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Opening Extract from...

Night Waking

Written by Sarah Moss

Published by Granta Books

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Granta Publications, 12 Addison Avenue, London W11 4QR

First published in Great Britain by Granta Books 2011

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A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

ISBN 978 1 84708 215 2

Printed in the UK by CPI William Clowes Beccles NR34 7TL

1

THE REALITY PRINCIPLE

It remains true that social behaviour cannot come about unless the individual has progressed from the pleasure principle to the reality principle. But the statement is not reversible in the sense that this advance itself guarantees socialization.

– Anna Freud, *Normality and Pathology in Childhood*
(London: Penguin, 1965), p. 145

The swans are by the shore, drifting bright as paper cut-outs against waves blurred by dusk. They spend the night murmuring oboe harmonies to each other, a woodwind of reassurance. Ordinary swans, the Queen's swans on the river where we feed the ducks at home, have faces apparently afflicted by some medieval disease, and sleep standing on one leg, heads under their wings like child-free passengers on long-haul flights who can summon night with a nylon blind-fold. These sea swans seem to stay awake all night, sailing through the fading light like ships bound for far countries, and they have faces as smooth and neutral as the *corps de ballet*, faces that can't communicate any level of grief or pain. Perhaps this is an asset in species that mate for life.

I glance back at the house. Its façade, dark as the cliff-face at the other end of the island, turns away from the after-light

shining over the sea, from where America is coming up for a new day as we turn away from the sun. One of the swans stretches towards the sky and cries out, wings threshing the water in sudden agitation like that of someone who has just remembered that a friend is dead. I saw a goose dying, once, a Canada goose that had flown all the way from the Arctic to end its life on the hard shoulder of the M40, and although one wing was still beating as if to music while the other lay across the rumble-strip, its face was impassive. I stood on the footbridge, watching, joggling the pram in which the baby would sleep only for as long as we kept moving, until some lorry driver, merciful or inattentive, left a flurry of feathers and red jam on the road. Our swans are safe from that, here. For a season. Like us, they will go south in the autumn, but for now there are no cars, no roads. No bridges, either. The stars are coming out in the darkening sky over the hill. I shiver; not cold, exactly, but time to go in.

The power was still off, which doesn't matter too much in summer as long as we keep our laptops charged. Giles had lit a candle.

'Look! Here we are.' He passed me a holiday brochure, folded back to show a stamp-sized picture of the blackhouse down by the beach, taken last summer before the building work began. The idea is that at some point the income generated by letting it as a holiday cottage will cover the cost of the restoration. The reality is that even if Giles stops telling our friends and, God help us, his family, that they'll be able to stay for free, the argon-filled triple glazing, grey water scheme (it flushes the loo with water previously used to wash your clothes) and reclaimed furniture (reclaimed from a shop in Bath and transported over land and sea at expense that surprised Giles) might be hoped to pay off in the lifetime of our grandchildren. If any. I held the brochure towards the light.

*

Spend a week or two on your very own island! A stunning new conversion of a traditional blackhouse dwelling with magnificent sea views from every window, set on the deserted island of Colsay. The house, newly restored by an award-winning architect, boasts slate floors with underfloor heating, rain-mist shower and a kitchen hand-made from local materials. No TV, but a thoughtful book collection and arts and crafts kits for rainy days. There are no roads or cars on the island; your host will collect you from the harbour at Colla and take you back at any time during your stay for shopping or days out, enjoying the walks, crafts and heritage of the Inversnaigh area. Colsay itself has a wealth of bird life and historical remains to explore, or you may be happy to relax in the silence and beauty of this very special place.

“‘Very special’?” I put the brochure down too fast and the candle on the table went out. ‘And all those adjectives? Giles, you should have asked me to do it. You’ve even put an exclamation mark in, for God’s sake. People can get silence at home, you know. In libraries.’

I miss the silence of libraries. Even whooper swans wouldn’t talk in my favourite libraries.

‘I couldn’t have asked you.’ Giles started trying to relight the candle from a tealight. Wax dripped predictably onto his papers. ‘It was the week they both had that puking bug.’

