

i. Every wall is a door

Opening — gambits, sentences, propositions, exhibitions, performances, possibilities, doors: spring. Spring opens the year, awakens, brings light with it. Opens the day out. Daisy, days eye. Spring awakening. Buds, seeds, life. The language of opening is the language of beginnings, of imagined possibilities, of thresholds. There's a long disquisition in Peter Handke's novel *Across*, about thresholds. Handke evokes their double nature as spaces open to both sides, but also as places in their own right, zones of testing or safety: "Isn't the ash heap where Job sits in his misery a threshold, a place of testing? Didn't a fugitive put himself under someone's protection by sitting down on a threshold? Doesn't the archaic usage of 'gate' evoke the threshold as a dwelling place, as a room in its own right?" Thresholds' equivocate, but they offer refuge. Without them we lose the power of the space between sides to offer pause for reflection. The house that lies beyond the threshold is hospitable space. Strangers have to be entertained once they cross a threshold and come into the house — outside they can be killed, or indeed, as soon as they leave. *Mi casa es su casa*, as the traditional offer from host to guests has it, but outside you are a stranger. Peter Handke says that thresholds have gone now, as places of testing and safety, anyway. The only threshold remaining to us, he reminds us, is that between dreaming and waking, and nowadays little attention is paid to that.



Building Site Sign –
Villa Said, 2006
(Photo: Idit Elia
Nathan)

ii. Child's play

When did we children first go to war? Was it with the Cheshire Hippopotami — that filthy, feral band, average age nine, in their shorts and wellington boots, fiercely territorial. They barricaded a small, sandy island in a stream in Sparrow Woods, behind the suburban south London houses where we lived, sending out challenges through their leaders to anyone who wanted to fight them. They had stones and sharp sticks, and some muscle, skinny and small as they were. They were, of course, fearless by repute; part gang, part secret society; no one knew who was in and who was out. In those days we kids were all citizens of the republic of war, geared up to respond to any and all infringements of back garden or local woods and fields territories with strategic attacks. Our weapons — blackened by flame in the back garden — were charred swords made from two pieces of wood nailed together. On winter nights my brother and I practiced boxing in front of the living-room fire, with rules and corners and wet flannels to suck. We were at the time about eight and ten. I was bigger, a girl, wiry and red-haired, but my smaller ginger brother had *drive*, the will to beat me. When we weren't fighting we made camps and lit fires, cooking stolen potatoes in the embers. In autumn we stamped on our fires and came home in the dark. In spring we looked for frogspawn in the rain-water filled bomb-crater, and came home with armfuls of sappy, strong smelling bluebells.

This was the 1960s, a decade that, in retrospect, has been re-inscribed with liberality and sunshine — but there's a difference between liberality and peace, surely, for the liberality that encouraged new ideas of post-war selfhood with children at the centre, also feared children, and feared for them. It was not a peaceful decade. Not for you, of course, born into it and toddling out of babyhood right into the Six-Day War, you for whom all that childhood war-play and running wild in the fields, playing dead and hiding, that came slightly later and in a different context. For us the long shadow of war was 'the War', the one my mum told me about, the one where she drew lines down the backs of her legs instead of wearing stockings and danced with Canadian servicemen at Covent Garden. That was the one that mattered. To us, you lived in the land of oranges and folk dancing, we had no idea you had a war on your hands too.

It was in 1959 that the United Nations enshrined the rights of the child, a decade after the invention of the AK47. Easy to repair, long lasting, it was a marriage of the command economy with its limitless capacity for production, and the capitalist market, with its limitless need to sell. Was it merely a spin off that it was also, reportedly, intended to be light enough for a child to use? Child soldiers, under age combatants defined as such by their ability to lift an assault weapon. There are so many, now. In the decade after the war, when so much of urban Britain lay in ruins, Marjorie Allen championed the transformation of bomb-sites to playgrounds. 'Junkyard playgrounds' as they were first called, were real, dangerous, made for combat and adventure. By 1959 the first junkyard playground, in Camberwell, was ten years old. Eventually they were renamed 'adventure playgrounds' because of the disruptive and degrading associations of junk, according to social historian Roy Kozlovsky. Allen was born Marjorie Gill. A cousin of the artist Eric Gill, she was a progressive landscape architect who, Kozlovsky remarks, became a ceaseless promoter of adventure playgrounds, children's rights and international cooperation. Playing in playgrounds could foster democratic tendencies, creating play communities, preventing future war.

