At Home in the Unheimlich

An interview with Deborah Levy by Andrew Gallix

At the close of *Swimming Home* (2011), Nina Jacobs confides that she only enjoys biographies once the subjects have escaped 'from their family and spend the rest of their life getting over them.' This confession could be dismissed as of little import, were it not for its strategic appearance in the penultimate paragraph. As well as providing a metafictional commentary on the preceding narrative—and a thematic template for much of Deborah Levy's fiction —it also gives us an insight into the author's writing process. In *Things I Don't Want to Know* (2014), Levy likens her 'literary enquiry' to 'a forest': an annex of the unconscious, where she contrives to lose her characters Hansel and Gretel-style. Everything begins with this sense of disorientation and dislocation; wrong turnings taken and lives gone awry. Deborah Levy is at home in the *unheimlich*—this is where she poetically dwells. I picture her blindfolding her dramatis personae and spinning them round, before peering at them (while paring her fingernails) from behind some venerable tree. I picture it all wrong, of course, because the novelist should also appear blindfolded, or, at the very least, squinting quizzically. She too is at a loss, like the guests in *The Unloved* (1994) who become 'unwitting players' in a drama they remain unaware of. Levy has written about the 'sheriff's notebook' where she was wont to gather 'evidence for something [she] could not fathom.' A crime that was yet to be committed, perhaps, unless the evidence-gathering itself constituted the crime, like that tortured portrait, in *Beautiful Mutants* (1989), which captures by happenstance the very instant when a priest loses

his faith. This unfathomable 'something' time-lapsed, over the course of two decades, into *Swimming Home*, as though the Booker-shortlisted novel had been there all along, in potentia, written in the stars or invisible ink.

In their quest to find their own form, Levy's works attempt to throw off the shackles of dominant discourse and narrative determinism. 'What kind of language will (re) create us?' wonders a character in *Swallowing Geography* (1993), before positing that 'classic rules of form and structure' may not 'fit this experience of existing and not existing at the same time.' What kind of speech could express the experience of being spoken when speaking? What kind of narrative could convey the experience of losing the plot as a result of being trapped inside it? Such questions are of particular significance to women, who are specifically referred to in the quotation. A prime example is that of Kitty Finch, who inspires poems in her conventional capacity as a muse, but fails to be recognised as the poet she aspires to be in her own right (*Swimming Home*). The author constantly flags up the essentially fictive nature of notions of womanhood and femininity, even chronicling how she first made this discovery as a child: 'The fact that lipstick and mascara and eye shadow were called 'Make Up' thrilled me. Everywhere in the world there were made up people and most of them were women' (*Things I Don't Want to Know*). Cass, in the exquisite short story entitled 'Cave Girl,' wants—and indeed undergoes—a sex change, not in order to turn into a man, but into a 'pretend woman' (*Black Vodka*, 2013). The thrilling allure of the real (that is to say pretend) woman is probably best embodied by Luciana, whose glacial glamour is part Stepford wife, part

femme fatale. She is described in mock-Ballardian terms as an 'Italian suburban supermodel, catwalking the white surgical aisles of hypermarkets in Frankfurt. Clasping soap powder and pâté to her beautiful breasts as if they were Oscars' (*The Unloved*). For her female characters, Levy strives to 'find a language that is in part to do with learning how to become a subject rather than a delusion; unknotting the ways [they have] been put together by society' (*Things I Don't Want to Know*). Monika's subversively made-up face takes self-effacement into camouflage, or even war paint, territory: 'She looks like a Noh mask: black kohl eyes and lips the colour of a recent massacre' (*The Unloved*). The character called The Poet mistresses (as Levy puts it) the art of metamorphosis by turning to advantage her lack of identity as an individual: 'If she had no identity she would have many identities' (*Beautiful Mutants*).

