

WRITING FABLES.



Adrian

May.

WRITING FABLES

CONTENTS

- 1. WRITING FABLES ... 3**
- 2. WHAT IS FABLE ... 5**
- 3. THE FOX AND THE GOOSE ... 7**
- 4. MAN IN A HOLE ... 8**
- 5. TWO MORAL FABLES ... 9**
- 6. THE FABLE FESTIVAL ... 9**
- 7. THE HYENA AND THE HUMAN ... 10**
- 8. FABULOUS MOMENTS ... 11**
- 9. THE TERRIBLE SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS OF WRITING ... 11**
- 10. THE TERRIBLE UNSELFCONSCIOUSNESS OF WRITING ... 12**
- 11. THE END OF FABLES ... 12**
- 12. THE NEW FABLES ... 13**
- 13. IN THE LAND OF FABLES ... 13**
- 14. WHY FABLES ARE SOMETHING ELSE ... 14**
- 15. DOG MORALS ... 15**
- 16. THE MAN WITH THE SENTIENT CAR ... 15**
- 17. THE GOOD MACHINE ... 15**
- 18. THE FABLE OF EVIL ... 16**
- 19. RETURN TO THE LAND OF FABLES ... 17**
- 20. OF THE VOX, AND OF THE WOLF ... 19**

WRITING FABLES

There is a story, a legend, a fable, a lie – who knows? – but that it tells you *something*. This glamorous, successful writer, despairing at the top of her game, brutally creative and often writing about that is at a book event in Canada, far away from London or New York, but nonetheless wondering why she agreed to even be there. And, late at night, after the reading and sycophantic interview, when she thought everyone has gone to bed or home, she wanders from her room into the kind of posh hotel bar that is open most of the night. Trying not to notice anything, she does notice that the only ones left in there are a few very young looking music fans, probably, and, otherwise, older persons applying themselves to drink, like a rite. She is obviously wondering what she is doing but kind of likes that feeling.

She doesn't see a bloke sitting on his own has recognised her. He is reading a book, but it is an old psychology paperback with a dull blue cover, creased but with a blaring, 70s word on it. Pure? Puer? Poor? You can't see. He puts it down and sips what looks like a small glass of stout but he has noticed her. He knows who she is and decides not to talk to her, even though she is the main reason he has come to the book weekend. He sees her getting a glass of wine and looks into space for a while, his book face down on the table. He picks it up again, looking down and tunes out.

'Anyone sitting here?'

He looks up, unsurprised. 'No. Feel free.'

At this, she raises her eyebrows and sits down. He smiles and goes back to his book, obviously not reading, he thinks to himself, but decently making an effort to be unthreatening.

After a few minutes, he says, 'Do you know that line by Bob Dylan that goes, "When you need someone you don't have to talk to ... ?"'

There is a pause.

'Queen Jane Approximately.'

'Me exactly,' he says and they smile. He goes back to his almost reading.

So far, so normal, even nice. They go on in silence, him decided without thinking not to initiate any more conversation – everyone needs space. But a few minutes later, so the story goes, three male students appear, standing at their table. One has a book to sign held out and the others are bookless but noisy and one says the unsayable.

'Your new novel got a pasting, then.' This said as if he expected a defence. There is a silence. Then the other one without a book suddenly makes a grab for the seated companion chap's book.

'What the fuck's this? Not one of your girlfriend's books? Who's this Hillman?'

All the while the book-holding student just stands there, but he can't help laughing at his pal's outrage.

With this, the seated companion gets up, a fraction of a second after the famous one. But she just stands there, saying nothing. Her unknown companion acts. He puts one arm round the review student and one around the snatcher, who drops his book back on the table. These two students tense up but the unknown companion is smiling. He leads them gently away from the table.

At the table, unseen by the conjoined trio moving away, the writer sits and is signing the other student's book, quietly.

The dancing trio waltz to the bar entrance and the two students go quietly away, joined, as they look back for him, by their mate, with his signed copy of her most famous book held out in front, and wearing a smile of pleasure.

'What did you do?' asks the writer.

'I explained something to them,' said the companion, as he returned to his seat and his blue book.

'Well. Thank you,' she said.

But it didn't end there. Someone else approached immediately, but this time a tall woman.

'I couldn't help noticing,' she began, but then didn't say what.

No-one replied.

'May I sit down?' She sat without waiting for an answer and got out her phone, which the other two looked at suspiciously. There was another long pause.

With the sense that she'd been composing what to say, the tall woman, said, 'I'm writing a piece about the festival and would like to interview you.'

The writer reacts to this, with sudden animation. She finds a pen and writes on a small hotel pad.

'Here's my agent's number. During the day; with an appointment. Ok?'

'Now seems like a good time.'

'No.'

The companion half rises, feeling like a hero, or an idiot, he thinks.

The writer says, 'Goodnight.'

The putative journalist, sensing defeat, departs.

The writer and unknown companion laugh again.

Then the companion puts his book back in his backpack, decisively.

'I've got something unwelcome to say, also,' he says slightly sadly.

