HIGH PRAISE FOR BLOOD KNOTS

"From the arresting title—*Blood Knots*— to the final word, Luke Jennings commands our awe and admiration with this unusually fine, wholly engaging memoir of that life-affirming trinity—fathers, friendship and fishing."

—Tom Brokaw

"Luke Jennings' *Blood Knots* is a wondrous book. As a lifetime obsessive reader of angling literature, I know whereof I speak. As an occasional writer of it, I am humbled indeed. In modern times, Jennings is in the stratosphere of Roderick Haig-Brown and Tom McGuane's rarified *The Longest Silence*. The prose is graceful and the treatment of material utterly fresh. I couldn't recommend it more highly."

—Jim Harrison

"*Blood Knots* is one of those books so surprising in its depth, its effect, its power, as to leave a reader with a sense of an inability to convey just how intense and wonderful it is. But make no mistake. This is a book written from the heart, one that acknowledges the mysteries in fishing, which, as the author so gracefully manages to suggest, is a stand-in and an expression for many other of the most powerful parts of being human. On top of everything else, it is so keenly written as to make the beauty of the English language seem new."

—Craig Nova

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FOREWORD

I AM AN AVID, OFTEN UNSATISFIED, READER OF ANGLING LITERATURE, unable to absorb much new information about technical advances in equipment or the view of angling as a problem and the ingenuity required to solve it. Izaak Walton set the stage for angling escapism as he left a dangerous London after the defeat of the Royalists for forty years of fishing and rusticating in the safer countryside. It wouldn't be the great book it is if he had stuck to his knitting and wrote a real "fishing book"; and it is sometimes held against him that his book is short on tips, though Cotton helped a bit later with an appended Second Part to *The Complete Angler*, which is full of tips, mostly useless. Nearly all information on how to catch more fish has a fleeting lifespan. Nevertheless, Walton's wandering and musing had enough weight to give the book its enduring resonance. He's Montaigne with a fishing rod, and like his progenitor, happy to face his inadequacies and get on with it, hundreds of years before fluorocarbon.

Life can be written about from any vantage point: the law, high steel, falconry, night flight, war, sailing, and so on—and it has occasionally and memorably been written about from the vantage point of angling. Such books often come from an unexpected source—ironmonger Izaak Walton, opera singer Harry Plunkett Greene, or the sometime garbage collector Harry Middleton—but they stay around for a long time buoyed by the esteem and

insistence of readers. Dance critic Luke Jennings belongs in this company and *Blood Knots* is a great book. It is full of glimmering fishing moments and sharp portraiture, astute comments on angling literature, and elegant, dry humor.

Angling is a training in mystery. Most anglers are like Jennings in remembering some living thing appearing from the depths and engaging part of the mind that thereafter is never quite at rest. It doesn't have to be Melville's whale "insinuating its vast bulk"; for Jennings, it was an eel, rising into view, vanishing, and above all, eluding immediate explanation. For Roderick Haig-Brown, it was a great pike under a trestle seen from a train window. For me, it was brook trout in a rivulet behind my aunt's house, bright underwater birds. I was four years old and I am still in its clutches. The first throb of a hooked fish threw Sergei Aksakov into a seizure that resembled epilepsy. Mild reservations about his angling abilities occasioned in Anton Chekhov a spell of pique and bad temper, unheard of in that most humane of all men. He must have seen something.

Jennings' attraction to mystery has taken him in several directions besides angling, whose illuminations of the natural world are its own excuse. He is the son of a tank commander so badly scarred by fire and metal-splash in a clash with German infantry that his mother had to apply medicinal salves to his body every day for the rest of his life. The unfolding story, the event, its lesson in heroism and loyalty reflect in part his attraction to mystery with its basis in love. But it begins like the half-glimpsed eel. Jennings' father strikes this reader as the sort of mentor/hero who seems not ever to have been looking for trouble.

His other mentor was of a different sort, Robert Nairac, a Catholic of almost "medieval" devotion, predictably influenced by T. H. White and Lawrence of Arabia, a splendid outdoorsman with the older-boy gleam irresistible to young sportsmen craving initiation to the natural word. It is hard to image what loyalty

might have meant to Nairac, except as a praxis for adventure. Certainly there was more. From him, Jennings learned the value of stealth, a skill Nairac idealized in angling, and, as would be seen elsewhere: his daring as an undercover SAS officer in Northern Ireland led to his murder by the IRA. Nairac was a controversial figure, accused of complicity in Unionist "enhanced interrogation," but he met a terrible end with tremendous courage. His sense of duty, inflamed by religion, adventure, and a romantic streak, set a very different example for Jennings than did the heroism of his father: beacon and comet.

So, there is some of it: a novelist and dance critic looks out upon his years fishing, a battle-scarred parent standing remarkably in his own shoes, a mentor killed in the sectarian violence of Ireland, witty anecdotes of British class rivalry, a doomed glam-rocker René Berg, whose 41-pound pike eclipsed a record that had stood since 1797, a land and its rivers lovingly described by a man with a rod in his hand, a marvelous memory and the art to take you there.

—Thomas McGuane
McLeod, Montana
July, 2011

ONE

BY CLOSING TIME THERE'S NOT MUCH TRAFFIC GOING PAST the King's Cross goods yards; perhaps it's too late at night, or too close to Christmas. You can hear the distant rumble of the cars on the Euston Road, but in the yards it's quiet. And very cold.

To get to the canal you have to duck underneath an advertising hoarding and push open an iron gate; although this used to be padlocked, someone's taken a pair of bolt-cutters to it and now it just needs a good shove. Beyond it there's a railway maintenance supply area piled with concrete railway sleepers, rusted steel reinforcing rods and rectangles of welded wire mesh. Overlooking this are two low sheds. A pyramid of ceramic powerline insulators stands outside one of these and beside it a couple of figures are bowed over a flickering lighter. The tiny flame dies as I pass and then rekindles. There may be other people that I can't see. Some of the yard is lit by the sodium glare of the lights on Goods Way, whilst most of it is black shadow.

At the top of the yard there's the sharp smell of fox shit. The second gate's hard to see, concealed behind ragged bushes of

sycamore and wild lilac, but I know it's there, just as I know to avoid the razor wire that loops above it. The gate swings open. In front of me, flat and metallic, is the canal, reflecting the Mars-red glow of the city. I stare at it for a moment, my breath vaporizing, and wonder whether to fish right here. It's deep at this point, a great tank of water held between banks of Victorian brick. Opposite me, on the far bank, is the dark mass of a disused warehouse, rusted bars guarding its long-broken windows. At its base, as if awaiting collection from the towpath, stands an old spin-dryer. Everything about the place suggests neglect. And big pike thrive on neglect.

However, it's not where I've come to fish. I've come to fish downstream of here, in a place I've been tipped off about. My source is Dejohn. Most fishermen will tell you anything, just for the hell and the geniality of it, but Dejohn's information is usually good. Aged fourteen and a habitual truant, he knows every inch of this stretch. We're not friends, exactly, but we talk.

