Invisible, unseen

1

Stories can arise from the need to explain something: why the sun disappears at night, why it's not a good idea to go into the woods after dark or why a hundred and thirty children disappeared from a small town in northern Germany in the late thirteenth century. The story of the Pied Piper hovers between history and myth, and is full of the kind of detail that settles into fact. There is a specific date, an actual street through which they passed, and the number of children is always given as a hundred and thirty.

> In the year 1284, on the day of John and Paul on the 26th day of June, 130 children, born in Hameln, were led out of the town by a piper, dressed in many colours …[1]

A watercolour of the Pied Piper in Augustin von Mörsperg's *Reisechronik* (1592) is said to be a copy of a window destroyed in the seventeenth century, which had been painted in a church in Hamelin in 1300 to commemorate the event. The piper looms over the story while the town and the children are lowly and exposed. The way into the mountain is usually portrayed as a discreet opening that leaves its surroundings unperturbed, a manifestation or an apparition that you probably imagined and will never see again. We do not see where it leads. It is often left out of the picture, perhaps because it is the hardest part to believe in. The hole in the mountain is a tear in the page. Here, it is a massive rupture that confronts us with the nothingness it holds.

Details add substance, especially in the form of statistics. An exact place and time make this a document rather than a story. It was not some children or many children who disappeared but 130, five classrooms or thirty families. The disappearance may be invisible but it has been witnessed, described, heard, recorded and read.

> All this is written in the town-book at Hammel, where many high folk have read and heard the same.[2]

The horror of the children being piped away is enlarged by how easily this moment flows from the ordinary. The town is plagued with rats. A man arrives who promises to get rid of them. The town tries to cheat him. Then the story takes an unexpected turn. When the Piper doesn't receive his promised reward, he repeats the act but this time takes the children, leading them into the mountain. His power is the music of his pipe, an invisible charm and one to which anyone could succumb.

The story extends from what is seen to what might be seen, the unseen and what cannot be unseen. No wonder it has lingered for centuries. To be lost inside a mountain is not to be invisible but to be unseen. The page, the painting, the window, the mountain, are all the surface of the visible and teach us about visual boundaries. We can replicate them on screen where we can magnify the detail, the brushstroke, the grain.* We can see more but we cannot get any further. The surface remains. Did anyone actually see the mountain open? There are witnesses.

> A boy that being lame and somewhat lagging behind the rest, seeing this that hapned, returned presently backe and told what he had seene …[3]

He was too slow in following the Piper and too late to enter the mountain although he saw the other children disappear. Having been an outcast, he is now a witness although he cannot show anyone what he has

seen. And he's not sure what he did see because it is impossible that a mountain could open and close like that. Perhaps he's haunted by other things he does not want to have seen. We might make a disturbing event invisible by replacing it with a version we feel able to look at.

> this a childrens' maid saw, who with a child was drawn after from afar, and turned about, and brought the report into the town. Büntingus writes that two of the children returned, and that the Kopfelberg had opened itself, and that the Piper had gone in with the children, of whom there were altogether 130.[4]

Büntingus adds that the mountain was where criminals were hanged. He also says that of the two children that returned, one was dumb and could only point and one was blind and could only tell. If you did not see it, you must take the word of someone who did and their memory has to be ratified as testimony 'all compared with the original documents and the testimonie of the witnesses thereof, which let him that doubteth be condemned.' If we swear we saw something, does that make us sure we did?

The children are often described as lost rather than taken or killed, as if it were an accident and they could still be recovered. They are the object and the Piper the subject: he 'led them out of the city gate into a mountain, where he lost them with himself …'[5] It is his story not theirs, and we cannot bear for them to become more visible – to see their faces or hear their names – because we know that they are going to disappear.