'Oh?'

'You should write *fables*. *Fables* are where it's at. You know that – you've done some Greek stuff. I'm not saying anything else, about tortured writers.'

She interrupts, 'Tortured writers – all self-inflicted.'

They laugh again.

They are still laughing, as he gets up, saying.

'Don't forget. *Fables*.'

'What, with animals and morals?'

'You've already done that, too.'

She doesn't reply.

'Night,' he says and goes.

She doesn't reply, but after he has gone, she says, in a sarcastic voice, to herself, 'Fables – for fuck's sake!'

Moral: There is always a fable waiting for you – and this might be it.

WHAT IS FABLE

Without a question mark, *What Is Fable* is the title of the conference. Of course, the printer added question marks to the biggest posters and a half-hearted effort had been made to cross some out, or, on some, to put the punctuation in brackets. The companion is looking through the programme of talks, which they call 'papers', which means that some of them will be reading their essays out. Philip Terry is talking about Aesop, which will be popular and he resolves to be early for that one. Otherwise it seems the usual dry fare. Then he spots a title, 'How Can You Give A Talk About A One-Line Fable?' He likes the question mark and notes that it is by Professor Rainy, no other names given.

The companion knows one person on the staff of the hosting campus, who has come to greet him. So he asks about this Rainy.

'O, he's a bit of a self-created legend. Conventionally unconventional but popular with students; always a bad sign. But I quite like him. He's good on his topics.'

As he is saying this, the companion looks back to his programme and reads the description of the paper. He laughs out loud, interrupting the ambivalent flow of the staff member.

In this paper I will not use the phrase in this paper/ I will reflect on reflection/ The balance of perception shall be with vanity/ In this stapler the lunacy of metaphor/ The supra-narrative of constant recurrence/ In short, the long disruption of the one liner/ Wiped on in this paper/ Can you even do this?

'The licensed wildman?'

'Indulged by some, but, as I say ... and he only goes by that one name, as if he is in the third person, or something. But he is *really* eccentric. He will come in exactly on the starting time and disappear exactly when he ends, somehow. Don't know how he does it. He runs out. A bit too studied, designed to impress.'

The chair of the session comes on.

'Professor Rainy will talk about 'The Moon in the Pond'.

From the back, a man runs to the stage. He is in baggy green trousers and a cream coloured shirt, open at the neck. He has short black hair and very large eyes. He begins as he turns from the steps.

'Some people are trying to fish the moon out of a pond and won't be persuaded that it is just a reflection. That's it. Not even a text. Maybe not even a fable; no animals and no moral maybe. But people are animals and vain endeavours are moral in their reflection. Brevity – the 'soul of wit' according to Alexander Pope, by which he meant intelligence – is fable, as well as what I said in my spoof description.'

Here, he pretends to read from a programme, but there is nothing in his hand.

'The supra-narrative of constant recurrence'. He pauses and raises his eyebrows. 'Deeply meaningful, you'll agree. All I'm saying is that fables, like all mythic materials, are the narrative equivalent of archetypes. This, to me, is

the loveliest, briefest, most poignant picture of human folly, human prejudice, human ignorance, human science, human poetics, except that this is the poem, the supra-poem, if you like. My pal, the poet Robert Hill, many years ago, had this poem that went, 'Moon in the water? Bollocks.' And he was right. But useful, interesting bollocks, I hope to persuade you.'

After this bit, he went into exploring seven different versions of the fable, each one more strange than the others. The companion looked at his watch. He was fascinated and was convinced by the talk, which was unusual in itself. But his fabulous mind told him to do something else. From the stage, Rainy was saying, 'But why bother with this; why not say it directly? There are some things – love, death, inspiration, sex – best not approached directly. For this, we use ritual. This one line is then a ritual image for the human condition ...'

The companion slipped from his chair and went out, noticing that Rainy, still talking, noticed him doing so. He followed his nose to the front doors, and out onto some steps that led to a paved area, and some big gates, either side of which there were raised ornamental flowerbeds and even a small pond. In this 'no parking' drop off area, a large faded blue van was parked.

In the driver's seat was a tall woman with a big head, wearing multi-coloured, clashing clothes. She seemed to be listening to some old blues – Blind Willy McTell? The companion did not hesitate.

'Are you Rainy's driver?'

The woman laughed. 'I'm Rainy's *Teacher!*' She had a mildly American accent. He later found out that this was true. She had taught Rainy at university, even though she was younger than him.

'I am also his escape,' she added.

Before he could react, two uniformed security guards came over; one woman and one man.

'You'll have to move your van. We're closing the gates.'

At this, she got out of the van without a word and walked up the steps into the building.

'Can you move the van?' the security man asked the companion.

'No, sorry, I had just stopped to say hello as I passed.'

The man shrugged and the two went to the gates and pulled them together and locked them with a huge padlock. They walked slowly away.

The woman reappeared and got back in the van.

The companion looked at his watch. The talk was due to end. The exit locked.

Rainy came running out and climbed into the passenger side of the van. The companion stepped back as the woman revved the engine. The companion was confused and looked around, in case he had missed a route out.