I saw him a week ago at the Vale of Health Pond on Hampstead Heath. It was a Saturday afternoon, and the light was going. Dejohn had caught a small rudd and was using it as live-bait, illegally but excitingly drifting it across the pond beneath a fluorescent yellow float in the hope of enticing a pike. We swapped stories as usual and I told him that I'd heard that someone had landed half a dozen jack-pike weighing up to six pounds from a barge on the Kingsland Basin in de Beauvoir Town. Dejohn mused on this for a moment and then said that he'd heard – second-hand, but he trusted the source – about some bloke who'd been drinking in the Pentonville Road and at closing time, well pissed up, had decided to go fishing. So he'd hauled his gear out of the van, dragged it to the canal, set himself up with a dead-bait rig, and gone to sleep in his chair. At 3 a.m. he'd woken up to find line running off his reel, and had struck into a big fish. When he felt the weight of it, Dejohn said – and the dead, dour resistance of a

water was coloured from the rain, so at first all that was visible was a dark shadow, but gradually you could make out the long back, the rapacious jaw, the slow fanning of the pectoral fins. When I had landed and unhooked it I held it up for a moment. River pike are olive-green, the colour of stones flecked with sunlight, but this was a deep-water fish, as dark and grim as old armour. Eyeing its teeth, meeting its unflinching gaze, the boy backed away.

'Jesus,' he breathed. 'What is that?'

I told him. And as I slid it back into the water I added that it wasn't particularly big, as they went. That there were pike there three times its size.

'Jesus,' he repeated, looking around him as if seeing the city for the first time.

> As to the shape and proportion of this great devourer, the figure of his body is very long, his back broad, and almost square, equal to the lowest fins: his head is lean and very bony, which bones in his head, some have resembled to things of mysterious consequence; one of which they commonly compare to the cross, another to the spear, three others to the bloody nails which were the instruments of our Saviour's passions. (Robert Nobbes, *The Complete Troller*, 1682)

The cold hardens, and the first currents of wind come nosing down the canal from the east, burring the water's surface like an iron file. A few yards away, on the bridge, an occasional car passes, as if in another dimension. My world has contracted to a box of darkness: to the walls, the towpath and the black of the water. As always, there's the temptation to wind in the bait a little, to check that it's OK, but that way madness lies, because you'll never really know what's happening down there.

Nor would you want to, because in an over-illuminated world, a world whose dark corners are in constant retreat from the

remorseless, banal march of progress, this not knowing is a thing to be valued and enjoyed. It may be that your hooks are caught in the rusting spokes of a bicycle wheel, that your bait has already been stripped from the hook by Chinese mitten-crabs, but this is the nature of fishing. The odds are almost overwhelmingly against you and that is how you like it. All that you can do is offer your bait to the water, empty your mind, and reach for your thermos, your hip flask and whatever other comforting poisons you've brought with you.

In other words, you must acknowledge the ritual nature of what you're doing. If a butterfly beats its wings in the Caribbean, they say, this can set in train a series of events culminating in a hurricane in the Pacific. Students of a post-modern form of occultism known as Chaos Magic take the idea further, suggesting that, under the proper conditions, this Butterfly Effect can be harnessed for wish-fulfilment. The technique involves a ritual consignment of the wish to the elements and an intense visualization of the required outcome. The dynamics of chaos will do the rest.

In the past, these ritual actions were often accompanied by invocations. One thought to be particularly effective was devised by the Elizabethan mage John Dee. It's written in the Enochian language, which, Dee claimed, was revealed to him by angels, with whom he and his fellow magician Edward Kelley regularly conversed. Usefully, Dee kept records of these exchanges, and a century later, in 1659, Meric Casaubon collected and published them under the title *A True and Faithful Relation of What Passed for Many Years between Dr John Dee and Some Spirits*. The book is in the British Library, a few hundred yards from where I'm fishing, and was the basis for the system of high ritual magic developed by the twentieth-century occultist Aleister Crowley for the Order of the Golden Dawn, the secret hermetic society of which he was a member. John Dee's invocation for wish-fulfilment ended with the

following words:

> SA CHAOS ANGELARD HARG AZIAGIAR. OD IONAS.
> (Into chaos the wish is cast. May it be harvested.)

You could try this when fishing: it certainly echoes every angler's intention. Some occultists favour adding to the invocation the mantra, *Zarzas Zarzas Nastana Zarzas*. These words, which are beyond translation, are said to summon Choronzon, the baleful Watcher of the Abyss. Crowley, who claimed to have raised Choronzon in the Algerian desert in 1909 (and to have terrified himself and his companion half witless in the process), advises against this. The wise angler will heed his counsel. Specimen coarse fish are one thing, the Dark Lord of Entropy quite another.

As it happens, there's a tenuous connection between Crowley and my family. In 1903, having met her just twenty-four hours earlier at a Scottish spa, Crowley absconded with Rose Kelly, the sister of the painter Gerald Kelly, and married her the same day. Furious, Kelly determined that the marriage be annulled. He knew Crowley well; the two men had met at Cambridge a few years earlier and were both marauding sexual adventurers. They had probably shared lovers in Paris the year before and may even have been lovers themselves (in letters to Kelly, Crowley sometimes signed himself Maud, although this in itself doesn't prove anything. Rod Stewart and Elton John used to call each other Sharon and Phyllis).

It didn't take a genius to guess that the Crowleys' marriage wasn't going to survive. The couple were divorced six years later in the wake of Crowley's persistent infidelity and cruelty, and Rose would eventually die an alcoholic. During these upsetting times Kelly was befriended and counselled by Harnett Ellison Jennings, my great-grandfather, then the vicar of Dulwich. Perhaps it was out of gratitude that Kelly painted a fine, sombre, life-sized

portrait of the Reverend Harnett robed as a Doctor of Divinity. We have it still.

In fact, Rose and Crowley were not completely incompatible. On their honeymoon they went to Ceylon, as it was then named, where Crowley took up shooting. Having discovered that the island's giant fruit bats were renowned for their soft belly fur, he decided to try and kill enough of them to make himself a waistcoat and Rose a hat. With his first shot, taken from a lakeside punt, a wounded bat fell on Rose. The experience had a profound effect on her and that night Crowley was awakened by a highpitched squeaking. Lighting a candle, he found his wife hanging naked from the frame of the mosquito net. No one could accuse her of failing to get into the spirit of things.

We're drifting here, as you often do when fishing. Half of you is tensely expectant, while half of you enters a zone of no time at all. The question is: what does the angler wish for when he casts? What, as the chaos people might put it, is the willed endpoint of the working? On the surface, the answer appears simple: to catch a fish. You want to deceive a wild creature, take it from its element, marvel over it and return it to the wild. But that's only part of it – what you might call the ego element. The living, wriggling proof of your skill and cunning. Proof that, in the right circumstances, you can get one over the natural world.

For a time, that's what I thought it was all about. Success or failure. Statistics. The numbers game. The late Bernard Venables, author of the classic Mr Crabtree fishing books, used to say that there are three stages to the angler's evolution. To begin with, as a child, you just want to catch fish – any fish. Then you move to the stage where you want to catch big fish. And finally, with nothing left to prove, you reach a place where it's the manner of the catch that counts, the rigour and challenge of it, at which point the whole thing takes on an intellectual and perhaps even a philosophical cast. I tried out this theory on a pike-angling friend

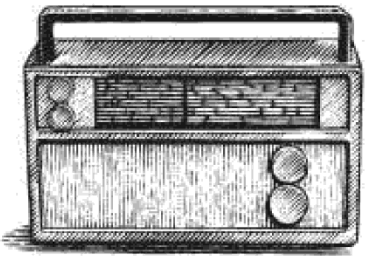
of mine, the rock guitarist René Berg. 'It's like with women, then?' he said thoughtfully.