The week Giles kept going to work because it was ‘expected of him’ and I stayed at home scrubbing sick out of carpets. I do, as Giles does not tire of pointing out, get paid whether I actually do any work or not. It’s in my contract. ‘The Research Fellow shall make such progress as might reasonably be expected with the research project outlined before taking up the Fellowship.’ Apart from that I can discharge my contractual obligations by dining in college twenty-four times a year. Most of the Fellows (who are not fellows but ladies of a certain age and don’t-mess-with-me demeanour) would not recognize me

on the high street, although few people recognize me on the high street anyway because I am usually behind the pushchair. The pram in the hall may be the enemy of promise, but outside it would be the perfect cover for almost any kind of criminal act. You could strafe the high street with a machine gun and stroll away wearing nothing but high heels and a top hat, behind a pushchair, and nobody would remember you'd been there.

'Anyway,' said Giles. 'The anchorite enjoyed the silence. I mean, isn't that the whole idea? Ow.' Wax ran down his fingers.

'I expect the anchorite was far too busy looking for something to eat and hiding from the Vikings. Lighter? Matches?'

He shrugged and we both looked around as if we could see the children's books, half-eaten biscuits and papers awaiting filing that trickle from every orifice of the house.

'Oh well. At least we can't tidy up in the dark.' I moved my foot and encountered something squashy, either stuck to the floor or surprisingly heavy, perhaps a recalcitrant small mammal or my mother-in-law's fruit cake. 'I hope you know the on-call ferryman is you. I've got *Fair Seedtime* to finish. And who's assembling this book collection?'

Fair Seedtime: the invention of childhood and the rise of the institution in late eighteenth-century Britain was due at the publisher last month. In theory, I should be more employable with a book to my name. In practice, there will be no jobs in history for several decades to come and, if there were, they would go to people who haven't spent half of the last eight years changing nappies instead of buying drinks at the conference bar. Giles started picking the wax off the papers and rolling it into balls.

'Don't,' I said. 'Moth'll eat them.'

He dropped one into the tealight. 'Better than birdshit.'

I stood up. 'I wasn't claiming birdshit as the base line in infant nutrition. Anyway, that was why I gave up on the garden. I can't plant the sodding trees without looking away from him for the odd second or two. At least it wasn't foxgloves.'

Foxgloves contain digitalis, and will stop your toddler's heart

long before you can cross the Sound to the village surgery, which is open four mornings a week.

‘I got to him in time. I made him spit them out. I told you.’

‘Yeah. You said. I’m going to bed.’ I burnt my fingers balancing the tealight on my palm and crossed the room as one might venture across a minefield in the dark, which is reasonable when many of the small objects you can’t see have wheels.

I’ve stopped showering in the morning because Raph allows me three minutes and then stands on the bathmat with a stopwatch telling me how many millimetres of the polar ice cap have been melted by the energy used to heat the water and Moth, who still has vivid memories of what breasts are for, peers round the curtain, getting his clothes wet and gesturing unmistakably. Candlelit showers by night are awkward for obvious reasons, so I ran a bath hot and deep enough to drown polar bear cubs and stood at the bookcase wondering whether to drown my sorrows in *Marjorie Makes It at the Chalet School* or revive my intellect with the selected essays of Henry James. I picked up *Caring for Your Child* (1947) in the hope that I might have missed the solution to toddler insomnia last time I read it. Giles’s family have been using this house as a repository for unreadable books since the War.

‘You were asleep,’ said Giles. He’d found matches and another candle, or maybe nipped outside with a couple of flints.

My neck was stiff and the water had cooled. I pulled myself up to sitting and yawned.

‘So?’ At least by candlelight I didn’t need to pull my stomach in.

‘One of these days you’ll drown.’

I rubbed my neck and scooped water on to my face. ‘I’m sure a lung full of water would wake me up. If it was that easy people wouldn’t bother cutting their wrists. Anyway, it sounds a nice way to go.’

He started brushing his teeth. They can probably hear Giles brushing his teeth on the mainland. 'What about the children?'

'You're dribbling toothpaste on your jumper. They'd be your problem.' Which is probably one of my better reasons for staying alive.

I waited till he put the candle down on the bookcase by the door and then climbed out. The bathmat wasn't where I'd hoped it might be and I pretended to believe that what I'd stepped in was water, a regular pretence the alternative to which would be cleaning, which I decline on ideological grounds I cannot be bothered to specify, even to myself.