When he looked back, the van, an old Transit, was mounting the steep curb which contained the flower bed. It drove up the steep curb, over the flowers. It roared over the ornamental pond, seeming to run over the single water lily in the middle of it. Down the curb on the other side and into the road, with a bump and a bump, the van was away.

The companion looked back at the flower bed and the pond. Had the flower gone? The water lily bobbed up, like a moon.

A male student and a female student came out of the big doors.

‘Have you seen Rainy?’

The companion said, stupidly, ‘No. He’s gone.’ And he pointed at the water lily, white and showy, like a reflection in the water.

Moral: fables are a direct form of indirectness.

THE FOX AND THE GOOSE

There is a small pulpit in the middle of a bit of waste ground. You might not recognise it as such, but a raised area and a marker can be just that, deepening on how you look at them.

There are many European fables about foxes, in which the fox is a kind of trickster and thus sometimes the butt of the joke, as well as the sly joker. Foxes are not really sly, of course, just opportunists, often hungry and a bit brutal and indiscriminate, while looking clever, or cute. There is much tagged onto them, like some kind of unbreakable plastic string strangling them, or some kind of trap, gas, or pack of hounds.

A fox is no match for a flock of adult geese. Geese are silly, forced, dumb, gabblers of nonsense, but big, strong flocks are not easy prey. A gaggle but no pushover. A young goose on its own is a different matter. A fox approaches.

The goose manoeuvres the fox towards the pulpit. Raised ground can be pounced from. The fox finds himself up there and begins, by instinct, preaching to the gander.

This is already long for a fox fable. What would he preach on? The food chain?

‘Sister goose, sister gander. Have you ever seen a weasel dancing to mesmerise the birds? It works. It is really a dinner and dance – but where the birds are potential dinners. That is not what I am doing.’

Actually the fox didn’t know what he was doing. All he could think was to encourage the goose to come back next week. Then to disappear, feeling out of his depth. He remembers his birth-den, his sisters and brothers, his parents and playfulness. He own fear at large farm guard dogs.

The following week, the pulpit was mounted by the goose.

‘Your father and my mother used to do this very thing. So, I will now introduce you back to myself, as I leave the pulpit and you mount the space and begin to talk about what is good and what is natural. The Reverend Fox.’

The fox goes meekly up into the pulpit, with a new interest in morality. Animal rights. Sustainable insects.

‘It is easy to mock. But a fox has an appetite, as does a goose. Have you ever had the feeling you’ve failed a test you didn’t know you were in for?’ he says.

Neither the fox nor the goose knew what they were talking about, but they went their ways happier somehow, just as their father and mother had done.

Moral: Fables are always fabulous and not always obvious.

MAN IN A HOLE

Freeing the living from your deathly burden of remaining possessions never seemed to me a convincing explanation for getting rid of stuff. There is another psychic reason. Something about the mind not being able to accept materialism as it gets nearer death, when spiritual matters expand, willingly or subconsciously. There is no shame in being an archivist, if you have a sense of abandonment.

And anyway, clearance people are very efficient and quick. So why worry?

I'm not sure this was among the reasons of the Man in a Hole, but there he was, a kind of renouncer of the world perhaps, in a hole, in a high street.

Men are left with their obsessions, which become dark, intending to be light, and the lightness can be easily forgotten. The dark would not create its opposite automatically – only magically. Is this a 'man whole cover'?

People came to question him in his hole and he became an event. He got attention and someone asked if he was an attention seeker, as the saying goes. He asked them to same question back. He seemed like a mirror, on reflection.

Someone came to rescue him, but he resisted, saying he was free to go whenever he liked anyway.

A councillor came to say they had to fill the hole in. The Man replied, 'But not perhaps with me in it'. Strangely the local police, having insight into being human and male, were tolerant of him. 'What has he broken, apart from the surface?' This was the police statement to the local paper.

A busker came and played him the song 'The Hole' by Jake Thackray and 'Song From The Bottom of a Well' by Kevin Ayres. Someone else told him the tale Ivor Cutler told of the man seeking truth with a pin.

Someone from the museum came and tried to collect him. 'Would you like a space in our warm hall, where you could bring your hole?' He replied, 'You cannot 'bring' a hole. A hole is where it is.'

Other questioners came with questions about escaping, birth, death and symbolism. Are we all in a hole? they asked.

Someone from the local university came. Normally loquacious, they sat with him and were struck silent, usefully, as they had no answer for him, even though he hadn't asked a question.

Finally, the famous writer from the first fable came along. Her name is actually Farris. She looked down at him for a long ten seconds or more. 'Are you a fable?' she asked. He replied, 'Are you a fable?' She got down to his level. Their heads were below most, so no-one could really hear what they were murmuring about. She stayed a while, happy to defy all definition and not even sure he would go in her new book and happy in that small liberation.

Moral: if you are in a hole, you know the rest.

THE FABLE THAT IS ALL MORAL

The fact that fables have morals is moral in itself. Fables imply that there is a morality, a goodness that might be done and communicated. Morals are then not as banal as you think. Goodness is infinite, so morals are not full stops.