We agreed that there was truth in the three-stage theory, but not the whole truth. The ego thing is certainly important. When I was a boy, and you stayed in a pub or hotel that had trout fishing attached to it, it was conventional to display the day's catch on a salver in the hall. It would have taken the Dalai Lama to ignore the competitive undercurrent. No one went so far as to add his name, but by dinnertime everyone knew who had caught what, and if you had laid out a decent fish you could expect a quiet 'Well done, old boy!' from the major as you sat down to the Brown Windsor soup.

Of course, most fishermen soon progress beyond the need to prove themselves and the desire to compile lists of statistics. Most soon realize that there are 'easy' fish, like small roach and perch, and subtle, challenging fish like carp or barbel. However, there is something fundamental beyond which the lifelong angler never quite progresses. Something for which the three-stage theory makes no allowances (although Venables himself, as his writing indirectly makes clear, was well aware of it). And that's what happens when you hook a big fish. A pike, especially.

The best big pike waters have a numinous, forbidding air. Cold, reed-fringed East Anglian meres. Desolate Irish loughs. Dark, secretive waters 'as deep as England', as Ted Hughes puts it. You feel that you're trespassing, that you're violating some natural law just by being there. Certain stretches of London waterways like the Regent's Canal and the River Lea fall into this category. These silent conduits barely figure in most local people's lives. As the years have passed they've become invisible, walled off from residential areas and the footpaths of commerce as if they present a danger. And perhaps they do: what could be more fatal to the garishly hyped-up business of consumption than, like a memento mori, a sudden glimpse of black water, sliding past as silent as the Styx? I will be here when your lifestyle accessories are landfill,

There are places, invariably near bodies of water, where that sense of an unremembered past is particularly strong. Where you turn a corner and know for certain that you've been there before. Fishing, at such times, is an almost wholly symbolic activity, and to see the pluck and twitch of your line in the current is to know a very particular anticipation. That somehow, in the connection with the invisible forms below, you'll connect with your own deep history.



TWO

THE YEAR IS 1961, IT'S A SULTRY DAY IN EARLY SEPTEMBER, and I'm seven. In a couple of days' time I start at boarding school, a thought that induces an empty chill behind my breastbone. It's ordained, however, and the process is no more to be resisted than the summer's end. New pyjamas have been bought, new face flannels and Chilprufe vests have been name-taped, new football boots wait in their box. 'You must be excited,' people say, and I gravely agree that this is the case.

For the moment, though, summer is hanging on, stale and a little desperate, and my parents have driven me and my brothers Anthony and James to Swanbourne Lake, four miles from where we live in West Sussex. It's a pretty spot, lying in the wooded lee of Arundel Castle, but it's crowded. There are busy queues at the tea caravan and the ice-cream stall, and wasps are swirling around the overflowing litterbins. At the lakeside, you can hire rowing boats from a weather-beaten couple in brown coats. The couple have a small hut, in front of which is a chair with a transistor radio on it, playing 'Fings Ain't What They Used to Be', by Max Bygraves. The radio, a newish model, has attracted a circle of mostly male admirers, and in the tea queue women in floppy sunhats are

laughing and swaying along to the chorus.

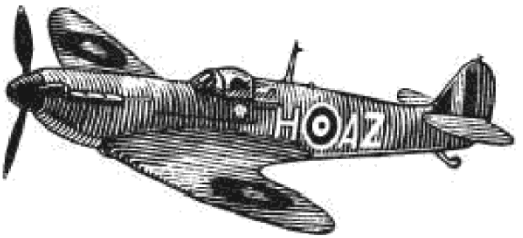
My brothers and I are interested spectators of this bonhomie, while my parents watch with rather more detachment. My father is in his shirtsleeves and his flannel trousers are held up with a regimental tie. My mother is in a straw hat and an Italian print dress. Neither has embraced the concept of 'leisure' clothing, nor ever will. Until the day that he dies, my father will never wear any form of T-shirt, untailored jacket, or shoe without laces. He simply wouldn't have been capable of it, any more than my mother would have been capable of wearing slacks or of dyeing her hair.

As there's a bit of a wait for the boats, we join the ice-cream queue, and are eventually face to face with the gypsyish stallowner and her rocker son, who glares at us with surly contempt from beneath his oily quiff as he hands us our ice creams, which come in round moulded wafers called oysters. Finally, with an hour's hire paid, we push off from the bank in one of the heavy, clinker-built skiffs. Recoated each spring with green lead paint, these are built to withstand daily collisions and are powered by massive oars in clanking rowlocks. Slowly, to my father's steady pull, we move away from the shore.

For a time Anthony and I return to one of our favourite meditations, which concerns the poisoning of one of his schoolmates. If he dies, runs our reasoning, then we will not have to go to another of his birthday parties: overpoweringly melancholy events featuring warm orange barley water, Shippam's paste sandwiches and organized games. A generous cocktail of yew, foxglove, jack-in-the-pulpit and deadly nightshade should do it – like all country children, we know which plants and berries are the most toxic – but that's the easy bit. The harder part will be persuading our victim to swallow the mixture and then preventing him from shopping us to his parents while in his death throes. In some ways, we agree, it probably makes more sense to wipe out the entire family.

These musings, while constituting a comforting retreading of old ground, fail to dispel my growing sense of apprehension, or the feeling that something irrecoverable is about to come to an end. In less than thirty-six hours' time I will be lying in bed in a dormitory full of total strangers. Trailing my fingers over the side of the boat, I stare into the water. We are at the far end of the lake from the crowds now, sliding through the clear water in the shadow of a stand of trees. At intervals shafts of refracted sunlight pierce the branches and the looking-glass surface, illuminating the emerald weed six feet below, like the canopy of a tropical forest. I'm staring down into one such column of light when suddenly the greenery parts and a large eel glides into view. For a moment I see it clearly – the arrow-taper of the head, the fanning pectorals, the muscular grace of the bronze body – and then it's gone.

I stare after it into the olive shadows. 'I saw an eel!' I say, and the others lunge for the side of the boat, sending the shadows rocking. What I can't explain is that it's not just the eel, it's the revelation – the opening and closing of the shutter on an alien world. That tall, mysterious chamber of green, speared with light but vanishing into darkness. What Aztec empires might that darkness hold? What escape might it represent?



THREE

My first rod came from a tobacconist in Arundel High Street – an impulse buy by my father, who had gone in for a packet of Senior Service. It was about five feet long and made of fibreglass, with a wooden handle and an alloy reel-seat kept in place with a nail. It came with a two-inch, centre-pin reel that had been enamelled a weird pink colour, a packet of hooks and split-shot, a float, and twenty yards of bright-green line. I was eight.