He spat toothpaste. 'Nice tits, missis.'

'Piss off. You can't even see them.' And they're not, haven't been for some years. My towel smelt faintly of fish. I walked through a curl of smoke as I found the door. 'I think you've just set the *Guardian* on fire.'

'Fuck.' He grabbed a flaming *Weekend* magazine from the top of an unsteady pile of clothes on the bookcase and dropped it in the bath. I caught a glimpse of a double-barrelled chef and a pig before they were consumed by green flames and then drowned. 'Oh well, I'd read that one.'

'I hadn't. I was saving it. For a bath with electric lights and all.'

'Read it online. Come on, it's gone midnight.' He ran his hand over my shoulder and down under the towel, tracing my spine with a fingertip.

I batted at his hand. 'If I get unmolested time on my computer I'm not wasting it reading the bloody *Guardian*, I'll write my book. I said, piss off.'

What I miss most when the electricity goes off is the steady gaze of my radio alarm clock. It's hard to navigate the night without the stations of the clock. I couldn't have been asleep long, because our west-facing bedroom was still as dark as a coffin when I swam up through sleep to Moth's shouting. The

floor was cold and gritty under my feet. As I crossed the landing, where the coming day was beginning to assert itself in the uncurtained window, something rustled and creaked in the attic upstairs. I picked Moth up and he clung to my hair and rubbed his slimy nose on my neck.

‘Mummy.’ There was food behind his ear but his hair still had the butter smell of babies. I kissed his salt cheek and felt the weight of him on my wrists. ‘Mummy. Moth frightened.’

I paced, four steps across and four back, watching out for the nineteenth-century iron fender which juts out of the fireplace. Giles remembers his father putting in the electric heaters, not as a concession to modern ideas of comfort but in recognition of the fact that there was nobody left on the island to cut peat for him.

‘Mummy sing a Gruffalo.’

‘Later. Gruffalo in the morning.’

‘Mummy sing a Gruffalo!’

I patted him. ‘Night-night, Gruffalo. The Gruffalo is sleeping.’

‘Want Gruffalo!’

If he screams, it wakes Raphael, who requires not the Gruffalo but lies about why there will probably still be a planet for him when he grows up. I murmured into Moth’s ear.

‘A mouse took a stroll through the deep dark wood. A fox saw the mouse and the mouse looked good. Where are you going to, little brown mouse? Come and have lunch in my log-pile house—’

He lifted his head. ‘Unnerground house.’

I pushed his head back down. ‘No, that’s the snake.’

‘Fox in unnerground house. More.’

‘Well if you know it, why don’t you—’

‘More.’

‘It’s terribly kind of you, fox, but no, I’m going to have tea—’

‘Lunch.’

‘Lunch. With a gruffalo. A gruffalo, what’s a gruffalo? A gruffalo? Why, don’t you—’

‘*Didn’t* you know?’

I fear that I now know the works of Julia Donaldson better than those of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, but if that’s true then Moth’s commitment to accuracy suggests that I don’t know anything very well. Which is plausible.

‘Oh! But who is this creature with terrible claws and terrible teeth in his terrible jaws?’

Moth had gone soft and heavy on my chest again.

‘His eyes are orange, his tongue is black; he has purple prickles all over his back.’

I crooned towards the vegan resolution – ‘The mouse found a nut and the nut . . . was . . . good’ – and his fingers stayed loose on my neck. I hummed the Skye Boat Song and, as if exploring the fifth arrondissement with no particular destination in mind, sauntered towards the cot and back towards the bookshelf. Reconnaissance successful. I made a second approach, heading for the window but pausing at the cot as if a jeweller’s window display had caught my attention. Moth’s breathing didn’t change, and I’d eased him back down, risked putting a blanket over him, evaded the creaking floorboards and the rustling bin liner over the dinner jacket hanging from the door for reasons that presumably seem logical to Giles and was pushing Giles back onto his own side of our bed before Moth woke to find himself abandoned to what one of my parenting handbooks helpfully calls ‘a barred cage far from you in the dark’. Not far enough. By the time Raphael required my services to evict the Somali child soldiers from last week’s *Guardian* magazine from under his bed there was grey light in the sky over the mountains. I escorted the child soldiers all the way down the stairs and went to hide in the unfinished stunning modern eco-conversion with my laptop until morning forced itself upon me in the form of the builder’s motor boat.