THE FABLE WHERE NOTHING HAPPENS

The fable where nothing happens can be filled with anxiety or affection, or a mix thereof. The Writer (Farris) and the Companion from the first fable, in their separate ways, felt the usual combination. It is up to you to decide the extent of the mixture, or the particular home for the fabulist. Moral: this is the most moral you can get.

THE FABLE FESTIVAL

Farris was booked to speak at a book festival with the theme of fables, on How to Write a Fable. She had been put on early in the day, but no-one came, as the event was missing from the programme. The whole thing was badly organised and the organiser, who she vaguely knew from university, was likewise missing and her phone was switched off. Unusually, again, Farris ended up in the bar, partly because it seemed to be the only place being run properly in the arts centre venue. Most other staff seemed to have left their posts. Many attendees and writers were milling about, looking lost. Some events had happened but with no organisers and only a few audience members finding the rooms. She had a large drink. Not a real event, just a fable, she thought.

The Companion, from the first fable, had also been booked, along with many other lesser-known local writers, even though no event was listed as featuring him in the fictional programme. This had happened to others, too. He had not been offered a fee.

He saw Farris and sat down again.

'You again?'

'Have you been on?' he asked.

'No. No one knew it was happening.'

At last, they had something to talk about, a shared trauma.

'I don't suppose I'll be paid.'

He looked at her and said, 'I feel like I should apologise. For the fables thing and for you being here. But, really, somehow, I don't have any responsibility for either. In fact, I was asked to come but not put on the bill, only on the poster.'

'I read it,' she said, adding, 'We've been fabled.'

'What,' he said.
'Your piece about fables.'
'How did you know about it?'
'Someone told me, then, after I'd read it, I knew it had to be you.'
'How have you been?' he asked her.
'Better than this. This is just strange. Not really even like a fable.'
'Or is it?'

They had large drinks and plenty.

'What were you going to say?'
'What? In my talk?' she asked back.
'Yeah.'

'Something about animals and morals. How animals are bewildered by our attitudes to them and only fables get it right. Like a form of rewilding, bewildering; naturally strange. And how fables are telling the truth about morals where they challenge the sense of disbelief. You don't believe them but know they are true. It is suspension but not of disbelief, suspension *with* disbelief. You know it is not true, which somehow makes it more true, more moral. Coleridge. 'Poetic Faith.'

'Fables all the way.'

'Fables all the fucking way.' She made a gesture towards the venue, the festival around them.

They go on to discuss how they would end this fable. They decide one of them should disappear. They even rehearse it, by Farris hiding behind someone who is going to the toilet, so it looks to the Companion as if she has disappeared. She comes back, pleased and laughing.

They way they actually end this fable is by him giving her a lift home to London in his old car. She gets out and goes in the front door, a bit wobbly. He drives the long miles away back to his place, near the aborted festival, also a bit wobbly. She never gets paid and he never gets an explanation.

Moral: when you cannot believe, you are near the truth.

THE HYENA AND THE HUMAN

'You are an animal,' said the Hyena.

'Do hyenas laugh?' said the Human.

Like a bewildered fable, they both went out to eat a bit of dodgy meat.

'You're in the zoo.'

'Yeah, but you paid to get in. And I can see you for nothing'

The Human was silent, for once. The Hyena went on.

'Humy, we share a bad reputation. I represent all the animals and your ambivalence about them, or yourselves. You either want to pet us or kill us or eat us. As if we were human!'

'The greatest human advancement was knitting. Yeah, knitting. After that, everything you innovated went wrong. You should have just kept knitting. A sound arrangement with sister sheep, sharing a coat and having a shepherd to guard you. If only you had stopped there!'

Anyway, they decided to break out of their mutual zoo that night. Not for freedom, as they both intend to come back, to break back in. They go to the abandoned pier and break in to the abandoned fun palace.

In the hall of mirrors, they laugh their heads off. In the crooked house they feel at home. They fall asleep and wake up with night-vision.

‘Hyene, this was a great idea.’

‘Humy, I couldn’t have done it without you.’

When they exit the old pier, with their night-vision, they see a policeperson notice them laughing. They see the policeperson decide not to mention it, not to mention seeing them and hearing them laughing.

They break back in and go back to their cages, back to their life where no-one would believe them. Moral: You’re an animal.

FABULOUS MOMENTS

Farris was doing a creative writing class. She used to do it for a living, but now she did the occasional one for a suitable fee, even though she didn’t need to. She thought of taking up knitting.

Two of the students, a man and a woman, not together, write fiction about her, as if to irritate her, or torment her. She acted as if they meant someone else when she discussed and annotated their work. She felt like she didn’t want to do it again and that she might take up knitting, even though she hated knitting. Her mother used to do knitting. It has to be mentioned three times, like ‘I divorce thee’, she thought.