One of the dangers here, of course, is to fall back on clichés about the protean, mutable character of women. Deborah Levy is acutely aware of the archetypal narratives that shape our identity and aspirations, chief among them motherhood. Fairy tales endure in the disenchanted world she depicts, even though they no longer cast a magic spell. Take this example from *Billy & Girl* (1996): 'If Girl had tried to kiss him better, this frog Dad, nothing would have happened. What could Dad have changed into? The world has changed and he needs a new story.' Or this very similar one from *Swimming Home*: 'She had turned into a toad in old age and if anyone dared to kiss her she would not turn back into a princess because she had never been a princess in the first place.' Billy clicks his heels thrice, like Dorothy

in *The Wizard of Oz*, but nothing happens. 'Take me away from here. Take me home,' he mimics, before remembering that 'this is home' and that there is no exit. His sister, a connoisseur of 'American sitcom moms,' longs to inhabit a perfume commercial: 'She wants to dream herself into peachness because she wants a happy ending. Like in the ads' (*Billy & Girl*). 'Life is only worth living,' echoes Kitty Finch in *Swimming Home*, 'because we hope it will get better and we'll all get home safely'—an unlikely outcome in the absence of pebbles or even breadcrumbs.

Deborah Levy is one of the first novelists to have truly taken stock of the radical changes, not to say ravages, brought about by the neo-liberal revolution. Her early nineties novels herald our 'age of the migrant and the missile.' They already depict the 'splintered times' we live in 'when whole worlds and histories collide' and everyone is 'separated and afraid' (*Beautiful Mutants*). Stupefied by late capitalism, passengers at airports no longer know if they are 'an arrival' or 'a departure'—if they are coming or going —although it makes little difference when everywhere is a non-place ('Pillow Talk'). Worse still, 'we have been robbed of a language to describe the bewildered brokenness we habit.' Levy's fiction is thus an exhortation to 'leave and learn a new language' (*Beautiful Mutants*) in order to be 'in exile from exile' (*Things I Don't Want to Know*). In this spirit, Gemma writes letters backwards, forcing the addressee to read them 'through the looking glass.' 'Backwards letters are my escape,' claims the little minx—and perhaps ours too. The free bus tour around the Thatcherite enterprise zone turns into a kind of Situationist *dérive* due to the disjuncture between the guide's commentary

and the cityscape being travelled through: '…where she said you were, you were not—she'd point at the waterfront and it would be the railway station' (*Beautiful Mutants*). The whole scene feels like a rollicking *Carry On* remake of Marguerite Duras' *Le Camion*. There are more psychogeographical high-jinks in *Swallowing Geography*, when J.K., having established that 'maps correspond to reality as seen at a particular time,' wonders what would happen if she observed 'a number of realities at the same time'…

A couple of hours after *gorse* editor Susan Tomaselli had sent me a message to see if I wanted to interview Deborah Levy, I met up with a friend—Adam Biles—in a Parisian café close to Shakespeare & Co., where we were going to attend a reading by Joanna Walsh. As I was telling him about the interview commission, he pointed out that Deborah Levy had just sat down at a table outside. As we went out to join her, I remembered that line from *Billy & Girl*: 'Life hurts more without magic.' Suddenly, life hurt a little less.

•

In *Beautiful Mutants*, The Poet urges Lapinski to 'ask the present what it's got to do with the past'—sound advice that Deborah Levy follows to the letter throughout her work. Take Nina Jacobs, whose mute conversations with her late father on London buses testify to the porousness of temporal borders. She confesses, in the bittersweet coda to *Swimming Home*, that she has 'never got a grip on when the past begins or where it ends,' thus failing to make it 'keep still and mind

its manners.' As a result, the past 'moves and murmurs with [her] through every day' unlike the statues—'forever frozen in one dignified position'—with which society commemorates history. The sudden shift from time to place in the above quote points to the survival of the former in the latter. The angel, in *An Amorous Discourse in the Suburbs of Hell* (2014), hears 'the historic echo of yesterday's lambs' beneath 'the tarmac of the ring road.' In 'Black Vodka,' the hunchbacked narrator muses, as he walks up Exhibition Road, that 'under the twenty-first-century paving stones there had once been fields and market gardens.' Later, in South Kensington's posh Polish Club, he unearths a dark forest, complete with prowling wolf, beneath the plush pink carpet. This primeval forest —rooted in the author's tragic family history, as well as in Dante or grim fairy tales —is, as we have said, the primal scene from which Levy's entire oeuvre seems to draw its inspiration. It finds its fullest fictive expression in Joe Jacobs, whose father 'had tried to melt him into a Polish forest when he was five years old' (*Swimming Home*), but also resurfaces through numerous, seemingly incidental, lupine and sylvan references: The Banker who 'sobs like a wolf cub' at night (*Beautiful Mutants*), Magret's accent that her lover cannot place but 'makes him think of wolves' ('Vienna'), the woods outside Prague whence Alex emerges as Aleksandar ('Shining a Light')… The pivotal road trip in *Swimming Home*, which recurs like some kind of repetition compulsion, establishes a direct link back to prehistoric times: 'Early humans had once lived in this forest that was now a road. They knew the past lived in rocks and trees and they knew desire made them awkward, mad, mysterious, messed up.' When the zoo is torched in