Whatever the legend's starting point, it has a palpable sense of being prompted by some actual event. There were reports of 'dancing mania' related to the consumption of bread made with rye infected by a fungus called ergot, which has the same hallucinogenic effects as LSD. These might have been an escalation of the dances traditionally held on St John's Day. The children might have joined the Children's Crusade of 1211 or an eastwards migration or, most darkly, might have been eaten during a time of famine. In Hamelin itself, the disappearance was treated as historical fact.

> … such a history is painted on a window in the parish church … The pitiful wonder is also inscribed in the town book, and the folk of Hameln are accustomed in their writing to date their letters from the loss of the children. Some set down this wonder in the year 1282 …[6]

The children are not only enchanted by the music of the pipe but by the piper's dress. He makes himself visible, drawing the eye so as to distract attention from what he is doing. He also makes himself motley (as if he could be anybody) and unreadable. He escapes convention, performs magic, appears from nowhere and disappears back. He is an arrival of colour and noise, excitement and strangeness, in this small, quiet world. Artists paint the children as caught up in the visual magnetism of the piper. They take on his shapes and rhythms, his gestures, the colours of his coat. They break down into the landscape as they are gently led off the sunlit slope of the mountain along a path that is sliding into a pocket of darkness. They could tell themselves that what lies ahead is only shadow. The piper draws them on, keeping himself in sight but also pulling away as if to say *Keep up or I will disappear*. They do not, or cannot, let him out of their sight.

The purpose of the story might have been to warn the young about the dangers of what lies beyond the mountain: do not let yourself be seduced by brightness, by music, by the different and new. Do not wander away because you will get so lost that you will be locked into darkness. You will never come back.

> and comming to a little hill, there opened in the side thereof a wid hole, into which himselfe and all the children, being in number one hundred and thirtie, did enter; and being entered, the hill closed up again and became as before …[7]

What we see depends on how it is described to us. A mountain is a towering vertical, a solid form of absence, one that is too large to be easily seen.† Maybe it wasn't a mountain at all but a 'little hill' that grew in the telling in order to match the incredible nature of the event.

The children's absence is held in place by silence in 'the street in which no music is played', Bungelose-strasse, the street without drums, from where they are said to have left the town.

> … they could not but haue kept memorie of so strange a thing, if indeed any such thing had there hapned the folk of Hameln are apt to date their letters from the loss of the children.[8]

They could not but have kept memory of so strange a thing. They do not want to remember but they have to. The feeling of not believing what you've seen is aligned with that of not being believed. Both require a considerable level of visual confidence to be overcome. The story of the Pied Piper continues to haunt us. Children still disappear into mountains. Someone must have seen.

2

Before we were old enough to walk out into the night, my big brother and I went through a phase of slipping out of the house at dusk. We weren't going anywhere. Instead, we turned back to spy through the windows. We watched our mother tidying up the kitchen, our sister playing a game, our father doing paperwork, our little brother chattering to himself. We were out there in the not-quite-dark looking in on the ordinariness of early evening. No one realised we were gone, let alone came looking for us, but we could conjure drama from thin air. We pressed ourselves flat against the wall, inching closer to a window and straining to escape notice.

The aim was not to see but to become unseen. We were eight and ten years old, and testing the idea of stepping outside family and home. It felt like discovering a new power. We had what now seems like a remarkable amount of freedom, spending all day out with our friends, but less sense of volition than a child might these days. We felt able to wander and so didn't need to gather the will to do so. I've been told I often slipped away, even as a small child. That, for me, is the point of invisibility – not being able to discover people's secrets but still moving among them and not being seen, not needing to respond. I didn't really want to be apart from my family. Had I looked in the windows and seen no one, had the lights gone off, I would have been terrified. I wanted to be able to step outside my life but only if I could easily step back. There is no point in being invisible unless someone is expecting to see you.

In their twenties, with both parents dead, Virginia Woolf and her siblings rented a house in Cornwall two miles from Talland House, where they had spent their childhood summers. They arrived at night and immediately walked up the hill to Talland, which they hadn't seen for ten years.