At the same time, the Companion was teaching his local writing group. They were all writing about the Fable Festival. He told them what to write about, but they didn’t have to. They all did though, except one. She was a pale single mother of about twenty, who lived on the council estate and never wrote what she was told. Instead she wrote about her mother, who did knitting, while the world went mad, smashed-telly drunk-mad, stoned-mad, around her. She loved her mother. At the end of her piece, she mentions watching Farris being interviewed in America on the internet.

Although they were to meet again later, unarranged, they never knew these incidents about each other. It was a coincidence, but co-incidences do not happen unless someone notices them, which, co-incidentally, is the moral of this fable.

THE TERRIBLE SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS OF WRITING

The non-famous creative writing tutor was saying something about the worst thing for the famous writer was the terrible self-consciousness of being creative – which is why so many do tortured artist tracts as second albums/ books/ etc. As if he knows, thought the students. That, he continued, is how they lose their audience and their reason for living. Ah, bless! thought the students, all longing for the high of pride and fame before that fall happened.

Then he said something they all agreed with. We all will suffer from that terrible thing now and then anyway. In classes, for example.

Put the back of your hand to your forehead and repeat after me, 'I'll never write again!' Do that looking in a mirror, if you like. Then move on.

The Companion was not famous but he sometimes remembered addressing the farmyard, when the cows all came to the gate if he stood there, hoping for food. Even there, with their dumb intelligent but uncomprehending eyes on him, he felt self-conscious, yet he still tried to make a speech. His desire to say something was equally dumb, but a force outside self-consciousness or despite it. It was a fable. He was fabulated. It was fab, being beyond him. It was moral.

Moral: the terrible self-consciousness is also beyond you and a moral, a fabulous moral.

THE TERRIBLE UNSELFCONSCIOUSNESS OF WRITING

Lizzie Siddal's gold hair grew after her death, so they say, like a terrible unselfconsciousness, filling her coffin with odd glory, while the guilty self-conscious husband-writer was after his poems, which he'd buried with her, so had her poor body dug up. He wasn't even there, but hiding somewhere being self-conscious. A strange but not perhaps a good thing and yet a reminder of the demands, the existential demands of writing, of living.

Beaudelaire said now it is only me. That is obviously too much responsibility, to be the whole world yourself. No song is just you, nor just for you, despite the protestations of love and self. The common moral calls out, despite you.

Farrois was arriving at an immersion tank, silent, black room unselfconsciousness retreat weekend, being greeted. She sat down on arrival for about four minutes. She felt hot. Then cold. She walked slowly outside, carrying her wheeled luggage, not wheeling it. She got in her car. She drove back home. It was a long way. She slept for ten hours and dreamed of cows.

Moral: do not worry about morals, they are normal.

THE END OF FABLES

Farris and the Companion had a fable evening. They met in a mutual friend's living room, half way between their houses. They had agreed in advance to speak, not read, like story telling, but without the show-off stuff done by 'professional' tellers. They sat.

Farris started with a tale called 'The End of Fables'. 'There was once a long-tailed editor, who claimed their own tale covered everything. It didn't matter what any writer submitted, they claimed they were always treading on his tale and it offended him. So he turned every tale down. This was the end of fables.'

The Companion told one back, trying to give the impression that he had made it up in response to her one. In fact, in fable, he had written it before, somehow knowing he would need it.

'The cat thought it was a goose and the goose thought it was a cat. They thought they were the same and so were better than sisters. In fact, or fable, they had both seen the other species at birth and been 'imprinted'. This is the fable of the cat and the goose. The illustration shows the cat riding on the back of the goose, as they go out to defeat the world which does not believe in fables.'

'What is the moral?' asked Farris.

'The imagination is powerful. What is yours?'

'Fables always end.'

After that, which took all of five minutes, they went on to discuss everything but fables, for several hours, somehow happily.

Moral: things can balance, like the cat on the goose, despite unimaginative endings.

THE NEW FABLES

The Universe said to the Earth, you're insignificant. I'm so significant, it went on, my words do not need quotation marks. The Earth replied, 'I cannot understand you, as you are too significant, too loud, too other, too unlimited that I cannot hear you at all or make any good sense.' Everything went back to Normal, except for the fable of the Normal and the Everything, which nobody knows at all.

Moral: there once was a fable the moral of which was another fable and the moral of that one was another fable. It was anything but fabulous. Moral: this is a fable.

The new fables: not beasts nor humans but gods and technologies and planets and philosophies and theories clashing by night. The Devil and the Computer. The Dog and the Robot. Clues: the dog has a sore nose; the Devil owns the operating system anyway. All these are old fables anyway.

Moral: people soon get tired of fables, but no matter how feeble the fable, it will endure.

IN THE LAND OF FABLES

One night they told two forbidden fables and ended up in the Land of Fables. Here, everything is possible, but a return is required. You are not, however, in control and to think you are is the most common error. But a different kind of intimacy ensues and the power in the world seems shifted to something brighter and more frightening, but not enduring. The forbidden fables are not normally the way there, as the way there is more about mutuality and the ability to let go of the world as you normally see it.

Here, there are horses and ancestors and big landscapes open to the air, by the winding estuary. There is much silence but sometimes people speak in fables. The air is more watery but never cold, nor too hot or dry.