When my father brought it back to the car I insisted on trying it out immediately. We drove out of town until we came to a place where a stream ran under the road. I laboriously rigged up the whole thing, lashing the hook to the line with a sturdy quadruple granny knot. A hurried roadside search revealed a fat earthworm. Attaching this to the hook, I pulled the line off the reel, which screamed in protest, and swung the tackle into the water a yard in front of me. To my delight the float cocked. Three feet below it I could see the worm wriggling on its hook. Grasping the rod handle with both hands I waited for a fish to dash out and take it – an event which, surely, could be only seconds away. Minutes passed, but nothing happened. The bait just hung there below me. No fish came. And yet surely I was doing everything right? Surely there could be no more to it than this? I looked round at my father, who

but I felt I knew them, and when years later I fished waters that they had made famous, like the Royalty on the Hampshire Avon, I sensed their presence there.

I owe so much to that unnamed but enlightened book-buyer at Arundel library – surely an angler himself. I remember Peter Stone's *Legering* arriving there. It was published in 1963 and the library bought it the following year, when I was eleven. To my enormous satisfaction I was the first to take it out, newly wrapped in its clear plastic jacket. Recently I looked through the used book lists on the internet to see whether I could find a copy. There was one, a first edition heart-stoppingly marked 'library copy', which had found its way to a store in Chicago, Illinois, and now cost over $200.

I tended to borrow books and run, because browsing in the library meant that one was likely to come to the notice of Mr Fox. 'Firefighter' Fox was a master at my school. A dapper Scotsman in the autumn of his life, he had at some point suffered a severe head injury that had left him with a matchbox-sized indentation in his forehead and a wild-eyed, eccentric manner. At some point in his career, according to rumour, he had also served with the local fire service, hence his nickname.

Whilst this colourful background did not make Firefighter a compelling English teacher, he was nevertheless a generally benign bloke with two obsessions that could be counted on to enliven a class. The first of these, which was not unreasonable given that he was a devout Catholic and a loyal Scot, was a visceral hatred of Queen Elizabeth I. The second, rather more obscure, was his unswerving admiration for László Bíró, the Hungarian-born inventor of the ballpoint pen. An extreme pedant in matters of pronunciation, Firefighter insisted that biro should be pronounced *beer-oh*, and that any deviation from this, particularly *byre-oh*, represented a slur against the great man. To either of these topics, he would rise like a starving trout, never learning from

experience.

PUPIL (*looking up innocently from* Dragon Book of Verse):

Excuse me, sir, why was Elizabeth I called the Virgin Queen?

FOX (*bristling*): The *Virgin* Queen? To all right-thinking men she was the Bastard Queen.

PUPIL: Oh, come on, sir. At least she executed Mary Queen of Scots.

SECOND PUPIL (*as Fox's eyes begin to bulge*): Sir, please Sir, my pen's run out. Can I borrow a biro?

And so on.

Fox haunted the Arundel library. It was no more than a couple of hundred yards from the cathedral, and whenever the bells rang out, as they did at least four times hourly, he would sink to his knees in a quasi-mediaeval display of piety. If I happened to be there, he would forcibly compel me to do the same thing. Given the library's popularity, this was more than a little embarrassing. I remember roomfuls of respectable browsers staring at the pair of us open-mouthed: Firefighter kneeling in prayer, his lips moving slowly, his hand heavy on my shoulder, and me bowed in mortification over a copy of Peter Stone's *Bream and Barbel*.

I read, and from working my way through the key angling texts as voraciously as a pike through a tank of goldfish, I amassed a huge backlog of theory on subjects like free-lining, long-trotting and stret-pegging, the use of the slider float and the paternoster rig, the application of the Arlesey bomb and the coffin-lead. One of the few books I actually owned was *Teach Yourself Fishing* by Tom Rodway. There were Teach Yourself books on every conceivable subject, from Swahili to stamp collecting, trigonometry to personal efficiency. They cost five shillings, came in a distinctive blue-and-yellow hardback cover and were small enough to jam into a school trouser pocket. *Teach Yourself Fishing*, which covered every aspect

of the sport, was practical without being too specialist and, because it didn't have to be returned to the library, could be kept at my side during term-time. With the help of a torch, its discussions of hook sizes, shotting patterns and monofilament breaking-strains could be pored over under the sheets in the dormitory after lights-out (batteries had shorter lives in those days, but you could buy yourself extra reading time by leaving them on a warm radiator during the day).

Rodway's instructions and black-and-white line drawings would transport me to realms I knew from my reading but had never visited. In my imagination I slipped through the Norfolk Broads in a flat-bottomed punt, amassing huge catches of roach and bream. I cast subtly prepared baits to monstrous carp in elm-fringed Hertfordshire ponds at nightfall, watched the give-away needle bubbles of tench on Blenheim Palace lake at dawn, saw the ranunculus streamers on the Hampshire Avon part to reveal magisterial ranks of feeding barbel and chub.

And as each leviathan was hooked, landed and gently returned, there would be a nod of approval from the spirit guides. From Richard Walker in his battered felt hat, from the genially chuckling Fred J, or from Mr Crabtree, quietly tamping his pipe. Mr Crabtree was the fictional star of a comic strip in the *Daily Mirror*, drawn by Bernard Venables. Originally created to dispense horticultural advice, Mr Crabtree found fame when, one winter's day when there was nothing much to do in the garden, Venables had him go fishing. The response from the public was immediate. Seeing which way the wind was blowing, the *Mirror* allowed Venables to phase out the hardy perennials.

The collected comic strips, published as *Mr Crabtree Goes Fishing*, became the best-selling angling book of the twentieth century. In each strip the sapient Crabtree takes his ten-year-old son Peter fishing. There is infinite time for this, and wherever the pair go – willow-shaded chalk streams, slack-water pike swims, reed-fringed

lakes full of specimen tench – they always have the place to themselves. When they go live-baiting for pike, Mr Crabtree introduces Peter to 'Tom, the bait-catcher', a deferential figure in a flat cap. And of course, in this unchanging dream world, they never have a blank day. Sooner or later the quill float shudders or the live-bait is seized, and after a short but dramatic battle Peter is marvelling over yet another prize. In all of this, every nuance of weather and water is realized in black-and-white line illustration. And yet it was not implausible, nor was Mr Crabtree an improbable figure. There were elements of him in my father and in the fathers of my school friends: trilby-wearing, pipe-smoking professional men who had fought in the Second World War and then returned to the British countryside.

It was a conflict that, in the early 1960s, was still very much in the schoolboy consciousness. Without exception, we read War Picture Library comics, played with 8th Army and Afrika Korps mini-soldiers, made Airfix models of Spitfires and Lancaster bombers, owned Luger cap-guns, and watched films like *Albert RN* and *I Was Monty's Double*. And of course the games we organized in our free time were always British versus German. The rules were straightforward. A bramble patch in the school grounds represented a fort that had to be taken or defended. Both sides would pile in, wrestling opponents to the ground and riddling them with fire from invisible Tommy guns and Schmeissers. Inevitably, the line between history and imagination became blurred. One school friend, born as I was in 1953, breezily confided to the rest of the class that although he preferred not to talk about it, both his parents had actually been tortured to death by the Nazis. At seven years of age, we saw no reason to disbelieve him.

Mr Crabtree, I imagined, had been an officer in one of the more technical regiments, the REME, perhaps, or the Royal Engineers. And he had then gone on to manage a local auctioneers, maybe, or work in a land agency, thus making the connections that provided

access to so many miles of fishing. Peter's mother, whom we never meet but who spends happy days preparing steamed pike with parsley sauce, might well have been a Wren. And their cook-housekeeper Patsy, to whose reddened hands are consigned more mundane tasks like roasting perch and ironing Peter's shorts, had probably worked in a munitions factory.