Beautiful Mutants, the gibbons 'make loud whooping calls that echo through the city, into nightclubs and cinemas and traffic jams; the call is 65 million years old…it is answered in the dense forests of the gibbons' origin, it breaks the windows of the local police station.' Like gibbon, like man. Seeing his estranged, abusive father again sends Billy 'primal': 'Whirling through the caveboy vortex into fire, fat and flint. Demon terror' (*Billy & Girl*). A character in *Swallowing Geography*, who has contracted AIDS, recognises that he 'still has the same sort of fears people had in the Iron Age': 'Fear of the dark and certain kinds of animals. Things lurking under the sea, under my bed, inside my skin.' The 'Stone Age girl''s brother would like to ask 'an Ancient' if 'he's scared of the dark things lurking in the sea' like he is ('Cave Girl'). The Banker dismisses The Poet as 'the dinosaur trapped in ice from the age of slow-moving beings' (*Beautiful Mutants*). The alleged 'beast' inside J.K. is described as 'a mammoth, frozen in ice' (*Swallowing Geography*). FreezerWorld Louise, who works in a frozen-foods store, is said to be 'trapped in the ice age because she is frightened of the future. Which is the past' (*Billy & Girl*). It is possibly this terrible truth that explains why we can't see the primeval forest for the ring road—why the presence of the past is swept under the plush pink carpet, or tamed into a genteel doorknob bestiary:

> I have grown to love the bronze doorknobs in the shape of jungle beasts: a lion's head, a tiger, a snake. These seem to me to be caveman icons on the doors of the bankers and dentists who live here, a way of keeping in touch with The Divine ('Cave Girl').

AG Deborah, could you talk to us about the parallel you seem to draw in your work between childhood—which you describe as 'a primitive culture' (*Billy & Girl*)—and prehistory?

DL Well, it's all about attempting a temporal fuse and fizz in the present tense, interrupting chronology: what are we connected to? Of course, like Ballard, who was working from Freud but who was also a futurist, I'm interested in the ways in which the psychological past is preserved in the present—in architecture, commercials, landscape, everyday objects, ideologies, the human body. In my story 'Black Vodka,' I wanted to find a way of getting to twentieth-century Eastern Europe in the twenty-first century: how could I make them happen simultaneously? So I have the male protagonist conceptually roll up the genteel faded pink carpet in the Polish Club, South Kensington, and find a Polish forest in 1942 beneath it. While customers are eating plates of goose and handing their credit cards over to the waitress, wolves are digging up human bones beneath them in the forest. He hears silver spoons stirring cappuccinos, and he hears insects thrumming in the forest. It's tricky to pull this off without it sounding like a fairy tale; it took a few drafts to tune the reality levels. But that's my job, and I'm happy to spend my life solving this sort of problem.

The Polish Club has this sort of time warp about it anyway, because it was opened in 1940 and became the cultural meeting place for the Polish community in exile. I used to take my students from the Royal College of Art there when I taught writing in the Animation Department, and found myself over time beginning to mentally dig

beneath the carpet and plot what would become *Swimming Home*—also the hunchback in 'Black Vodka' whose own body becomes a site of excavation.