*

My book is about the relationship between the Romantic celebration of childhood as a time of joyful purity and the simultaneous increase in residential institutions for the young: boarding schools, orphanages, hospitals and prisons. At the same time as Wordsworth is rejoicing in the clouds of glory trailed by infants and Rousseau is telling us to learn from the instinctive wisdom of toddlers, other people – actually, sometimes the same people – are sponsoring establishments intended to take the children of the poor away from their families and make them into useful consumers and producers for the age of capitalism. Nothing changes; as in modern parenting books, either babies come with a beautiful inner self that we need to respect and liberate (bring your child into your bed when he wakes at night) or they come as a primitive set of desires and have to be socialized into humanity (leave him to scream until he learns not to be nocturnal). It's interesting that the era famed for its embrace of infant innocence is equally, and simultaneously, committed to the idea of taming the little savages in institutions. When I started the research I thought this was simply a conflict between idealism and pragmatism, indulgence and discipline, but the more I read their rules and manifestos the more I think that institutions have utopian agendas of their own. Institutions constitute an attempt to ratify a brighter future, to achieve what individual households cannot encompass. They exist in order to make things different or better, although it seems to be in the nature of either humans or institutions that they often end by reinforcing, or even fossilizing, the status quo and making things worse. Institutions, at least in the eighteenth century, are the incarnation of optimism, of a confidence in human capacity for change that we lost somewhere along the way. My editor has said she'll still take the manuscript if I get it in by September, and I think I'll make it. If the USB device proffered by Giles as the solution to my need for online databases on an island without broadband works more often than it has so far, I'll

make it. If I can keep on behaving as if sleep were elective I'll make it.

I've finished the archival research, or even I wouldn't have been so stupid as to come to Giles's island. I've read the manuscript records of meals, accounts, expulsions and punishments in the boarding schools of the 1790s, plodded along lists of the benefactors of foundling hospitals across England, leafed my way through pages of yellowed instruction in uneven typeface: 'It is with great Pleasure that I see at last the Preservation of Children become the Care of Men of Sense . . . this Business has been too long fatally left to the Management of Women, who cannot be supposed to have proper Knowledge to fit them for such a Task . . .' (William Cadogan, *An Essay Upon Nursing* (London: 1753)). I'm more or less up to date on the secondary material, although I realized rather late in the day that the most important work on childhood and institutions was done by Anna Freud and her disciples in the aftermath of the Second World War. Freud himself has long been towards the top of the list of people I should have read, pretend to have read, but haven't. My understanding of Freud is that he shows that the realization of human potential depends upon the self-control of parents, while I find economic and political solutions to the problem of suffering more palatable and, frankly, more likely to be achieved. Peace in the Middle East and the end of poverty and famine would be easier to implement than perfect parenting for all, and so I prefer the prophets of the Left to those of the human heart, Marx to Freud; one is, after all, concerned with what is possible as well as what is right. Nevertheless, when I saw that the collected works of Sigmund and Anna hadn't been out of the college library in nine years I thought I might as well bring them here for the silence and fresh air. I've got the whole thing in draft so the idea, Giles's idea, is that the isolation of Colsay is perfect for drafting and polishing and meditating on psychoanalysis without feeling the Fellows breathing malodorously down my neck. He over-

estimates my capacity for abstract thought and hasn't really understood the extent to which the Fellows don't care.

I should have been trying to write the conclusion, which troubles me because I am not sure that the book is in any way conclusive. Behind my laptop, birds that might have been kittiwakes flickered across the sky and I watched some kind of gull dive-bombing the sea. From the boat, on a still day, you can see the other half of their lives, transmuted by water, bubbles streaming off their feathers as they glide and turn like seals after fish. I craned to see the swans but they were somewhere else. I opened the acknowledgements. Last but not least I thank Giles Cassingham, although for what I cannot say.

'Hey, you.' Giles sat at the table reading a gardening catalogue while Moth, frowning, concentrated on spooning porridge into an envelope which also contained a missive from the Child Tax Credit people, who wish alternately to shower us with rubies and to hold our oatmeal in security against what we owe them, depending on no factor that we have been able to isolate. 'The power's back. I made you some tea.'