Although jeans became popular for children in the 1960s, many mothers, learning the hard way what a nightmare they were to wash by hand, and how resistant to the mangle, kept their sons in shorts for as much of the year as possible. The result, for middle-class country boys like me, was perpetually bramble-scratched legs and scabbed knees, with the resultant scars worn as a badge of pride. Peter Crabtree never wears anything except shorts, just as his father, whatever the circumstances, is never without a tie.

The biographer Adam Sisman, a one-time fishing companion of the poet Ted Hughes, once elaborated an entire Crabtree mythos to me, in which Mr Crabtree became a policeman after the war and was involved in the 1967 drugs bust of The Rolling Stones. The *Daily Mirror* strip was launched just after the war, but outside London the slow-moving, socially conservative world it described was still very much in place two decades later – certainly in our corner of West Sussex. When he was six, my brother Anthony asked his English teacher who The Beatles were. 'They're four very wicked young men,' came the answer, and there the matter rested.

Thanks to the library, I soon had angling theory to spare. What I needed, badly, was practice. This, however, was less straightforward than it might have been, as there were very few fishable places within bus or bicycle-riding range. At once the most accessible and the least promising was the village duck pond, a shallow and dispiriting body of water with an ornamental island in the middle bearing a single dwarf willow. It was bordered on three sides by roads and on the fourth by a melancholy parade of shops, including one selling only knitting wool. You occasionally

an obstacle course of overhanging snags. I wasn't by any means the only one after these fish, as at least a dozen snappedoff tangles of line in the branches attested. Half the boys in the village had them in their sights, and it was their efforts that had educated the fish to such an extreme pitch of caution. Even if I were to avoid the snags, a splashy cast would send my quarry racing into cover.

In the event, the same scenario played itself out again and again. I'd gingerly swing the bait out with an underarm cast and it would fall several feet short. I would then be faced with the choice: do I leave it where it is – in the wrong place but at least in the water – or try again and risk a snag? I'd always go for the second choice. Out would go the bait, this time with a bit more force. And then, invariably, a horrible silence. No watery plop, no jaunty cocking of the quill float, just the tackle swinging disconsolately from the overhanging foliage.

For a moment I'd put off admitting to myself that this had happened. I'd give the line the softest of pulls, to try to dislodge the hook. This never worked – it just drove the hook deeper into the branch. So I'd pull harder. Possibly, just possibly, the branch could be snapped off. But it was summer and the wood was green. So I'd pull again, really hard this time, which would achieve nothing except to send the shadow of the branch skittering across the surface and scatter any remaining fish once and for all. Angry now, knowing that it was all over, I'd point the rod at the snag and reel the line tight. Soon the nylon monofilament would be humming with tension while the offending bough twitched under the strain, shedding insects and fragments of twig into the water below. Another couple of ratchet clicks and the line would part with a crack like a pistol shot. Glumly, knowing the session was over, I'd wade out into the muddy water to retrieve my hook and float, and then, plimsolls squelching, start the half-mile trudge home.

On a couple of occasions, by some miracle of co-ordination and

good luck, I managed to send my baited hook careening between the overhanging branches to land on target. Sadly, however, that was where the story ended. My bread pellet would hang there untouched – a dim, pale speck two feet beneath the surface – for as many hours as I stayed there. The fish, meanwhile, were cheerfully feeding away on the far side of the pond. The moment I packed up, of course, they'd be back again, dimpling and nosing and carrying on as if the previous few hours had never happened.

They drove me crazy, those fish. I hated them for the effortlessness with which they evaded me, and I hated myself for my heavy-handed incompetence. The trouble was that I was ten years old and impatient in all things. When you made an Airfix model of a Spitfire, the prevailing wisdom (at our school, at least) was that you were supposed to paint the various parts first with enamel paint – brown and green camouflage on top, duck-egg blue below – and only when this was dry could you glue the whole thing together. One way and another, it was at least a forty-eight-hour process. But I could never bear to wait. I wanted the completed plane immediately, so I'd glue all the parts together at high speed and then, with the thing still wobbly on its wheels, start painting. The results were as messy as may be imagined and never good enough to hang on a thread from the ceiling. On the positive side, though, these exercises left me with a very satisfactory carapace of dried Airfix glue all over my fingers. This resolutely resisted the school Lifebuoy soap and would remain on the fingers until picked off flake by flake – the perfect way to spend a slowmoving maths or geography class.

Two things distinguished the really well-made model Spitfire: the propeller whizzed round satisfyingly when you blew on it, and you could see the pilot in the cockpit. To get the propeller to go round, you had to assemble it, let the glue dry for twenty-four hours, and then slot it into place as you joined the two halves of the fuselage. In order to see the pilot, you had to apply the finest

filament of Airfix glue to the cockpit surround and snap the canopy delicately into place. If you were clumsy, and got the powerful solvent on the transparent plastic, as I invariably did, it would corrode, bubbling into an opaque froth.

Real Spitfire canopies looked a bit like this, I discovered later, if the main header tank was hit by enemy cannon-fire. The tank was located directly in front of the cockpit, and the high-octane fuel would ignite with ferocious speed, melting the canopy and drowning the pilot in a torrent of flame. My father got to know a number of fighter pilots who had suffered this fate after he himself had been severely burnt in a tank battle shortly after D-Day. With his situation critical, he was flown home to the pioneering reconstructive unit in East Grinstead run by the plastic surgeon Archibald McIndoe. There, after more than forty agonizing operations, he became a member of the exclusive Guinea Pig Club, made up of the servicemen who had been in the care of McIndoe and his burns team.

The Guinea Pigs were a drinking club, and given the hell that they'd endured – the months of pain, the constant stench of open wounds and putrefying flesh, the screams that echoed through the wards every night as the nightmares returned, the fear that the outside world would find their rebuilt faces freakish and grotesque – these young men had earned the right to take a drink or two. However dark the hour, most of them managed to hold on to their sense of humour. There were macabre practical jokes. Patients recovering consciousness after operations, for example, would wake to find themselves rouged and lipsticked like prostitutes, or laid out like corpses with funereal wreaths on their chests. My father was one of the luckier ones, in that his face eventually healed well. You'd have known that he'd been badly burnt at some point, but that was the limit of it. The lasting damage was to his hands. His fingers never straightened, and the joints were stiff and painful for the rest of his life.

After that first day, when I was eight, he never fished with me again. Even if he'd been interested in it, which he wasn't, the intricate businesses of knot tying and hook handling would have been beyond him. He encouraged me from a distance, though, looking up from his desk or his book with a solicitous 'Any luck?' when I returned at the end of a session, to which the answer was invariably a mute shake of the head. This detached approach suited us both. There were areas in which he could still be my guide, but this was not one of them. I had to make the journey alone.

FOUR

BY MY ELEVENTH BIRTHDAY I STILL HADN'T ACTUALLY caught a fish and was beginning to doubt that I ever would. It never occurred to me that there was any course open to me other than bashing on by myself. Had my father known more about the fishing scene, he might have directed me to a local club, most of which ran junior sections and where I might have learnt some practical technique. But he didn't, probably assuming that, if left to my own devices, I'd get there in the end. Which I did – in the end.