I believe we are all anthropologists, and the primitive culture we know most about is ourselves—from infancy to adulthood. I have just reread Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. I'm still recovering. On the one hand, the writing is just incredible: what a piercing record of these depraved white primitives out on the steal (ivory, minerals, oil) in the guise of civilised European gentlemen, yet where Conrad positions himself in all of this is too unsettling for me. I don't understand his intentions. Here is one of my favourite writers, Chinua Achebe, on this matter: 'Conrad saw and condemned the evil of imperial exploitation but was strangely unaware of the racism on which it sharpened its iron tooth.' Steve McQueen's masterstroke in *12 Years a Slave* was to make the cotton plantations of the American South cinematically beautiful, and the picking of it totally brutal. It is my destiny to adapt *Heart of Darkness* for the big screen, and I have a trick up my sleeve to turn the subjectivity in that story inside out. But, you know, if we're looking for a savage culture, why not take the train to Kent, and interview Nigel Farage?

Those who are robbed of their childhood, never grow up: are they more likely to become writers or artists? Does the writer remain more in tune with that 'primitive culture' of childhood than most other people? **AG**

No one is entirely robbed of a childhood: we experience **DL**

life in the mindset of our age whether it be two, five, seven or seventy. Oliver Twist had a childhood. So did Jane Eyre. Children are wise because they feel things so intensely. I have never believed in the advanced wisdom of the old —that's just experience, which isn't the same as wisdom. In my view writers can be in tune with anything they like so long as their attention is in an interesting place. It is what we pay attention to that makes a writer worth reading—or not.

AG Writing, for you, is associated with childhood rebellion. You were beaten at school because you never wrote on the first lines of your exercise books. The same thing happens to Philippe in *The Unloved*: 'I had a horror of the top of the page, it seemed to me right to begin a sentence on the second line.' Stanley—the boring accountant of *An Amorous Discourse*, who refuses 'to live in a grey area' or 'read between the lines'—is, naturally, a stickler for methodical page-filling: 'Love must start on the first line / Continue on every line / No line without love.' Could you tell us about this 'horror of the top of the page'?

DL Writing on the top line of the page in those school exercise books, starting in the far left-hand-corner (no margins), working across to the end of the line in the far-right-hand corner (no margins) and on to the next line so that the writing comes out in a dense square block: I just couldn't organise my thoughts like that. There were no spaces or gaps allowed. We were told not to waste space. Starting on the third line seemed a good idea to me—and then there

are things called paragraphs, where we might be sinful and leave a little gap, maybe indent half a line, etc. Well, for some reason, we were not allowed to do paragraphs in my junior school. It's odd to think this was probably the moment I truly had some sort of intuition about language and form: I was seven years old, and I know it sounds a little romantic, but actually the anxiety I had about this was quite intense. If you have a facility with words, it's not hard to cover a page, but then I have never thought that writing is about covering a page.

AG Is the future the past (as it is for FreezerWorld Louise) because we are condemned to spend our lives trying to get over the traumas of childhood—perhaps even the trauma of being born itself? Billy pictures himself inside his mother's womb, thinking, 'I don't want to be born. I'm never coming out' (*Billy & Girl*). Tatiana, in *The Unloved*, wants to sue her parents 'for being born' and, in the same novel, consciousness is described as a curse…

DL I regard Tatiana as one of my best characters. Tatiana is the unloved child, and this makes her very interested in love. As for consciousness being a curse, it costs us to know things: knowledge is not a free ride. Talk to any war correspondent, and they will tell you they have seen things they wish they could unsee. The opposite of this would be what Lacan described as a 'passion for ignorance.'

AG In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud wondered if the goal of life were not to return to an initial inorganic state. I wonder

if this isn't one of the things we don't want to know your work revolves around—*Swimming Home* seems to indicate so…

DL The message in *Swimming Home*, in its exploration of the death wish, is that life must win us back. That uncanny Leonard Cohen song, 'The Night Comes On,' seems to agree: 'I wanted the night to go on and on / But she said, Go back to the world.'

