

also by Will Eaves

FICTION

*The Oversight*

*Nothing to Be Afraid Of*

*This Is Paradise*

*The Absent Therapist*

POETRY

*Sound Houses*

Will Eaves

---

**THE INEVITABLE GIFT SHOP**

*A memoir by other means*

**B**editions

For Ian

I cannot fix on the hour, or the spot, or the look, or the words, which laid the foundation. It is too long ago. I was in the middle before I knew I had begun.

– Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*

First published in 2016  
by CB editions  
146 Percy Road London W12 9QL  
[www.cbEditions.com](http://www.cbEditions.com)

All rights reserved

© Will Eaves, 2016

The right of Will Eaves to be identified as author  
of this work has been asserted in accordance  
with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988

Printed in England by Blissetts, London W3 8DH

ISBN 978-1-909585-17-1

## Contents

I	RISE	I
II	GREENERY	5
III	LET IT BLOW	
	Night Flight	31
	Close Watch	33
	The Lord Is Listenin' to Ya, Hallelujah	34
	Bolivia	36
	Mountain	37
	Winter and Summer	38
	Time on Calton Hill	39
	The Crossings	
	i <i>Wellington Ferry</i>	40
	ii <i>Storm</i>	41
	iii <i>Metamorphosis</i>	42
	iv <i>81 Sturla Road</i>	43
	The Turn	44
	Puzzle for Christopher	46
IV	LIVE RECORDINGS	47
V	NO TRESPASSERS	
	Gang Warfare	71
	The Half of It	72
	A Wedding	73
	Dandelion	74
	A Likely Story	75
	Gargoyles	78

I would like to thank the editors of the following magazines and journals for their hospitality and support: *Hotel*, *Yale Review*, *The New Yorker*, *The Times Literary Supplement*, *The Warwick Review*, *PN Review*, *New Walk*, *Dark Horse*, *The Age*, *The Spectator*, *New Statesman*, *Australian Book Review*, *London Magazine*, *AXON: Creative Explorations*, *Stand*, *Best Australian Poems 2012* and *2013*.

I am indebted to the Taylor family – Lucien, Emily, Alice and Patrick – for the same reasons.

'Close Watch', 'Gargoyles', 'La Padrona' and 'A Wedding' formed the pamphlet *Four Vigils*, published by Brockwell Press/Grayling Press in 2014.

W.E.

Mill Moon	79
La Padrona	80
Café Historian	81
Heat Life	82
Hearth	83
Physics	84
The Claim	85
Maximes d'Azur	87
VI THE INEVITABLE GIFT SHOP	89
VII AVAST	
The Presence at Drake Court	119
Barroco	120
De Staël	121
The Voice	122
Ever	123
Condensation	124
Couple in the Rain	125
The Park Bench	126
A Dying Fascist Misreads Plato	130
Death on the Ark	131
Noah's Owl	132
Robin	133
A Ship's Whistle	134
VIII EXPERIENCE	135

The cloud that echoes  
And the plane that enters  
Through a golden gap  
Resonate, sound a chord  
No one heard coming.  
This is now, or as good as.  
We should welcome it.  
There should be hats.  
The cars in line,  
The sprawled kids'  
Gluey slumbers, fans  
And air-con droids  
In their high loneliness,  
Even cows drone along.  
Up close, it's terrible,  
A base-metal racket  
But not here, afar, not  
Now everyone is in tune.

## II GREENERY

---

Je n'aime que les travaux indirects

– Félix Fénéon, attrib.

I will always be a year younger than my schoolfellows. They will grow up and I won't, even though I must age like everyone else. They will have deep voices and hair, thick eyebrows, calves with a topography; I can only affect a vocal maturity. I have things to say but do not like hearing myself speak: I'll enjoy acting all my life because acting is a truthful affectation; one speaks on the understanding that one is modulated by a 'character'. And because it is something one does but does not have to witness. My legs stay smooth and slender. Because I have been bumped up a year – because I knew how to read and write early on – I will inexplicably miss out on the 'cough and drop', the routine physical inspection to check on the process of puberty. My balls will not be weighed and held by a man for another nine years and I will always wonder if there is something wrong with me. Even writing this is a perilous sort of confession: I will read it over and hear a small voice piping away, an echo that is shaming, and peculiar, because its mental acoustic is also much to be desired. Because my refuge from all kinds of strange accusation and self-doubt will be the place anterior to the page – the inside of my head.

★

Creatures, man included, retreat prior to a change: in this tradition of contemplation and recoil will be found works such as *The Winter's Tale*, Boethius' *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, dramas of childhood survival such as Laura Ingalls Wilder's *The Long Winter*, and every tale of growing up – the rich English tradition of embarrassment. The latter involves a mild, comical but nonetheless enforced retreat. The adolescent falls back into self-consciousness when his classmates reach sexual maturity but he does not. Those of us who were late developers know instinctively that it is brute capacity and not any combination of attributes that makes for desirability. For many adolescents, the body is a revelation; for as many, because the body disappoints them, it is the mind. Puberty makes us watchful. It unlocks the sanctuary of study, for which probably we are never sufficiently grateful.

★

People telling you their dreams needn't be so boring. The reason they are, usually, very boring is that they leave out the interesting part, which is how they felt while they were dreaming. Dream narrative is a special, slippery sort of narrative, where content is much less important than shades of feeling, on which subject many analysts are silent. The defloration of your cousin, who turns out to be your mother, and then your daughter, by a centaur is nowhere near as upsetting as the vase of flowers you found terrifying.