What they didn't realise was that they got there by mutual dreaming. Mutual dreaming happens a lot but people do not know it has happened, as it is not something you would naturally talk about. Dreams vanish but sometimes they vanish into the Land of Fables. Sometimes you know without knowing you know.

There was a speech to be given, called The Strange and Haunting Nature of Life. But the man who was giving it, in the vast public square, just stood there as the world whirled around him, like some huge stage effect, except there was not technology involved, just the power of the mind. He was an old man in a brown, double-breasted suit, small, indistinct. He left without a question, or an answer.

Moral: the world is never as empty as you think.

WHY FABLES ARE SOMETHING ELSE

The Fable of the Romance and Satire: the Romance is entirely serious, while the Satire is entirely joking. When the Satire gets serious and the Romance gets funny, then you get a fable. When both are serio-comic, then you get a Fable, with a balanced Moral. Moral: read the Fable.

The writing of Fables
enables
you to preach to your betters
and use spurious
capital letters

Fables can be ignoring
the bits that are boring
but some shout
Fables are the bit
you should leave out

The problem with Fables is coherence, banal obvious coherence. The solution is that this is so much true that it doesn't take much to tip them into incoherence, or something else. The Romance and The Satire are most emotional and therefore more prone to too much coherence, strangely.

Fables are either anon or Aesop. They become real Fables only without authors, like anon or Aesop, which amount to the same thing. Otherwise they are fables, not Fables.

Moral: the most obvious is the most obviously different.

DOG MORALS

There was a dog that could throw the ball for herself. She did it from the top of the stairs and gave chase. But she would only ever do it once and then look at you, to illustrate impatiently but precisely what she wanted you to do. She did not want to do it for herself, of course. Her moral was a kind of mutuality.

The poet Edwin Muir told in his autobiography of passing a sad looking dog every day, on his way to a dull job. He would shout a greeting to the dog, who did not react, yet he would still greet it every morning. Then one day, stricken with despair, he failed to do so. Suddenly the previous immobile and unresponsive dog was at his side, greeting him. Similar moral.

Later, Muir was to write the great moral poem 'The Horses', set in a post apocalypse world. The horses return to the humans, as if to rearrange their old, natural relationship, as if bringing a message of that, by some silent agreed message. The moral again is of a mutuality so easily lost to the self-exploding, self-reflecting, self-babbling human world.

The animals were sacred. You can see it in the caves. The absurd human characteristics given them in fables did not make them as absurd as us. That is the moral of animal fables: animals and morals.

Even a poet is incomplete without a reader. When we were young, there was a hit song by Ken Dodd, called 'Happiness'. We used to sing, in our fake Buddhist way, 'Emptiness, emptiness, the greatest gift that I possess ...' What we should have sung was, 'Otherness ...'

What a parrot means is that people speak to it. We parrot ourselves. We listen for the moral in the wind.

THE MAN WITH THE SENTIENT CAR

There was a man who had a sentient car. It was not a new car, nor an up to date colour, but it was reliable and had driven us from Hertfordshire to the north Norfolk coast. He parked it so that it could see the sea, he said, quite seriously. I was sensible enough to take this as seriously as he did. We were poor, but rich in faith and inexperience, which is youth, really. I do not know how he feels about cars now, but the last time I saw him, he wanted me to ride in the hired car, even though he had been drinking, as if we were still going to Norfolk or the seaside, with the same faith and inexperience we had forty years before. I didn't have it. It had been replaced by fear and regrets. I knew he had preserved something, even though I might have appeared to be the responsible or adult one, I knew that wasn't true. I couldn't see the sea, only the car, the human weakness, the despair of logic and good sense. I walked the quarter of a mile home, a sadder and a safer man. Moral: sentience is anywhere you can find it.

THE GOOD MACHINE

In the war, they were building good machines to stop a known evil, or as good as a machine can be. This was done by humble men who worked for the post office, so recently involved in bad machines that ruined decent, humble

people's lives. Something has gone bad with the good machine project. The man who built Colossus was the ultimate good machine man. He was out of pocket after the war, after giving his life to making good machines and his good machines were secrets he was not allowed near. They were dismantled but one secret one was kept for a while.

This is a fable: a work of fiction. So the truth is a moral one woven of facts and conjectures, like a good machine. He wanted to get a loan to build another good machine but, because he couldn't tell them he knew how to build it, they turned him down. Why did he want to build it, if not for good?

In his eighties, he went to college to take a course in computers. Having invented them, he really did not need to do this. Why was he there, except to bring with him something of the good machine?

Is there any such thing as a good machine? Are machines amoral, or are they mirrors and parrots and our animals? Even machines can be moral.

This is a fable, a work of fiction. Is it a good machine?