Yet it was not peaceful, the decade that followed. It was not only the Six-Day War, but fascism in Greece ('67) the Prague Spring ('68), the ongoing horror of Vietnam, the corroding stasis of Franco's Spain, all those assassinations and the riots, and the murder of students in 1967 at Kent State

University in the USA. All of that, all those events, we watched on the new black and white TV my parents bought in the mid 1960s. In my mind they jostle with those images of hippy-haired children running free, and that post-war ideal that children should be protected from the violence and destruction of war through robust, healthy, outdoor play. All of us — and you and me with that ten year age-gap and desert and sea between us — grew up in a world in which we were declared citizens of peace by adults who had seen at first hand, or from afar (or who had even committed), atrocities, violence and acts of hatred, and who wanted to see the long decade in which we played as a decade filled with the sunlight of opportunity, free from pain, free from concern.

There was belief, in those days (and which still persists as a form of nostalgia), that children's play was and is beyond history. That it was and is natural and timeless, that whatever happens, children will play in the way they have always played. The nostalgia is for a time when children could play outside free from the danger of threatening strangers and voracious sexual predators. But in the post-war world play is always touched with danger, often danger that noble children can push back. The post-war world is full of representations of children dangerously poised over pits and bombsites; shimmying up pipes and jumping from broken wall to broken wall. Novels and films are peopled by children who overcome danger in quiet suburban life, or whose parents conveniently die, leaving them happily playing. In Alan Garner's children's novel *Elidor* the menace comes up through the garden. Ancient people — fierce, brutal and desperate, homeless and wandering, ruined by history — break through the flowerbeds and gouge the front door with their weaponry, leaving marks that the children's parents are unable to read. Only the children understand the real danger that history poses. Only the children read the signs.

Of course we played with guns. I had a double holster and spent my pocket money on caps. My brother had an air rifle by the age of eight, with pellets. My first cat was killed by a junior school kid with an air gun, up in Sparrow Woods. I keep thinking of kids with guns — if they can't carry an assault weapon a pistol will do — in those bitter, ragged, frontierless wars that we now see. Imagine — there was a *formal* declaration of war in 1914, followed by carnage and anarchy contained on fields of combat that were laid down on maps, their boundaries marked on paper. Some

of those combatants were undoubtedly still children. War has now exceeded any and all of its prescribed boundaries. Its failure — or just one of its many failures — has been to fail to keep to the agreed limits of combat. And as war has seeped into civilian spaces, including schoolyards and playgrounds, children are now both victims and combatants.

What were we doing, as children, then? Were we just getting ready for some as yet undefined future war? Was that the intention, unconsciously, of rough play? Or was it that play never surmounts its historical context? It is hardly timeless. What it is as a social practice is given context and shape by where it finds itself. Sadly, there is no other-world of noble children whose play is like a drawn thread that connects children across time. All civil life, all play, takes place within the current limits of law, ideology and imagination. Children are civilians too.



