. Here the trees had shaded out the nettles and the stream could be seen, a brown whisper, hoof-stippled, that petered out at the wood's far edge. There was no spring. The water didn't bubble from the ground, rust-tinted, as I have seen it do at Balcombe, ten miles east of here. *The source* sounded a grand name for this clammy runnel, carrying the runoff from the last field before the catchment shifted towards the Adur. It was nothing more than the furthest tributary from the river's end, its longest arm, a half-arbitrary way of mapping what is a constant movement of water through air and earth and sea.

It's not always possible to plot where something starts. If I went down on my knees amid the fallen leaves, I would not find the exact spot where the Ouse began, where a trickle of rain gathered sufficient momentum to make it to the coast. This muddy, muddled birth seemed pleasingly appropriate considering the origins of the river's name. There are many Ouses in England, and consequently much debate about the meaning of the word. The source is generally supposed to be *usa*, the Celtic word for water, but I favoured the argument, this being a region of Anglo-Saxon settlement, that here it was drawn from the Saxon word *wāse*, from which derives also our word *ooze*, meaning soft mud or slime; earth so wet as to flow gently. Listen: *ooooze*. It trickles along almost silently, sucking at your shoes. An ooze is a marsh or swampy ground, and to ooze is to dribble or slither. I liked the slippery way it caught at both earth's facility for holding water and water's knack for working through soil: a flexive, doubling word. You could hear the river in it, *ooozing* up through

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the Weald and snaking its way down valleys to where it once formed a lethal marsh.

On Valentine's Day, before things began to go awry, Matthew gave me a map he'd made of the Ouse. He'd photocopied all the relevant OS Explorers in Huddersfield Library and then, in his obsessive way, had calculated the extent of the drainage basin, cutting the sheets along the wavering line of the watershed. Each tributary had been coloured with marker pen, orange for the Bevern, pink for the Iron River, green for the Longford and the misfit Glynde Reach. I stuck the parts together with Sellotape and for months it was tacked to my wall: 233 square miles of land the shape of a collapsed lung. By April the sun had bleached the colours away, and at some point that spring I took it down and slid it to the bottom of the papers that lined my desk.

I thought of it then, as I stood in the wood. On the map, the ditch had been coloured blue. It meant nothing in itself: a place where deer drink, a channel cleared centuries before to stop the field from flooding. A leaf drifted down and floated slowly east. I couldn't remember when it had last rained, when this water might have gathered, seeping steadily through the grasses until it trickled here. The average residence time of a single water molecule in a river this size is a matter of weeks, though this depends on currents, rains and a dozen other vagaries. If instead it infiltrates the soil, becoming groundwater, it may

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linger for centuries or, if it's sunk deep enough, hundreds of thousands of years. Isotope hydrology suggests that the trapped fossil water in some of the world's largest confined aquifers is over a million years old. These aquifers often underlie deserts, and it is strange to think that buried beneath the Kalahari, the Sahara and mile after mile of the arid centre of Australia are vast vaults of ancient water, stored in rock or silt. In comparison, this ditchwater at the river's head was brand new, freshly fallen from the sky. Much of it would be wicked up by the sun before it reached Slaugham Mill Pond, where it could circle with the carp for fifty years before rushing south to rejoin the sea, a thousand tonnes a minute.

The stream was barely shifting now and it was hard to believe it could change its nature so entirely. There was a stinking pond at the edge of the trees, and a tractor waiting for the morning's work. The oats had yet to ripen and everything stood very still. I could hear the faintest trickle of water pattering past roots and tiny stones, and as I waited there I remembered a stray line from a poem by Seamus Heaney, part of the vast disordered library of river literature. It was about dowsing, and it seemed to catch something of water's strangeness: 'suddenly broadcasting through a green aerial its secret stations'. It might have been the thought of fossil water that had nudged it into my mind, for I've always been fascinated by the idea that the planet contains hidden lakes and rivers as well as those that run open to the sky; the sort of concealed richness that Auden was thinking of when he wrote 'In Praise of Limestone', which ends:

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*Dear, I know nothing of
Either, but when I try to imagine a faultless love
Or the life to come, what I hear is the murmur
Of underground streams, what I see is a limestone landscape.*

In Heaney's poem, water announces its presence with a *pluck* that jerks the forked hazel rod uncontrollably. The act seems wholly magical and so it is perhaps unsurprising that dowsing – water witching as it is known in America – has performed poorly in scientific trials, proving no better than mere chance at finding the conduits through which water passes beneath rock and soil. Be that as it may, humans by necessity must once, like all animals, have been attuned to the dark frequency by which water travels. No doubt this sensitivity has grown vestigial now, or become gummed up by car horns and the repetitive trilling of mobile phones, and yet there have been many times when, out walking in a wood, I have found myself drawn by chance or instinct to a pool or stream I didn't know existed.