> There was the house, with its two lighted windows … all, so far as we could see, as though we'd left it that morning. But yet, as we knew well, we could go no further; if we advanced the spell was broken. The lights were not our lights; the voices were the voices of strangers. We hung there like ghosts in the shade of the hedge, & at the sound of footsteps we turned away.[9]

Those lights that invite us in only do so if they are 'our lights'. Otherwise we must remain in the dark, at an unintrusive distance, accepting that as far as these lights are concerned, we do not exist. This is what it's like to watch someone disappear into dementia. My father kept trying to go home and gave his address as a combination of four places he had lived in. He was coming home in the dark fifty years late. Who is that at the window? Where is the key? He managed himself as if stuck outside, sitting indoors in his coat and going to sleep on top of the bed still in his clothes.

When I was eleven we moved to the country, where I found a darkness I could disappear into. As I approached the house at night, a distance of a hundred yards could fall endlessly open. I hesitated before wading in. Night swallowed my hand in front of my face. I was starting to learn that parts of myself could slip out of sight, could refuse me, and I welcomed the feeling that I might dissolve into this blackness. I had yet to be fixed by anyone's gaze. There was freedom in this but it also meant that I could not fix anyone, could not keep them.

The village had a scattering of lamp-posts but after dark you needed a torch to walk down the main road. There were regular power cuts that first winter. The newspapers were full of pictures of families gathered around a vague source of radiance, looking plucky and happy and playing a board game or cards, as if spending more time together had to be restorative. We no longer gather round a hearth. We have learnt how to carry off heat and light, and build our homes accordingly with corridors and staircases, in a series of small rooms. So when heat and light failed us, we did what we could to preserve our habits and arrangements. We were allocated a candle, lantern or oil lamp, and each took their own small source of light away into their own private dark.

Virginia Woolf describes the core self as this, a private dark, and the 'being and doing' of life as a gaseous

whirl around a black hole: ‘To be silent; to be alone. All the being and the doing, expansive, glittering, vocal, evaporated; and one shrunk, with a sense of solemnity, to being oneself, a wedge-shaped core of darkness, something invisible to others …[10] Evaporating and shrinking are ways of moving beyond notice rather than disappearing altogether, and essential to the freedom of being unseen.

When I turned on my bedroom light, I couldn’t see anything out there and so assumed myself unseen. But we had moved from a city street shaded by large trees to the middle of a village where my room looked out onto the road, and I was clearly visible. One day my father said that someone had mentioned seeing me lying in bed reading when they passed on the bus. He thought it was funny but I was mortified. I found thicker curtains in the attic, devised elaborate ways to test their opacity, and drew them even during the day. The spell of invisibility, of slipping outside, of seeing nothing in reflection, had been broken. From then on, I could not help but see myself and could not imagine myself unseen.

The self-consciousness of adolescence was a wrenching into light. I stared into the mirror at flaws made monstrous by the scale of my attention. All my energy went into vigilance against exposure. I turned myself up, invested in surfaces – hair, make-up, clothes – and learnt not only to meet the gaze of my enemies but to stare so fiercely that I could turn them back on themselves.

To be seen too clearly is to be reduced. Much of you gives way, becoming transparent and so invisible. Only the basic lines remain – anything from a sketch to a diagram depending on the level of attention and the determination of that gaze, what it accepts and refuses. I dyed my hair and clothes black, and stopped making noise to the point of speechlessness. I shut down at school and found myself unable to learn or remember. Dispensing with ‘all the being and the doing’, I simplified into silence and darkness. If I was lucky, this might become a starting point.