The winter of 1965 was a dour one, and on a cold and misty Saturday morning shortly after the beginning of the spring term the whole school was summoned to watch Winston Churchill's funeral on television. Knowing very well who Churchill was and what he had saved us from, we sat in silent, cross-legged rows while the ceremony unfolded. As the cranes in the London docks dipped in respect as the funeral barge passed by, the nebulous outlines on the small black-and-white screen and the sombre mood of the occasion seemed to fuse.

Winters were long, in those days, and school light bulbs feeble. From the beginning of the September term to the end of the Easter holidays in May, we passed our waking hours in an autumnal half-

of that winter.

At some point in the summer term following the Churchill funeral, my father announced that we would be spending several weeks of the holidays in Shropshire, where he had rented a country house. This was a popular arrangement in the 1960s and, although lavish-sounding, actually a much less expensive option for a family holiday than one involving flights, restaurants and hotels. As the arrangements were often cash-based, there were bargains to be had. Impoverished aristocrats, in particular, didn't want their houses lingering embarrassingly in the To Let column of *The Times*, where they and their owners might be identified. What accommodation my father arrived at with the owner of this particular house, I don't know, and I certainly wasn't interested at the time. One fact, dropped casually but significantly into his description of the place, occupied my mind to the exclusion of all else. 'There's a lake,' he told me. 'A lake you can fish in.'

Could this really be true? Surely, when we got there, the 'lake' would turn out to be a glorified water feature, or an unusually wet marsh. Or if a proper lake, it would be entirely void of fish, like the Walberton duck pond. That it could possibly be the real thing, and that I would have unlimited access to it, seemed just too much to hope for. I decided to count on nothing. To wait and see.

The term dragged its feet, as summer terms do, but finally ended. The beginning of the holidays was taken up with an orgy of packing: metal trunks, field stoves, reserves of tinned food, candles in case of power cuts, groundsheets, calamine, sunhats, wound dressings, suturing equipment and long-expired antibiotics. My mother, an enthusiastic amateur physician who had once run a Cub Scout troop, planned for holidays as if for a war. Finally, after a long, rattling drive in our battered grey Bedford van, with no more than a couple of stops for roadside vomiting – the combination of my father's pipe smoke and the sideways benches in the back of the van tended to make these an inevitability – we

arrived in Shropshire.

This was a very different landscape from that of chalky, flinty, commuter-belt West Sussex, where it always felt as if the sea was just a few fields away. Shropshire had the wild contours of the border counties – the dark ridge of the Long Mynd, the green escarpment of Wenlock Edge – but there was a voluptuousness there too, a softness to the curve of the limestone hills and a beery brightness to the rivers that spoke of something less austere. Of pouring sunshine, pollen-heavy air, and fields drowsy with bees and clover.

The house didn't trouble to advertise itself to the outside world. A discreet exit from a minor road was followed by a long drive between cornfields, past a walled garden and down an alleé of rose bushes. These led, quite suddenly, into a shadowed courtyard, from which reared castellated grey walls spotted with yellow lichen. Inside the house was cool and stone-floored. As I stepped through the front door, avoiding a rope-handled box containing a Jacques croquet set, I was met by the faint, biscuity smell of old furniture and gun oil. In front of me was a high-ceilinged hall hung with Civil War armour, engraved maps of the estate, hunting crops, antlers, foxes' masks and gymkhana rosettes. There were also – and my eyes fixed on these before all else – several rod racks, bearing fully made-up cane rods. These were long – three sections each, at least – with brass ferrules and dark-varnished bindings, and were clearly in regular use. From each cork handle hung a well-maintained centre-pin reel. An Aerial or Star-Back, loaded with greenish monofilament line.

I stared, open-mouthed. I'd never been into a house where kit was laid out like this, ready to be taken down and used at a moment's notice. Where fishing was considered part of everyday life, rather than an exotic and even perverse pursuit. The house had other wonders – portraits by Romney and Reynolds, Chippendale furniture, curtained four-poster beds – but these, for

the moment, didn't interest me. Following an instinctive course through half-darkened rooms, I made for the garden door.

Outside, as a last golden intensity of light announced the onset of evening, the ground fell away in a series of gentle terraces linked by lichened flights of steps. Beyond the garden were the thousand acres of the estate, a green and gold patchwork of cornfields, woods and coppices that seemed to gather itself skywards as it approached the horizon. The lake, one end just visible, was a dark gleam at the bottom of the valley. And for the next three weeks all this was mine.

FIVE

As soon as I'd had breakfast the next morning, I went to see the gardener, who lived in one of the cottages.

'Speak to Tom about the fishing,' the owner had told my father. 'He'll tell your boy where to go and what to do.'

Tom was in his late fifties, with weathered features, tousled hair and a roll-up permanently positioned between his lips. He gave me a friendly grin, nodded and led me to the dim, loamscented outhouse where he kept his fishing tackle. In a corner was a sack full of sphagnum moss and red brandling worms. Taking a generous handful of these, he dropped them into a jam jar, screwed on the lid, which was ventilated with air holes, and lifted his rod from the wall. It was fully made up.

'Ready?' he asked.

I followed him across the courtyard and down the steps at the front of the house. The sun had burnt the dew from the grass and there was not so much as a whisper of breeze. Tom glanced at my tackle. The green horror had been replaced by my eleventh-birthday present, a fibreglass spinning-rod seven feet six inches long with a decent cork grip, an uplocking reel-seat and a test curve of about a pound and a quarter, bought from Russell Hillsdon Sports of Chichester. There's no such thing as an all-

purpose boy's rod, but if there were, it would have been that one. The pink reel had quickly fallen to bits. Its place was now taken by a proper centrepin, a copy of a Westley-Richards Speedia in shiny pressed alloy that I'd bought with saved-up pocket money from the tobacconist in Arundel. The canvas bag over my shoulder – from Hardy's of Pall Mall, no less, a gift from my godmother whose husband's aristocratic aunt owned a rather grand stretch of the Eden in Cumbria – held a modest selection of hooks, floats and weights from Woolworth's and a bait-box I'd made by repeatedly jabbing the point of a compass through the lid of a pipe-tobacco tin discarded by a geography teacher at school. (This individual, a part-time scout-master who'd spent several years 'knocking about the Middle East', was always preceded by the chocolatey fumes of the Erinmore Flake that he smoked. Towards the end of our prep school years he would conceive a hopeless devotion for my friend Jamie and, casting around for a suitable way of expressing his feelings, sign him up for a year's subscription to the *Reader's Digest*. Jamie's parents were, to say the least, bemused.)

'Done much fishing?' Tom asked quietly, as we made our way between grazing cattle.

I looked down at the lake. The end nearest us was open and shallow, fringed by reeds. The far end was darker and deeper, masked by trees.

'Not that much,' I said.

He took me to the shallow end. From the dry trodden mud it was clear that this was where the cattle came to drink. The water was a semi-transparent olive, unruffled by the faintest breeze. Sitting down on a hummock, Tom watched and smoked as I fumblingly assembled my rod, slid a red cork float up the line, nipped on a couple of split-shot with my teeth, and jabbed my Size 12 hook through an angrily wriggling brandling.