Faber have reissued Sylvia Plath's *Ariel*, in a very nice edition. I know my twenty-year-old daughter enjoyed *The Bell Jar*, so I bought it for her as a small present to put under the Christmas tree. Before I wrapped it I thought I might write a few words inside the book—like you do—so I had a quick browse. Well, I thought I knew all about these sad, brutal, beautiful poems, but they seem to sting me differently in every decade of life. It is incendiary writing. That poem about folding her children back inside herself—it got to me all over again. Plath was at the top of her game as a writer in these poems, yet what she seems to be anticipating is her future suicide. What kind of inscription was I going to write in that book to my daughter? I wanted to make a joke—*Don't try this at home!*—and then I thought, well, there's no way I can write anything in this book: there's nothing to say; no words will do. And that made me wonder how Plath would have spoken to the world about these poems if she had lived. You know, let's say she had a few book tours and readings, and a sweet young woman, like my daughter, in the audience asked her, 'And what were you thinking when you wrote these lines?':

The frost makes a flower,
The dew makes a star,
The dead bell,
The dead bell.

Somebody's done for.

What kind of conversation would have been possible for Plath? These poems feel like the final words and I'm sorry to write this, and wish she had believed the conversation didn't end there.

AG Time and again, your characters are confronted with information that is too painful to process. For the protagonist of 'Vienna,' living without his children is 'a grief he knows he cannot endure but he must endure' (which reminded me of Beckett's famous 'you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on' in *The Unnamable*). The short story 'Placing a Call' opens in similar fashion: 'You are telling me something I don't want to hear. You are telling me the honest truth.' 'What am I supposed to do with the information?' wonders Billy apropos of his mother's absence (*Billy & Girl*). The five-year-old Joe Jacobs faces the same excruciating conundrum when his father informs him he can never go home again: 'This was not something possible to know but he had to know it all the same' (*Swimming Home*). Your own sense of homelessness is described in almost identical terms: 'I was born in one country and grew up in another, but I was not sure which one I belonged to. And another thing. I did not want to know this thing, but I did know it all the same.'

There seem to be two options. The first one is to go mad and be sedated with syringes filled from 'Lethe, the River of Forgetfulness' ('Stardust Nation'). The second option, which you describe in your memoir, entitled—precisely—*Things I Don't Want to Know*, is to write. When you first put biro to paper, as a child, 'more or less everything you did not want to know' came pouring out, but you felt, simultaneously, that writing could provide an 'escape to somewhere better.' Please tell us about your conception and practice of writing from this ambiguous perspective…

DL The writing I enjoy reading is both knowing and unknowing without being faux naïve. There is a sense that the writer herself is discovering something so potent it could just tip her over the edge, but the point is that it doesn't. As Duras points out, the writer has to be stronger than her material. At the same time there is nothing more exhilarating than writing a book. It's not all a downer, Andrew! I think you're in a mournful mood. Let's have a pick-up: do you want a beer, or perhaps a Bloody Mary with horseradish and celery salt?

AG Sounds like I could do with both!

DL In my story 'Stardust Nation'—which is to become a graphic novel, in collaboration with artist Andrzej Klimowski—there are two swans that are always asleep on the moat which circles the psychiatric institution. I had this idea that the water in this moat was Lethe, the river of forgetfulness, and the nurses fill their syringes with it and

inject their patients with oblivion. This is not just a surreal image—although I can't wait to see how Klimowski works with it—it is also a critique of medication that coshes the patient into unmemory. I repeat this idea in *Swimming Home* when the Hungarian doctor says to Joe, 'Give me your history and I will give you something to take it away. I'm interested in the ways we forget as much as the ways we remember—or what Freud called simulated forgetting. I'm interested in defeated desire as much as realised desire, and every book I write starts off as an enigma. Writing is sometimes like a snake-charming act: the writer is both the charmer and the snake.

AG Billy, in *Billy & Girl*, stands in for the writer as chronicler and interpreter of pain: 'Pain is a black box full of mystery and one day he will unpack it for the reading public.' Is the writer's role (or justification of her calling) to suffer on behalf of the rest of society?

DL No. That's the job of Jesus Christ, isn't it?

AG In your memoir, you relate how your father had advised you, in a letter, to say your thoughts out loud rather than in your head, and go on to explain that you decided to write them down instead. This put me in mind of Marguerite Duras' remark that 'To write is also not to speak. It is to keep silent. It is to howl noiselessly.' Do you agree with her on this point?

DL Noiseless howling? Maybe it sounds better in French. Duras

made a beautiful noise in her books, that's for sure.