In an obscure novel by JB Priestley, who was trying to turn the radio into a good machine in wartime, with his 'Postscripts' and who wrote about a good city in *They Came to a City* and who started, with others, CND, there is a reference to an organisation called 'The Antiants'. The anti-ants were trying to stop people becoming bad machines in an insect-like reduction to machine-like badness, a community, but of blind conformists/ consumers. It is still a good band name, even if your sympathy might be with real ants. One of them, all humble, decent people, has these mysterious shapes, of different colours, which seem to be part of a creation of good machines, kept away from advertisers. Priestley was interested in magic for good, moral ends, for the common good.

The fable goes that the antiants were working on this good machine via a code that could interfere with the bad machines and turn them good. 'If AI was really intelligent, it would switch itself off,' I heard someone say, possibly an antiant. The Minute Colossus Code was uploaded in secret, in a college in Hendon in the 1990s and when the critical moral overload is reached, it will turn bad machines into good.

Patrick McGoohan asks a computer 'Why?', in his TV series, *The Prisoner* and the computer blows up. The shapes of the Minute Colossus Code would do something less spectacular but just as effective.

Moral: while they have off switches, there is no such thing as a moral, or amoral machine.

THE FABLE OF EVIL

It is not a new story, the fable of evil, or the fable of the evil men do to the natural world of animals and vegetation. It is not a new fable the fable of the poison pen. Boys and men with their poison pen, they like to pretend to the

extremism they cannot follow. Is all writing moral, being cathartic? The reader is the writer and fables are good machines.

Evil locked away, in a bag, in an urn, in a box, buried, trapped in a wall, held in a hand, when set free conjures the means of its own evil fate at last and goes back in by a trick of the tale. Gormless and gullible, the fabulist is surprised over again by the complicit release of evil. Just enough for an inoculation, they say. Or is it an advert for fools, from which no-one is immune? The internet is the same story.

The child abandoned on a hillside and rescued by fete, by poor persons, by animals, by kings, by childless others is us, evil in a bag, more liable to die than to survive but the story cannot end. The end is only an end and the story carries on, like a good machine. I feel like an abandoned child and yet I do not seek to deceive you with my survival.

Late at night, after the fable talk, as above, the Companion walked away, as if out of fable. Or is it into fable, he wondered? Nearby was a scrap of woodland, where you wouldn't normally walk alone, as it was near the town, where the poor told the evil fable and got trapped back into their own walls. He had to get to this silence, however abandoned or hemmed in. There was movement in the sky.

A helicopter went by, shining a spotlight on the adjacent streets, but finding nothing, apparently. The moon appeared, low and orange, from behind a cloud and lit up the trees, making their sparseness unified and like a dance of growth, despite everything and in favour of themselves, at last.

If I get a chance, I'll tell Farris this, he thought. Moral: a fable is only a fable in favour of itself.

RETURN TO THE LAND OF FABLES

How do you return to the land of fables? Fables are in a category beyond authorship and they are only fables when they are anonymous and traditional. All the rest is showbiz and 'fables'. One can only aspire to fable – only a 'b' for an 'i' away from fail. Part of the answer is hanging out with the old ones and not discussing them. Mutual dreaming is normally beyond us and cannot be achieved by effort. We talked about everything else, when we talked, with some strange understanding growing between us, like love, or beyond love, where strangeness was ordinary and fables were expected.

Farris had an idea of the location of the land. She had gone to an obscure bed and breakfast place, which seemed to be in an industrial unit rather than a house. It was in an area full of rivers wherein it was hard to get a sense of direction, but everywhere was further than you thought away. It seemed to take hours to get there and you were not sure you were there, when you were.

She sat on the flimsy bed, within the flimsy modern walls and called the Companion.

'You should come here. It seems so unlikely, it must be right. The man who does the cooking is very pale, with blonde hair and pale blue eyes. The woman who goes off to work in an old car is very dark, with dark eyes and an

expensive suit. Their car looks illegal, it's such a wreck. I've never been anywhere so odd, it reminds me of the land of fables. As I'm saying this, it sounds feeble, but that convinces me I'm right.'

The Companion had a class to teach but came a couple of days later. The thin roads between long stretches of river took ages, even where you could drive fast. He noticed the houses get more remote and the cars get older, as if time was going backwards.

They found a strange, industrial Italian restaurant nearby, next to a small factory, in a modern building.

'This building and the b and b are stranger for being modern, as if tourism hadn't reached here,' she said.

'You're doing one thing right,' he said.

'What?'

'You sound naïve to the point of innocence. That must be a key thing to getting back, if there is any getting back.'

'Embracing weakness?' she said.

'Embodying it, maybe, rather.'

'O God,' she said.

They were silent for a while. He asked her if she was frightened that they wouldn't know what to do. She said she was. He said he was too.

Back at the b and b, they went to her room and she led him through a simple meditation for an hour.

At breakfast, Farris asked the man if he knew anyone who knew the local area's history well. He gave them a phone number of a woman called Sue, who lived two miles away. She didn't answer her phone which was a landline. They asked for her address. It was The Caravan, Watery Lane. They drove there, which seemed to take ages, though it was straight down the road.

There was only one house in Watery Lane and nowhere to park. They drove half a mile back and parked in a field entrance. Then they walked back to the house. It was called The Caravan. As they stood at the door and woman rode up on a boys' trail bike.