★

What is wrong with wanting to 'relate' to a character, when reading fiction? Well, the verb is suspect. It fudges the distinction between understanding and liking a character. We ought always to seek to understand X – in reading as in life – and not until we have made that effort can we expect any real sympathy to arise; but the reader who wishes to 'relate', who seeks likeable characters and situations, is barely reading at all. He or she is seeking a vindication of his own character or her own likeability, a tactic one might call 'reading for reassurance', which masks a fear of the truth. Such relating persons are noticeably and *personally* affronted when they glimpse something nasty, or indeed hateful, in the books they so wanted to like. The glimpse is usually an instance of involuntary understanding, of self-exposure, which brings on a minor paroxysm of guilt. It is not that these sensitive readers fail to relate to the bitter mother or the unattractive child; indeed, the relationship is obvious to them: these characters are the objects of their contempt, and the revelation of a talent for contempt must always be unwelcome. La Rochefoucauld said: 'we often forgive those that have injured us, but we can never pardon those that we have injured', meaning 'those we have injured are a perpetual reminder of our cruelty and for that reason become hateful to us'; meaning, guilt is often the motive for hatred as much as the result of it. 'I didn't relate to any of the characters' means 'I caught sight of my rage in the mirror'.

★



A literary convention is a retrospective abstraction. It exists only in relation to the experiment or the revolution that overturns it. It doesn't exist until someone does something new and you see how far you've come. Form and content, in other words. There is a widespread misconception about form, as the poet Elizabeth Jennings once pointed out: it is not a jelly mould into which one pours content. Rather, the two things are co-eval. Form will arise to express content, and the established forms (sonnets, novels, collage) are those that, like an evolutionarily convergent body shape, have by long trial shown themselves to be optimally expressive.

★

The novel is the autobiography of the imagination.

★

The house on De Carle Street is called 'Ephemera'. A restored shotgun bungalow, it is not noticeably different to many other houses in the locality but for the meticulously repainted weatherboarding, which seems not to flake or age in this harsh climate, and the two cane chairs on the front porch that are, a little closer inspection reveals, chained together.

★

The American modernist poet Laura Riding was odd, possibly wicked. She called herself Finality, came between Robert Graves and Nancy Nicholson, jumped out of a window, drove Katherine Jackson (her second husband's first

wife) mad, stood by as the poor woman was helped into a straitjacket, and in her reactionary zeal to construct a *Dictionary of Received Meanings* seemed to want to help words to the same fate – but before all of that she also spoke feelingly and movingly out of her experience as Laura Reichenthal, daughter of an immigrant Polish tailor, new born to American English: 'Poetry is the place where the fear of speaking in strange ways can be left behind'. That strikes me as true. Riding is pointing out the element of inadvertency that comes about when we speak a new tongue; what we wish to say may not be what the words we use are actually saying. Similarly, poetry is compressed meaning, yes, but it is also the meaning inadvertently effected by compression, the uncontainable heat that leaks out of usage.

★

In Virginia Woolf's essay on 'The Pastons and Chaucer', from *The Common Reader*, we hear of the cultured but feckless eldest son of Margaret Paston (Sir John Paston, 1442–1479) being distracted by a book – Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. He prefers the poet's ordered sensualism, the pungency of his swift characterisations, to the shapeless encounters of real life. But Chaucer's verse narrative only has this effect, Woolf says, because, although it is poetry, its author 'has his eye fixed upon the road before him', on 'the life that was being lived', the farmyards, the haycocks, the crooked clerics, and so on. The force of distraction is exerted equally on the reader by the book he is reading, and on the writer by the life he is leading – the people he meets, the things he does. And it is a force with consequences for the writer,

in particular: for should he be insufficiently distracted by life, his book will be powerless to divert. This may be why writers always complain about not having enough time in which to write: they know in their hearts that writing is everything else. A reader must be distracted by a world, a writer by the world.

★

The history of art follows the decline of the representative power of the model. From the Gods are derived types, from types individuals, from individuals characteristics, and from characteristics the approximation of characteristics, which is to say virtuality. For Woolf, Greek tragic heroes are the true originals: art, in Homer and Aeschylus, is tied to life by means of incontestable symbol. Chaucer's characters are varieties, by comparison; the art of the *Canterbury Tales* points to life which is particoloured and profuse. By the early twentieth century, the artist can say or do nothing conclusive about reality and must resort to a new kind of imaginative representation in order to discover the truth: art supersedes life. And so to the present, in which reality is provisional and everything virtual: now, art cancels life, and in so doing the cycle starts afresh. The last letter to be written by a human hand will, God-like, represent everything in the Anthropocene that preceded it.

★

Roadies wear their heavy-metal T-shirts like skins or hospital gowns. They move like sciatical trolls or creatures of

unpopular myth, with sad eyes and some subconsciously pressing resentment, through warm drizzle. At the grey intersection of Lygon and Albion, one heads for the music pub across the road with a box of beers balanced on his stomach. He is wearing a leather jerkin laced at the side, which puts me in mind of West-Country cider festivals, c.1975. The whole world is his tureen and he plays (sound off) upon its ladle.

★

The critic James Wood says that novels came into being when the 'soliloquy turned inward'. This is an arresting and debatable insight. Dramatic soliloquies proved perfectly capable of becoming dramatic verse for the page (Milton's *Samson Agonistes*) without turning into novels. A more convincing antecedent is the letter. Novels began when the personal mode of address – the private journal, the letter, the letter of news, the paper of correspondence – went public and became journalism. A tension then existed between public address (rhetoric, canon, theatre, law, propaganda) and a startling, paradoxical new mode of witness – the confidential revelation – which depended for its effect on the increasingly literate audience's sense of what it was like to receive, *and read*, a letter of interest. (The sustaining fiction of the epistolary novel, especially, is that it contains a whole series of 'exclusives': letters not intended for publication.) It is not yet clear what will happen to novels now that everyone writes emails and no one reads them.

★