3

The pilot Amelia Earhart suggested that you can observe the world more completely from the sky: ‘You haven’t seen a tree until you’ve seen its shadow from the sky.’[11] An aerial view offers a shadow world in which vertical forms are laid horizontal and become clear. It is true that you cannot really see a tree when looking up and towards it. When a tree lands on the ground, its height and scope are always surprising. The revelatory nature of shadows seen from the sky is used by archeologists who make aerial surveys at either end of the day, when the shadows are longest, in order to locate ‘shadow sites’, those which are only perceptible when their shadow can be seen. The artist Jananne Al-Ani made two films of such places across the desert landscapes of the Middle East, not just the imprints of archeological sites but of industrial, military, agricultural and mining activities.‡ Al-Ani was specifically interested in the conception of the desert as empty space, and in the representation of military conflict, atrocity and occupation: ‘I began to investigate events for which there was no visual record, no photographic or filmed evidence: just verbal or written accounts.’[12]

In Seamus Heaney’s last collection, *Human Chain*, there is an untitled poem that begins, ‘The door was open and the house was dark’.[13] This elegy for a friend contains an undocumented emptiness. There is less than no one there, a negative presence. His dead friend’s house has fallen open, as have the poet and the poem. The house, simply entered, has become its own emptiness – as we all will. He calls out his friend’s name and the response is a silence that ‘grew/Backwards’, reversing him out of the place and reabsorbing his utterance.

Even though he does not belong here he meets ‘no danger,/Only withdrawal, a not unwelcoming/Emptiness …’ By resisting the impulse to describe the unknown, he allows it to remain just that. More than that. He sets it beside another emptiness: ‘as in a midnight hangar//On an overgrown airfield in late summer.’ The hinge of simile keeps the house and the hangar apart. One cannot become the other any more than the poet can inhabit the death of his friend. In both places, the human presence has arrived at the wrong time of day, of the year, of the epoch, of life.

The door is left open by that final floating line but more so by the surprising conjunction with which the poem begins. The door being open *and* the house being dark is not things as they should be but things as they are. In a process of disinvestment, this poem, an elegy, rejects conclusiveness even when it comes to connection except in the form of conjunction. This is the falling short of the act of connection *by definition* or as Elizabeth Bishop puts it, ‘Everything only connected by “and” and “and”.’[14]

What we are left with is this ‘not unwelcoming emptiness’. The poem does not come to meet us any more

than the meaning of death or absence come to meet the poet. Instead it lets us in through an act of withdrawal, making way for our own specificities while providing us with conjunction rather than anything as contrived as consolation.

The accumulations and erosions that constitute ground.

What the drought reveals: gardens, airfields, ruins.

How others render us invisible.

How rarely we are unseen.

The power of the image that is unseen.

On not talking about what we have seen.

Of trying to unsee what we have seen.

How we close our eyes in order to feel more.

Notes

1 Fincelius, *Die Wunderseichen*, 1556, cited in Silvanus P. Thompson, *The Pied Piper of Hamelin* (Bedford Press, 1905)
2 Fincelius, *Die Wunderseichen*
3 Richard Verstegen (*c*.1550–1640), *A Restitution of Decayed Intelligence* (John Norton, 1634)
4 S. Erich, *Exodus Hamelensis*, 1655, cited in Thompson, *The Pied Piper of Hamelin*
5 Erich, *Exodus Hamelensis*
6 Erich, *Exodus Hamelensis*
7 Verstegen, *A Restitution of Decayed Intelligence*
8 Erich, *Exodus Hamelensis*
9 Virginia Woolf, 'Cornwall, 1905,' *A Passionate Apprentice: The Early Journals of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Mitchell A. Leaska (Hogarth Press, 1990)
10 Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 1927 (Vintage, 2004)
11 Amelia Earhart (1897–1937), source unknown
12 Julian Ross, 'The All-Seeing Drone's Gaze: An Interview with Jananne Al-Ani', Sonic Acts (11 November 2016)
13 Seamus Heaney (1939–2013), *Human Chain* (Faber, 2010)
14 Elizabeth Bishop, 'Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance', in *The Complete Poems 1927–1979* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1979)

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* See the high-resolution mouse in 'Seeing clearly, glimpsing, picturing', p. 79.
† See mountains in 'Black and white and colour', p. 103.
‡ *Shadow Sites I* (2010) and *Shadow Sites II* (2011)