I squatted beside one of the stripling oaks, crushing a fresh holly leaf into my knee. I was feeling uneasy, and the sense of trespass in the little copse had become overwhelming. The sources of rivers are often freighted with taboos, and for all their eerie beauty they do not seem, at least according to the records of mythology, wise places for humans to tarry. The seer Tiresias is said to have been blinded when he saw the goddess Athena bathing in a spring on Helikon Mountain, and his gift for prophecy came as recompense for the punishing loss of his sight.

According to the poet Callimachus the encounter happened

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in midsummer – a day like today – when Athena and the nymph Khariklo, Tiresias’s mother, were lying together in the creek. It was high noon, that still moment when the world is stunned by heat. Only Tiresias remained on the hill, hunting for deer with his dogs. He’d grown thirsty in the sun and he climbed down to the stream for water, not knowing it was occupied. Athena saw him pushing through the trees and she blinded him instantly, for it is forbidden to see a goddess undressed, even one who regularly bathes with your mother. *Helikon, I shall not walk on you again*, cried the nymph Khariklo. *Your price is too high: my son’s eyes for a few stags*. And so Athena cleaned the boy’s ears to make amends, that he could hear what the birds said, and tell it to the Boietians and to the mighty descendants of Labdakos. It was a harsh price to pay, though better, as Athena pointed out, than the fate that befell the hunter Actaeon, who was torn apart by his own dogs for seeing Artemis bathing, so that his mother had to collect his scattered bones from among the briars and brambles.

It would have to be a diminutive goddess to bathe at the Ouse’s source, and yet the stream no longer seemed a benign place to be. The sense of trespass stayed with me as I looped back to Slaugham, through a private lane that led past a barn in which there hung a motionless trapeze. The path climbed up through a field of horses in medieval jousting masks and into a meadow of bent, brome and Yorkshire fog, full of bees out milling the

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clover. The pink and tawny grasses dipped and swayed, and above them the bees moved singly, humming as they passed until the air was full of sound.

This was better. I lay down in the sun and curled my legs beneath me. The noise was very lulling, and as my eyes began to close I remembered with the intensity of a dream an afternoon I'd once spent sprawled face down on a dirt bank in Scotland, watching bees entering and leaving a network of tiny caves that they'd cut into the earth like troglodytes. There were so many bees coming and going that the whole hillside seemed to struggle in the hot pine-scented air, agitating over and over itself. There must have been far more beneath the ground, and from each of the holes rose the sound of their wings: a distant, atonal hum, as if the soil had bedded down and was singing to itself.

Leonard Woolf used to keep bees. He had a hive at Monks House, the cottage in Rodmell that the Woolfs bought soon after the end of the First World War, and the occasion of their swarming provoked a strangely sexy entry in Virginia's diary:

Sitting after lunch we heard them outside, & on Sunday there they were again hanging in a quivering shiny brown black purse to Mrs Thompsett's tombstone. We leapt about in the long grass of the graves, Percy all dressed up in mackintosh, & netted hat. Bees shoot whizz, like arrows of desire: fierce, sexual; weave cat's cradles in the air; each whizzing from a string; the whole air full of vibration: of beauty, of the burning arrowy desire; & speed: I still think the quivering shifting bee bag the most sexual and sensual symbol.

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A few sentences later, still intoxicated by the image, she describes an ugly woman at a party, adding, ‘Why bees should swarm round her, I cant say.’

It seems a very complete Woolf that emerges from this episode: sensuous, exact, perhaps herself more wasp than bee, but nonetheless as attuned to nature as she is to artifice, and keen above all to get to the bottom of things, to find the exact word to pin down a sensation or sight she’s apprehended in the world. The diaries, it is true, are more shaggy, more luxuriant than the novels, and there is a stronger sense of a writer at play, practising her craft. But the polymorphous sexuality evident in this episode is entirely characteristic, and offers an appealing counter to the Virginia of the popular imagination, who might as well be made of glass.

One of the myths perpetuated about Virginia Woolf is that she was, as her name suggests, sexually unreachable: Patience on a monument, a woman constructed of alabaster and a fizzing brain. Certainly it is true that she told Leonard before the two were married, back in 1912, that she felt no physical attraction for him. But their courtship had its own charge and was, pleasingly enough, full of water, not all of it of the conventionally romantic kind. They went on a date to the *Titanic* inquest, had an initial kiss by the English Channel at Eastbourne and, on the afternoon when Virginia first declared her love, took a boat trip up the Thames at Maidenhead. A photograph taken at the time shows her looking both nervy and tough; it is a distinct improvement on the emaciated portrait in which she sits beside the poet Rupert Brooke, who looks like a plump Apollo – and also bears

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a distinct resemblance to Leonardo DiCaprio – in comparison to the chicken-bone girl squinting at his side.