Mixed Rubble - Villa Said, 2006
(Photo: Idit Elia Nathan)

iii. Housers

In the opening pages of David Malouf's novel *Child's Play* — which is about Italian terrorism in the 1970s — the terrorist, who tells the tale, opens by recounting the story of his farewell visit to his father, in the countryside where he grew up. In the course of the afternoon he walks alone to an ancient abandoned farmhouse nearby that he has known since childhood. On its doorstep he finds what he has come to find — two rows

of deep markings in the stone of the threshold, an indecipherable script that he traces with his hands, trying, and always unable, to understand. This threshold might once have been an Etruscan altar, his father had told him as a child. Whoever made these marks is long gone. There is no one — how could there be? — to tell these runes, to uncover their meaning. It is beyond the threshold of memory; beyond the possibility of reading. It is, it must be, this short opening, an echo of Virgil's Georgics, that ancient paean to the earth and all that grows there, that cry to returning farmers for the land they had lost. Politics, war, conflict. All unreadable now, hidden in plain sight. Two cherry trees grow against the farm wall, half a dozen olives, some pears. It is a house on the borderland, a place of testing and safety for this young man before he goes out to kill. And he sits on the step of a small house that was made before Italy itself became a nation, built by people who know nothing of present troubles, as we know nothing of the gouges in the stone that they made. No amount of seeing can make us understand. We do not have the key.

We can only see what we have the imagination to see, the imagination that is held within what the philosopher Charles Taylor calls our 'social imaginary'. Beyond it the world is hidden in plain sight. In Tel Aviv, that city of spring, of openings, of beginnings, there is a mansion, scarred, rough and damaged, inhabited now by social activists, passers-through and migrants. The Red House, as it is known, is one of many late 19th century well-houses built for wealthy orange growers around sources of water. It too was hidden in plain sight until recently, when it was 'discovered' by architectural students and activists. It is a kind of ghost. It stands as a crumbling marker to a hidden history of occupation — an economy of oranges and water in place well before the settlers came and built those dream houses of modernity. Threads draw competing pasts through history, past to present, social imaginary to social imaginary.

None of us has a monopoly on history, or, come to that, story.

They called them 'housers', in the 1930s, those reformers of social planning. Germany, Britain, France, the US, Israel. Patrick Geddes, the Scottish social planner, pioneer, champion, global thinker (all words that seem somehow to set and shape who he was) was born in 1854. Tel Aviv is the only known city whose core was entirely built according to one of

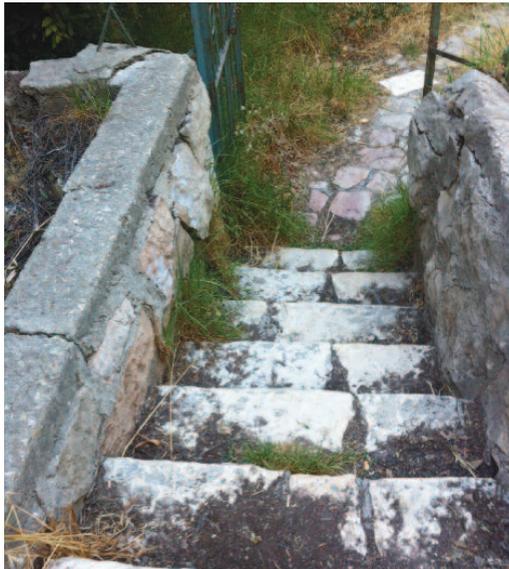
Geddes' plans, designed by him from start to finish and completed, so they say, by a network of architects, nineteen of whom studied at the Bauhaus. The well-houses were over. Gone. Gone not just then, in the 1920s, but blown away earlier, condemned to dust in the blistering heat of change that followed the end of the first World War. All 20th century history really starts — Margaret McMillan's book *Paris 1919* argues — at the post-war negotiating table, with the cutting up of the old worlds — the Ottoman Empire and the Austro-Hungarian among them — the pleading of new causes by tiny autonomous regions, the beginning of the ending of colonialism, the emergence of new kinds of nation states and the enshrining of the right to self-determination.