I cast, surreptitiously putting all the beef into it I could muster. There was a whistling sound and my end-tackle nearly took Tom's

the weeks that followed. I ate my perch, as well as several of its larger cousins, and learnt what the French have long known: that fried in butter with a sprig of fresh parsley it is the subtlest-tasting of freshwater fish. And I began, finally, to learn the art of angling. Every few days Tom would accompany me over the dewy morning fields, showing me new places and how to approach them silently, how to pre-bait a swim, how to recognize the needle bubbles that indicate feeding tench, how to present a pinch of breadflake to nervous roach, how to tell whether there was a big perch or pike around. Not that he put a great deal of this into words; he just did as he'd always done, and I copied him.

Today's high-tech anglers would find Tom's methods simplistic in the extreme: he had no time for elaborate techniques, or for any tackle that couldn't be comfortably carried in a trouser pocket alongside his tobacco. He didn't use a geared, fixed-spool reel, as almost all coarse fishermen did by then, but preferred an old-fashioned centre-pin, looping line into his lap in neat coils before executing an underarm cast that was little more than a quiet extending of his rod-tip. He fished pretty light, by the standards of the day – a little quill float balanced with a couple of Number 6 split-shot – but present-day anglers might have looked askance at his hook sizes. As far as I can remember he used a Size 12 for everything, and if that meant he lost a few fish, well, he could live with that. Bait was usually bread or worms, unless anything better came along. One week he smoked out a wasp's nest, and the fish went mad for the pale, succulent larvae. Ground-bait, when he bothered with it, was a random mash of parboiled potatoes, stale bread and stewed wheat, poured from a tin bucket. He was the antithesis of today's roving, 'scientific' angler and wholly uninterested in any notion of fishing for results. As far as he was concerned, you found somewhere peaceful, set up a rod, tipped your hat over your eyes and lit up. Sooner or later, this season or next, the fish would come.

A lot of our fishing was for roach, which Tom loved. Small roach are found everywhere in Britain and are usually fairly easy to catch, but big roach are wily and are therefore held in very high regard. Size, of course, is relative. Roach are small fish compared to bream, chub, or carp. A roach of a pound and a half is a big one, and a roach exceeding the two-pound mark a real specimen. But for all its modest size, the roach has a dedicated following. No other species is as subtle and enigmatic, no other species makes greater demands on the angler's patience and watercraft. They can drive you crazy, either refusing point-blank to so much as look at your perfectly presented bait, or mouthing at it with tiny, exploratory pouts that set the float fluttering for minutes on end but never quite resolve themselves into a committed take. Just occasionally you can look over a river bridge and see a shoal of roach, their pewter backs waving demurely in the current, and you realize that for all their easy visibility they're in the one place where they can't be cast to – just downstream of a deep-trailing willow branch or lethal underwater snag. Even roach that are rarely fished for seem to possess this instinctive education as to the angler and his ways, and it's the challenge of outwitting that instinct that drives the dedicated roach angler to spend a lifetime in their pursuit.

There's nothing new about any of this: Izaak Walton, who wrote *The Compleat Angler* and was born in Shakespeare's day, was keenly sensitive to the allure of 'the great Roaches about London', although he had no time for 'bastard small Roach'. Walton fished for roach with a variety of baits, including maggots (his instructions for procuring them begin with the words 'Get a dead cat...'). But he also hints darkly at the existence of a certain alchemical 'oil', that would magically compel roach and other 'float-fish' to bite. '[T]here is a mysterious knack,' he writes, 'which though it be much easier than the philosopher's stone, yet is not attainable by common capacities, or else lies locked up in the brain

or breast of some chemical man, that, like the Rosicrucians, will not reveal it.'

Tom didn't let me at the roach straight away. Instead he started me out in places where he knew there were shoals of small perch, which hurled themselves at my brandling worms without caution or discrimination. Only when I'd returned a couple of dozen of these, and shown that I had some semblance of control over my tackle, did he direct me to the quieter, deeper swims where roach were to be found. The first of these was on a steep bank below a spreading elm. The fish, Tom indicated, were to be found in the dappled shadows beneath the branches. The best bait was bread-flake, and you had to drop it just so, at a depth of about four feet. Izaak Walton's book ends with the words 'study to be quiet', and Tom impressed the same message on me. Gradually I learnt to carry myself lightly, to move without sending out a threatening sonar vibration, to lay my line and tackle softly across the water rather than lobbing it in like a depth-charge or swinging it straight into the waiting branches. And eventually I started to catch roach. Tiny ones at first, the 'bastards' of which Walton was so dismissive, but soon a few larger fish of nine or ten inches, which to me were colossi.

I was captivated. The silvery, elusive roach were as feminine in character as the gladiatorial, bronze-armoured perch were masculine. I've fished for roach a number of times over the years and been driven crazy by them almost as often. To catch a prime specimen, though, and to linger for a moment on its exquisite fashioning – on the amber eye, the white gold of the gill covers, the vermilion fins, the iridescent violet scales – is to forget the hours of frustration. They are the most beautiful of freshwater fish and possessed of a strength that belies their Marie-Antoinette-like delicacy.

I spent day after day by that lake, as the sun poured down on its motionless olive surface while the swallows swooped and snapped

at the hatching insects, gradually adjusting to its unhurried rhythms. There was an old dam wall at one end, just a few yards across, from which you could command the deepest water. Tom agreed in his non-committal way that it was as good a place as any and I began spending hours at a time there.

This, in itself, was an education. Stay still enough for long enough at the waterside and things start to happen. Jewelled blue and green damselflies settle on your arm. Water rats creep from the rushes and steal your bait. Grass snakes zigzag through the surface film of the water. And all the while you wait, with the rod balanced on your knee, the palm of your hand resting on the warm cork, the line looped over your index finger.

You wait, and you wait some more. To watch a quill float on still water is to enter a state in which time slows to a halt, and serenity and expectancy are one. The place and the moment enclose you, narrowing your focus and concentrating your senses to the point where the frailest tremor of the float is a distinct and legible event, descriptive of what is happening below. If you can't read that surface calligraphy, you will never catch good fish. And it's always subtly different. On that lake, the take of a big roach had a sharply inscribed formality. A staccato shudder, a pause and a steady drawing away. You struck the instant the movement became confident, rather than tentative.

Late one afternoon I decided to try a new place. At one end of the dam wall there was a rickety stile leading into a wood and an overgrown path following the lake's edge. At intervals, spreading trees overhung the water, creating small, enclosed pools. Selecting one of these, I arranged myself on a fat tree root. I had no idea what the pool might hold, so chose a big lob-worm from my tin, suspended it four feet beneath a little black-and-white cork float and swung it out beneath the branches.

Time passed, with the float motionless on the water. Somewhere above me, wood pigeons came in to roost and started their low

cooing. Others answered them, while out on the lake the swoop and dip of the swallows took on a last urgency.

The light was going, making the water no longer translucent olive but inky black. My float was virtually invisible now, so that I wished I'd chosen a red or orange one. I glanced at my watch. It was well past the time I was supposed to be back at the house for supper, yet something made me stay. I stared at the float, narrowing my eyes to keep the dot of white in focus. A vast and fragrant stillness descended, broken only by the stumbling flight of moths and the tiny whirr of bats' wings in the twilight.