Leonard and Virginia spent their first weekend together in Sussex, in the hills that overlook the Ouse, which passes in that region between the Downs at the base of a broad marshy valley, its final territory before the sea. Wandering through the green rolling fields, they came upon Asham, the house in which they would soon begin almost three decades of marriage. At the time of their wedding, both were in their thirties; both on the verge of completing their first novel. Leonard was Jewish, kindly, intense, his brilliance combined with a cold practicality that even then set him slightly outside the chatter of the Bloomsbury set. He had recently returned from Ceylon, where he had been working as an administrator under the auspices of the Colonial Civil Service. His father was dead, and he was afflicted despite his admirable strength of mind with a tremor of the hands that in times of stress he was helpless to control.

As for Virginia, she was an orphan. Her mother had died when she was still a child, and in 1902 her irascible father, Sir Leslie Stephen, the mountaineer and critic, was diagnosed with the bowel cancer that would kill him two years later. In the wake of each of these bereavements Virginia's mental health became unstable and she suffered the breakdowns that would, in the years after her death, come to define her. But she emerged from her madness determined to *work*; to write, and in this she was successful.

These two people, then, formed an alliance that cannot really be described as conventional. The marriage was consummated, but the sexual side never exactly took off and was soon abandoned. Virginia had a third breakdown just over a year after the wedding,

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and attempted suicide by overdosing on the sedative veronal before returning to a fragile equilibrium. Leonard took on at least sporadically the role of nursemaid and sometimes jailer, insisting on a programme of regular meals, early nights and limited excitements in order to keep his wife from toppling towards insanity again. But it should not be thought that Virginia was a vapid, vacant invalid, disconnected from the world in which she lived. She possessed throughout her life a glittering charm, much commented on by friends and enemies alike, as well as an acute sense of the ridiculous that made her almost incapable of self-pity.

A marriage is a private business, even for people who leave behind them such a vast litter of diaries, letters and third-party gossip. What occurs at its centre, what bonds maintain it, are not always visible, or even guessable, to the outsider's greedy eye. But the sense that arises from this residue of words is of an abiding love, comprised in equal parts of affection and intellectual stimulation. *My inviolable centre*, Virginia called Leonard, and the last words she wrote were to him alone: a testament, against all the odds, to the happiness they'd shared. The title of one of the many books about the Woolfs' liaison is *The Marriage of True Minds*, a line drawn from Sonnet 116, itself an ode to enduring love. The sentiment is accurate enough, but it is a couplet later in the poem –

*Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.*

– that I think may be even more appropriate, all things considered.

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The bees were still passing through the meadow, drifting along their wobbling paths a few feet above my head. I rolled onto my back and spread out beneath the sun. It was so warm it felt as if my flesh were melting, and when I closed my eyes the light made a kaleidoscope on the inside of their lids. 'The bees of infinity', the filmmaker Derek Jarman once called them, 'the golden swarm . . . their pollen sacs all different yellows'. Bee-keeping was one of the activities he turned to when he was dying of AIDS, when he moved to Prospect Cottage, the little wooden house on Dungeness beach, the fifth quarter at the end of the globe. He kept them in a hive made of railway sleepers, in the garden he wrestled from the shingle, and they made honey from the woodsage in August and in January from the gorse.

In his last years, I remembered then, Jarman too went blind, when toxoplasmosis ravaged his retinas. 'Someone . . . said losing your sight must be frightening,' he wrote in his diary. 'Not so, as long as you have a safe harbour in the sea of shadows. Just inconvenient. If you woke on a dark day, had only the mind's eye with which to see your way, would you turn back?' And later: 'The day of our death is sealed up. I do not wish to die . . . yet. I would love to see my garden through several summers.' His last film, *Blue*, replicated his own sightless vision: an unchanging blue screen for seventy-nine minutes. It's the colour of the void, the saturated ultramarine of the world behind the sky. The soundtrack, a drift of memories interwoven with poetry, misquotes William Blake: 'If the doors of perception were cleansed then everything would be seen as it is.'

I stood abruptly and as I did the blood rushed to my head

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and I rose amid the whirling grasses temporarily both dizzy and blind, the roar of the bees bouncing off me in a language I couldn't begin to decode, let alone to prophesy.

Back at the Chequers, I slept until the sun dropped to its final quarter, and then went to the bar, where I ate an almighty burger that fell apart when I poked it, watched over by a moustachioed dog whose owner did not move an inch the entire time I was there. But it was impossible not to go out again, into the lovely, diminishing day. The swallows were rising and falling about the church tower when I left, calling in high voices above the grave of Nelson's sister.

The path I took led to Slaugham Furnace Pond, a relic of the iron industry that once dominated this region. The idea that nature can be prised free from civilisation is, in England's overpopulated south at least, absurd. The landscape hereabouts has been shaped by centuries of man's activities, as man, I suppose, has been shaped by the land. To make nails or cannons, or the dainty tweezers that even the Romans used, you needed iron, and the combination of dense woodland to fuel the charcoal fires and clay rich in ironstone ore set the Weald at the heart of the industry from before the Romans until the beginning of the Industrial Revolution.

The earliest furnace ponds were formed by damming streams with clay bays, to provide the steady outflow of water that would power the bellows of the bloomery, the furnace used to smelt