A decade and a half later, in 1933, that threshold of a year in Germany after which all changed, your grandparents came from Germany to Palestine. In the post-Ottoman British Mandate, Palestinians were still the landlords and immigrant Europeans the tenants. Your grandparents rented, moving house from time to time, and then moving to London for the duration of the war, where your father, born in 1935, grew up as one of that adventure playground generation, his early childhood framed by those plane-filled skies over London, with bombings seen from the vantage point of the hill of Hampstead Heath, where they lived in a basement flat. He would have been ten in 1945, exactly the child Marjorie Allen had in mind when she passionately argued for children's rights to play for a better world.

The Israel they moved back to, post-war, was the Israel of modernist dreaming. The well-houses were already ghosts. The image I have here is of spring awakening in modernity, as if the land has been asleep, and in its sleep had flattened the past. In the desert there is barely a spring. It is a two-season climate, but in another sense spring *springs*, fully formed, fully opened. In Hebrew the word for spring, 'aviv', relates to the moment when a seed awakens in spring, just around the time of the northern equinox, in late March. As you know, spring is brief and full of flowers in the Mediterranean, and it moves, east to west. In cold, damp Britain it moves from east to west at around two miles a day. The poet Edward Thomas, who died on the front in France in the spring of 1917, followed it on his bike in the spring of 1914, as he rode west from London. 'It is not yet spring,' he wrote, 'spring is being dreamed' in his book of that journey, *In Pursuit of Spring*. Spring is being dreamed. Spring is promised.

When does a promise stop being a promise? When does it run out?

We were housed in modernity, you and I, the desert and a sea and ten years of time between us. But we were not *contained* by it. For you, growing up in the modernity of Israel, there was nothing old but the land. No one lived in old houses, it was as if they had been swept away in a tide of the new, as if they, and the life that had lived in them could not be seen — or could not yet be seen. History, after all, has its revisions. Our family lived in a small new house on the outskirts of London, my parents having moved there enticed by new developments, subsidised by government. The story we heard was that there had been an orchard and a pond at the end of our street. Someone knew someone who had lived there as a child. Our doctor's surgery now stood on it. Our mother was a real bricks and mortar woman, from a communist family, and they were, contrary to many stories, not keen to be dependent on the state. Housing, owning your own, was a deeply held tenet of the left. Our mother believed in social planning, in clinics and vaccinations and choirs and libraries and schools, in democracy, in community. She was so encouraged by Israel — the orchards, the water, the shared dreams. It had just been sand, she told us, 'before'.



Old Garden Path,
Jerusalem 2013
(Photo: Idit Elia
Nathan)

On the fringes of a Kent still marked with old farm-tracks and strawberry fields, we played in the remaining unkempt wild edges of suburbia, in woods and fields and abandoned farmland redolent with the memory of earlier ages, of other farmers; filled with flowers in spring, and echoing with the enmities of our mild savagery.

Settlement, sediment, subsidence. When does a promise stop being a promise? When does it run out?

Houses have the deepest of connections to all our pasts, our porous histories, our constantly crossing stories. What is utopian in one moment is corrupted and ruined in another. Things simply do not continue to mean the same thing. All utopias are fringed by barbed wire.

As if the land was ever free of marks.

iv. Sans terre

Henry David Thoreau was a man who walked west. He lived in the north-east of the United States in the mid-19th century and came from a family whose money was made in pencils. He rebelled, he lived free, he went west every day, walking for at least four hours, and he believed that in walking west he followed something like an invisible thread of connection, that linked the movements of the sun to the animal instinct for westward movement. He thought of his kind of walking as 'sauntering,' a word that he describes as deriving either from the 'sainte terres' or 'Holy Landers' of the middle ages, wanderers who asked for charity on pilgrimage, or from sans terre, meaning landless, a phrase which he says, 'in the good sense, will mean having no particular home, but equally at home everywhere.'

When your grandfather came to London just before the war he worked as a travel agent. He had trained as a lawyer but he couldn't practice and so he became a traveller between worlds, with a British Mandate passport that he had been issued with in Palestine, and that enabled him to travel into Germany, war or no war, to get out and get others out. He continued until 1941. The Nazis, obsessed with the letter of the law to the point of absurdity, allowed him to do so. They had to comply with the evidence they found fastened to his passport. He was under the protection of the British.