The float disappeared. No tremor, no dancing about; it simply wasn't there any more. I struck and felt a strong, angry resistance. For the first time, I was connected to a fish that I couldn't just wind in. A big perch, I guessed, given that it had taken a worm. As it kicked and jagged, trying to make for open water, I held it tight on the reel and hoped against hope that my knots were sound.

Everything held, and eventually the fish allowed itself to be drawn to the side. Carefully stretching my fingers across its broad grey back, my heart pounding, I lifted it from the water. It was a roach, but a much deeper and heavier one than I'd ever seen – well over a pound – with burnished silver-phosphor flanks and a great sail of a dorsal fin. I unhooked it, fixed it in my memory and gently replaced it in the water by the tree roots. It hung there for a moment and then, with a single kick of its tail, disappeared. I gazed after it for a moment, half regretful, as I wiped my hands on the grass. There went the living proof that I could catch not just a fish, but a big fish. At the same time I knew, deep down, that nobody else much cared. The only person I had to convince was myself.

When we'd been there for about a fortnight, Tom took me to the second lake. This was some distance away – perhaps twenty-five minutes' walk from the house – but held, Tom promised, 'some big old perch'. Even better, it was hardly ever fished. So at nine o'clock

paste on to my hook and swung it towards the centre of the lake. The quill started twitching almost immediately, as small fish mouthed at the bait and then darted away at an acute angle. I struck and soon a small roach was tumbling through the water towards me. At that point things stopped making sense. A huge mottled shape, which I had taken to be part of the underwater topography – some amalgam of tree root, leaf mould and decay – seemed to shift. It detached itself from the shadows and then, with lethal momentum, jolted through midwater to seize my fish. The rod hooped, almost wrenching from my hands, and for a brief instant I saw a tiger-striped flank and a great churning tail. Then, for the second time that day, my quill float flew back in my face.

I crouched there, open-mouthed, as the bubbles rose and the lake surface rocked with the disturbance. My hands were shaking, my heart was thumping and my breathing seemed to have come to a dead halt. Gradually, as the ripples died away, I made sense of what I'd seen. I'd read about pike, and seen countless illustrations in books, but nothing had prepared me for the sheer savagery of the living creature. And that was a bloody big pike, well over a yard long and with a tail-span the size of a man's hand. Even allowing for an eleven-year-old's impressionability and the passage of more than four decades, it was certainly closer to twenty pounds than ten.

I knew, as I stared after it, trying to shuffle a handful of fractured images into a coherent memory, that the pike had simply acted in response to its own deep imprinting. Its function was eugenic – to cull the sickly and the injured – and the roach's faltering progress had tripped its killing signal. What I'd been given, I realized, was a glimpse of creation's true face: Pitiless, unflinching and utterly exhilarating.

SIX

IF MY PRIVATE DOMAIN WAS FISHING, MY FATHER'S WAS THE war. For me, as a child, this was both *Iliad* and *Odyssey* in its epic, mysterious character. Although it had been played out just a decade before my birth, it seemed to be located in another, unreachably distant, era. A kind of temporal refraction had occurred, transforming those half-dozen years into myth and history.

Like many of those who fought, my father was happy to talk about the lighter-hearted aspects – the deafening excitement of hearing Carroll Gibbons and the Savoy Orpheans playing in an East Anglian aircraft hangar; the muddy joy of racing an armyissue motorcycle across Salisbury Plain, the precise technique for making cheese in a Cromwell tank (you strained the whey through a khaki sock); or the questionable pleasure of censoring other ranks' letters, like the one that opened with the words: 'Dearest Maeve, I want you to know that you and Queenie are the best two fucks in Watford' – but he grew vague when questioned about the experience of battle. As an officer in a tank regiment he had been involved in a particularly brutal form of warfare, seeing friends and enemies alike 'brew up' in a roaring inferno of petrol,

exploding shells and ricocheting shrapnel. There was no way of talking about it and leaving out the horror. The burns on his hands and face, visible half a century after the event, told their own story.

It wasn't until I was married, with children of my own, that he spoke to me about it in any detail. It was Christmas, shortly before the millennium, and he and I were standing in a queue in a crowded supermarket on the outskirts of Hereford, some ten miles from the house in which he and my mother had lived for the previous couple of decades. With the harsh strip lighting, the loop tape of Yuletide Favourites and the tacky displays of 'seasonal' produce, it was an unprepossessing scene. Expressionless, my father looked about him as we shuffled towards the tinsel-draped tills. He was wearing an ancient British Warm overcoat and a battered trilby.

'Those young Nazis manning the eighty-eights at Eindhoven,' he said thoughtfully and quite loudly. 'They were arrogant, but they were very brave. Half a dozen of them dug in over there...' – he frowned at a neon-swagged crib in one corner, as if calculating fields of fire – 'do this place a world of good. Needs a good cull, wouldn't you say?'

I laughed, and an obese man in a tracksuit turned to stare at us, his fleshy features reddening in outrage.

'I do think I felt more alive during the war than at any time before or since,' my father continued. 'It's a hard thing to explain, but can you imagine what I mean?'

Alongside tens of thousands of others, my father submitted his name for military call-up in 1939. He was eighteen. Knowing that it could be months before he heard anything, he went up to Cambridge, where he had been offered a place to read History. The retreat from Dunkirk took place as he was doing his first-year exams in 1940. Returning home for the summer holidays, he witnessed the aerial dogfights that took place, day after day, over

the South Coast. One of the most intense was in August, when more than twenty Stuka dive-bombers and fighters attacked Ford aerodrome and the RAF station at Tangmere. With the family home exactly halfway between the two, he watched as the Spitfires and Hurricanes of 602 Squadron duelled with the raiding party. One young pilot, Billy Fiske, scrambling from Tangmere, shot down a Stuka before he'd even had time to raise his own landing gear. The son of a leading American banking family, Fiske was the first US citizen to join the RAF, and that August afternoon was the last of his life. His shot-up Hurricane crashed and burnt on landing, and he died of shock in Chichester Hospital. Today, his headstone stands outside Boxgrove Church, distinguished by a small Stars and Stripes flag.

At the end of that memorably fine summer, as September shaded into October, my father was summoned to Hounslow Barracks for basic training. There – under the eye of an authority figure known as The Trained Soldier, a forty-year-old private who in nineteen years of service had never known promotion – he entered a world of Blanco, brass polishing and drill beneath the drab Middlesex skies. His colleagues, a varied lot, included an ex-regular sergeant who infuriated everyone with his unvarying dawn cry of 'Get up! Get up, and meet the sun halfway!' Another, a near-psychotic individual named Private Moss, throughout the day kept up a constant stream of drill commands and admonishment directed solely at himself. 'Private Moss...*shun* !' he would bark, en route to the Naafi or the showers. 'As you were. Smarter than that. Private Moss will advance in single column. Quick *march* !' On runs around Hounslow Heath, he would vary this routine with a stream of erotic reminiscence. 'I told her, I did, I said not bloody likely, you're not getting away with it this time, not *fucking likely*...'

In the New Year of 1941 my father took the train from King's Cross to Edinburgh to attend an armoured OCTU (Officer Cadet Training Unit) at Lanark. Through a prep-school acquaintance, he