AG The most famous passage in *Things I Don't Want to Know* is the one where you explain that in order to become a writer, you had to learn 'to speak up, to speak a little louder, and then louder, and then to just speak in [your] own voice which is not loud at all.' It's true that earlier novels like *Beautiful Mutants* or *The Unloved* were characterised by a high-octane spikiness that has gradually given way to a more subdued, but also much more self-assured, narrative voice. Now that you are speaking in your own spellbinding voice 'which is not loud at all' (and which we recognise from readings) —now that you are howling noiselessly and beautifully— people seem to be paying far more attention…

DL I totally stand by the high-octane spikiness of my earliest fiction. You know, I'm so glad I was properly young in that writing and not wearing sensible flat shoes. I made mistakes, there was more work to do. For this reason I'm happy I didn't have a creative-writing tutor telling me to calm down and get to grips with narrative. It would have been better for my career to have done so—but not better for my future writing. I don't regard my books as becoming more subdued, but it is probably true that in a long writing life you gain some things and lose other things.

AG I wonder if the discovery of your 'own voice' isn't also due to the adoption of a less theatrical style. Were you more influenced, in the early days, by your playwriting? Many people who discovered you when *Swimming Home* was

shortlisted for the Man Booker, in 2012, had no idea that you had been a successful playwright for many years: did this give you the feeling that you were starting over again as a fiction writer?

DL Yes, I trained as a playwright. Oddly, my two favourite plays written in the 1990s, *The B File* (an erotic interrogation of five female personas that has been performed all over the world) and *Honey Baby: 13 Studies in Exile* (performed at La Mama Theatre in Melbourne) are not theatrical at all. Read those plays (*Deborah Levy: Plays 1,* Methuen) and you will see I'm starting to slip into prose. I can't begin to convey how hard it was to be a female playwright in the mid-1980s, writing in the way that I did—yes, the whole gender thing—but mostly because I wasn't writing social realism which was very much in vogue, nor was I writing didactic feminist theatre which was also having a moment at that time. I was much more influenced by Pina Bausch and Heiner Müller than anyone else, though Pinter and Beckett were influences too. Writing for the theatre taught me to embody ideas.

I was giving a reading somewhere recently and a woman came up to me to say she had trained at drama school, and the play she had put on for her graduation show was *The B File*. I asked her if she remembered her lines, and do you know what, she did! She began to recite them to me, there and then, almost word perfect and with such power. That was the biggest tribute ever, because I knew they had meant something to her. The best actors are incredibly open-minded, shamanistic and playful: I loved those qualities in

the rehearsal room.

The prose that is most theatrical is probably my first novel, *Beautiful Mutants*. *Things I Don't Want To Know* is where I pulled open the theatre curtain and switched on the house lights, but obviously that's not the same thing as saying there's no artifice in its construction. There is a peculiar relationship between writers and readers—but then all relationships are probably a bit peculiar, aren't they? For example, I know that Virginia Woolf trusted me when she wrote *To the Lighthouse*. I was never going to laugh at the seriousness of Lily Briscoe's struggle and ambition to create a visual masterpiece. There was no nasty little voice saying to me, *ooh she's a bit above herself, isn't she?* I understood the class analysis Woolf made with the angry student Tansley waiting for his toff tutor to talk to him about his dissertation. I understood that domesticated Mrs Ramsay was Woolf's bid to understand the rituals available to women of her generation, and to have a go at finding something good in them—despite rejecting them herself—via the avatar of Lily Briscoe. I understood that the form of the book was as radical as its content and that Woolf's vision for her novel was complete. That is what a successful writing-reading relationship should be like. Strangely enough, I'm not the biggest fan of Oscar Wilde's plays, although I am a big fan of his sensibility. I feel I have a writerly relationship with him, an attachment to his idea that 'Being natural is simply a pose, and the most irritating pose I know.'