In 1959, that year of many promises to the children of the future, Martin Luther King walked in the Holy Land. Actually he went to the part of Jerusalem that was then Jordan, and on Easter Sunday that year he gave a sermon in which he talked of that journey, and of the thoughts he had there. And he said, among other things, that for him the story of Easter is the story of commitment to unenforceable laws. By that he meant not the letter of the law, but with what lay *beyond* the law: love, honour, service, commitment, ideas of the possibility of the human that exceed what we can imagine. And in thinking about Israel and about conflict he said — and it seems so simple — that it was afterwards when he travelled to India that he realised there that the sun always comes up somewhere else, that a new opening happens, that light will return.

The world of the setting and rising of the sun is the *material* world, the world whose continued rhythms owe nothing to our agency, whose endurance is beyond the limit of our authority, but whose life we also hold in our hands, never more consciously than in what we might call our own age of grief. This page is not the place for loss or grief, for discussion of disappointed hopes and promises, for any, in fact, of the things to which your work, deeply connected as it is to time, history and responsibility, alludes. It is the place to mark the *fact* of the material world, ‘the fact of a door-frame’, as the poet Adrienne Rich put it many years ago, ‘blessed materialism’, as Thomas Jefferson might have called it, though blessings are not in your lexicon. All of this work, your work, in here, beyond the threshold, in the space of play beyond the opening of the door, attests to the power of what it means to be a citizen witness within the world of the everyday, the hearth and the studio and the home, a world of crossing and wandering and cards and papers and passports and leaves to remain, all of that. And it attests to the sheer work of that.

Loss is a universal experience that is never eased by repetition. And yet to consider it, to hold it in playful balance, to engage with it, is to hold the world in thought. To hold the world in thought, is to begin to apprehend the other, to paraphrase Martin Buber.

This page is merely a place to hold fast to paradox, to racing connections, to draw themes together as if they were a handful of threads, and let them jostle for space. This is *all* merely provisional, that’s all, and I mean this

world, not this page, after all. This page is merely a leaf that stands in for that provisionality.

In Latin ‘pagus’ — a word that has no easily defined meaning but from which we derive both pagan and page — is a word that suggests a site staked out, bounded, marked, a kind of territory, a term for a rural district, a sort of shire. A ‘paganus’ or pagan, was a civilian or commoner, someone holding to old rural ways. Pagus connects the rural, or the pagan, the world outside the town, a world of bounded spaces, fields and orchards, to the vineyard of words, the page, the closed space of the text. Texts are orchards too, flowery, fruitful. We are held in them, we make marks on them that will be, we can be sure, lost and indecipherable one day.

David Malouf’s young terrorist dies at the end of *Child’s Play*, in the explosion he initiates and foretells. As he dies, he narrates, finding himself suddenly naked and in the open, in unfamiliar country, a stranger. As he walks, everything around him changes, and he makes his way through thistle-strewn margins, filled with rags and paper. And then on, into the orchard, lit up in the late afternoon sunlight, heavy with fruit and yet also filled with early blossom. And this world of return and safety that he is in is the world closed off to all human possibility, for he is now safe in the only place where he can have no future, in death.

The future. Somewhere in fastening my ideas to this page, I wrote about emigration, about homelessness, about the notion that the emigrant loses the past in order to stake out the future. And yet I recently heard Joanna Macy — the environmental activist and translator of the poet Rainer Maria Rilke, who is now in her late eighties — saying that our passionate commitment to this world owes nothing to the future. It is not predicated on whether we think this world will survive. Our love for the world is engaged with the world as we find it, in the present, in our lifeworld, the everyday and only world we have. The only world in which our promises can be redeemed.

We have been waiting outside for a very long time. Let’s open the door and go in.

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