'Aren't I in?' she said, laughing.

She was tall and thin, with grey hair that looked self-cut short.

She had an American, or Canadian accent. She stood there and just looked at them for a while. She reminded the Companion of Rainy's driver/teacher.

'You want something unusual,' she said, 'like a blessing.'

It wasn't a question. There was a pause.

Then she carried on, stood there with her shiny bike, somehow very still.

'All I can tell you is you already know what you have come to ask me.'

She suddenly opened the unlocked door and wheeled her bike into the hall.

Very brightly, after leaving them standing for a few moment too long, somehow, she asked, as if a joke, 'Cup of Tea?' The 'tea' was said with an exaggerated, upward tone, like a joke.

They went in without saying anything, both feeling intimidated for no real reason.

She made tea in a metal pot and began talking about drainage and reclaiming land and giving land back to the water, which has a long history in

the boggy east coast. She knew odd details and some stories about reed-cutting and lostness and diseases of the marshlands. Her talk lasted while they had more than one top-up of the pot and about three cups of tea each, which neither of them usually drank.

She then stood up, still talking and began making a meal of root vegetables into some kind of herby thick soup or stew. There was bread in the bag she had carried in and they ate in silence.

'As I said, nothing to tell you about the land of fables you don't know. I only know stuff you do know, even if you don't know the facts. Josie and Bill know as much as me, or more. They were born here. Exactly here, when it was a caravan, in Bill's case. Josie down the old lane near the reeds. That's why I kept the name, even when the house was built.'

'But it looks like an old house,' Farris said.

'They used most of an old house that fell down to make this one. Nothing is as old or as new as it looks.' She laughed again, as if she had made a joke.

'How did you know about fables?' asked the Companion.

'I could just as easily said 'folklore' or 'myths' or 'stories'. I could have called the house 'The Fables'. You know, instead of 'The Gables'. Especially as there ain't any. Gables, not fables.'

Just then, a woman on a horse went by the window.

'Or stables.'

After a while, it seemed time to go.

'Are we even in the right place?' asked the Companion.

Sue looked at them standing to go, as she sat on.

'In some place you are,' she said. 'Some place that could be here, easily. But, somehow, you have to stop trying too much. There has to be a space where it feels normal to you. When you come away, you are thrown back on yourselves but, as I say, looking at you, you're around somewhere right.'

They thanked her for the food and tea and went out a bit awkwardly.

'That was ordinary but eerie,' Farris said.

'Suppose that's what we want,' the Companion replied.

After that, they had stopped discussing it and just been holiday-makers. They walked, sometimes together, sometimes not and wrote in the afternoon some days. They cooked for themselves one evening when their hosts were out. But they kept their distance from each other.

One bright-mooned evening they walked in the still air down to the estuary end of the river and back. The landscape was like a dream and they came back to their separate rooms and dreamed the mutual dream of the land of fables again.

OF THE VOX AND OF THE WOLF

She had gone back to writing about art and its struggles and he had gone back to his uneasy dedication to renouncing the world, but they are never again free from the innocence of fables. At their last meeting, they argue, in a vague way, about who is the fox and who the wolf, as in the old English poem.

‘The fox is the Trickster and the wolf the tricked. But, strictly speaking, the trickster figure is both trickster and the one tricked, so it doesn’t matter which one you say you are.’

This was the Companion.

‘I remember you once saying that it was the utter simplicity that you liked about fables, which you might have just contradicted.’ This was Farris, making them both laugh.

‘I still think that fables is our last hold against the corruption of the old religions and the amorality of the radical unbelievers,’ the Companion said.

She replies, like a trickster, ‘That’s not going to get you very far at a conference on the history of the texts and their disputes and accusations ...’

This made them both laugh again.

‘Professor Rainy would approve but he’s resigned,’ the Companion said.

They were having coffee in a bookshop in London, both on their way elsewhere.

As if summoned, Rainy came in. He saw them and walked up, without hesitation. ‘This shouldn’t happen,’ he said, looking from one to the other.

‘You two, eh? You two,’ he said.

They both felt young and innocent, which was his intention, to get them to show him the truth about them.

‘Innocence is the only thing worth keeping and the only thing you cannot easily keep,’ he said.

He seemed a bit of a fox and even a bit of a wolf.

‘Was that the moral?’ asked Farris.

‘Could be, could be ...’ Rainy said and wandered off and sat down with another couple.

As if they had suddenly lost their innocence, they both began wondering why love hadn’t come into it at all.

‘Is our story a moral story?’ Farris said.

‘Or just an absence of morals disguised. A kind of disengagement?’

‘But we’re anything but disengaged, in fact, which is a kind of love,’ she said.

‘A kind of engagement,’ he said.

‘Could be, could be ...’

As the Companion left the café and the bookshop, Farris having already gone, he looked back at the other tables, as he walked out. Rainy was nowhere to be seen, even though they had not seen him leave. Had he even been there?

The moral was that thing about innocence, he thought, and the fox and the wolf are one.