AG Language can take on an Adamic quality for your characters. Its purpose is to 'record and classify' the world, as the

narrator of 'Black Vodka' puts it. This often leads to a quasi-Oulipian desire to exhaust reality by enumerating its component parts, as in 'Vienna,' for instance: 'She is Vienna. She is Austria. She is a silver teaspoon. She is cream. She is schnapps. She is strudel dusted with icing sugar. She is the sound of polite applause. She is a chandelier,' and so on until the end of that long, delightful paragraph. The world becomes a kind of litany, as in this example from *Swallowing Geography*:

> In Washington the currency is dollars, the bread yeasted, breakfast waffles and maple syrup, coffee filtered and decaffeinated, golf is being played on slopes of green grass and yellow ribbons hung on taxis. In Baghdad, the currency is dinars, the bread unleavened, breakfast goat's cheese, coffee flavoured with cardamom, foreheads scented.

Ebele always describes J. K. in this enumerative fashion, much to her annoyance, because 'That's what strangers do. When they are in an unfamiliar place they describe it.' This sends us back to the question with which *Swallowing Geography* opens: 'When you feel fear, does it have detail or is it just a force?' Giving detail to fear is an attempt to master it, to defuse its power. Shortly after, Gregory explains why he collected stamps as a young boy: 'It was my way of naming places and conquering the world.' Language, here, is conquest: a means of controlling the world and endowing it with meaning. Jurgen thus views Kitty Finch's poem as a map that will show him 'the way to her heart' (*Swimming Home*). Is this neurotic, stamp-collecting approach a masculine way of writing?

DL I am a stamp collector too—the skill is placing one stamp against another. For myself, when the writing is going well, I love the smell of the smoke! Here are some things I dislike in various types of books written by men. I don't like it when girls and women have no point of view or intelligence or wit or interior life or subjectivity that doesn't always serve the desires of the male world and its arrangements.

My favourite male writer is Ballard—then Houellebecq, which probably contradicts all of the above, but all his characters are so wrecked that I forgive him. I always buy his books in hardback and now we share the same publisher in France, so wish I could read fluently in French because I could get the book for free. I also love Apollinaire and Nietzsche. I've just read Lou Salomé's gentle and fascinating portrait of Nietzsche translated by Siegfried Mandel. He was in love with Lou Salomé (what a beautiful name) who wisely declined his offer of marriage and wrote a book about him instead. And I admire Burroughs, who was endearingly fragile under that stylish hat. When I'm old and grey and have nothing to do except sit in a hot water spring in Iceland entirely naked (apart from my nose jewel) I think I might write about how Burroughs is often misunderstood by the heterosexual men who have been influenced by him. On the other hand I might write a murder mystery set on a cruise ship.

AG It seems to me that there is another conception of writing at play in your work—one which is not concerned with mapping, but with unmapping. In *Things I Don't Want to Know*, you describe how your journey to recovery from

a midlife breakdown began when you strayed, as it were, from the straight and narrow, finding yourself in a dark wood: 'The night before, when I had walked in to the forest at midnight, that was what I really wanted to do. I was lost because I had missed the turning to the hotel, but I think I wanted to get lost to see what happened next.' Deliberately wanting to get lost—attempting to escape narrative determinism—is something a character like Madeleine Sheridan could probably never understand: 'It was impossible' for her 'to believe that someone did not want to be saved from their incoherence' (*Swimming Home*). Perhaps there is a kind of writing that does not want to be saved from its incoherence; that shuns the 'why the how the when the who and all the other words [you are] supposed to ask to make life more coherent'…

DL The writing that interests me lives in this ambivalent relationship with coherence and incoherence. Duras gets closest to this. A writer like Gertrude Stein is baffling and exhilarating, but mostly baffling—yet I love her anyway, especially the way she drove a motor car without knowing how to reverse. These days my aim is to find an innovative narrative design that snares my own attention, and rewards readers for their attention. It seems to me that in the end coherence is going to win in my books, because it would be dishonest to pretend I have gone through the journey of writing a book and am only left with incoherence. It sounds good, but so far it's not true. I can't stand fake incoherence, or fake coherence for that matter. Back to *Swimming Home*: my point with hyper-rational Madeleine Sheridan is that she

might have a point—perhaps Kitty Finch is really very ill. But what is it she is so afraid of? Madeleine Sheridan holds on very tight to a rigid concept of coherence—her knuckles are turning white with the strain. As Disney tells us in the animated film *Frozen*—let it go let it go let it go.