'He boiled too much water.' Raph spoke from under the table.

'Mummy likes two cups in the morning.' Giles's gaze flicked over my off-off-white Victorian nightdress and cardigan outfit.

'But then she boils it again anyway so the second one is fresh. Do you know there are children in Africa dying because they haven't got any water? I bet their mummies don't drink cups of tea.'

Moth turned the envelope upside down and watched as porridge fell slowly to the floor, followed by a parachute of official communications. Giles actually packed these letters, a whole kitchen table's worth, and brought them from Oxford because he thought we might deal with them while on the island. Giles's sparkling career is founded on his ability to use observations about the present behaviour of puffins to predict their future

movements. I suppose it is necessary, if also delusional, to believe that people have more capacity for change.

‘All splat,’ said Moth. ‘Again!’

Giles passed him another envelope.

I sipped the tea, which was tepid and stewed. ‘There are also children in Africa who have air-conditioning and satellite television and chauffeurs, you know. It’s a continent, not a refugee camp.’

‘Why can’t we have satellite television?’

Giles stood up. ‘Because it’s an instrument of late capitalist excess that rots the brain and promotes American cultural imperialism. Anna, if you can take over here, I’ll go talk to Jake.’

‘No deal,’ I muttered. ‘Oh, all right then. Raph, think of the carbon footprint of a television. You can’t worry about global warming and want lots of big gadgets.’

He crawled out from under the table, through Moth’s fallen porridge, and stood up. ‘Why can’t I?’

‘Why?’ added Moth. ‘Moth wants jam.’

I sat down. ‘Eat your porridge, Moth. Because making electronic equipment uses lots of energy and makes lots of toxic waste.’

‘What kind of toxic waste?’

I had forgotten our new policy of not giving Raphael the basis of any further forebodings about the present and future state of the world.

‘I don’t know. Moth, love, don’t put porridge in your hair. Or in your brother’s hair.’

‘Porridge in hair! Mummy clean it.’

I ran an old baby muslin over Moth’s hair. He pushed it away. ‘Peepo!’

I held it over my face and flapped it up on to my head.

‘Peepo!’

‘Mummy, you look really silly like that. Are you going to stay in that nightie all day?’

I ate some of Moth's rejected toast.

'No. In a minute I'm going to go upstairs and reappear in one of my fabulous designer porridge-scrubbing outfits.'

Moth started trying to brush his hair with a jammy knife.

'Do you want to wash the floor, Raph? I think you might just about be old enough to do it all by yourself if you're really careful.'

'What, with the big bucket?'

I lifted Moth out of his highchair and frisked him for concealed porridge.

'If you think you're grown-up enough not to spill it.'

The garden is Giles's idea. I've never seen much point in extending housework to cover parts of outside, especially now we've got the beach on the doorstep to give the children a nodding acquaintance with what Giles persists in calling the Natural World, as if the human habit of making shelters and arranging for people to buy food they haven't grown and read books they haven't written is in some way unnatural. Giles says I kept the children inside far too much in Oxford, wrapped round each other on the sofa, working our way like termites along the bookcases. Giles says Moth is far better off eating fox-gloves and birdshit and getting wet in the great outdoors. Giles spends his days alone, working.

'Come on,' I said to Moth. 'Let's find some clothes for Mummy.'

It takes a long time for Moth to climb the stairs, and much longer if you try to hurry. I stay behind him, hands poised, and try to use the time to think about my book. In the hall below there are admirable Victorian tessellated tiles in white, black and a shade of red that reminds me of butchers' shops, of cut flesh, and the banisters are spaced for grandeur and not child safety.

'Raph?' I called. 'Raph, do you want to come into the garden?'

After a pause to greet the cracks between the floorboards on

the landing, and another to poke all the flowers in the carving on the chest of drawers, we reached my bedroom. Moth climbed on to the bed, smearing porridge on the pillow. The jumper I'd been wearing all week had some soup on the sleeve but the chances of encountering anyone who would care were approximately the same as those of the swans turning into princesses and performing pirouettes along the beach. Moth handed me a sock.

'Moth in a garden too?'

I shook yesterday's knickers out of my jeans. It's not really a garden. We have crocuses and a few foolhardy and stunted daffodils in June. And Giles, who against most interpretations of the historical evidence believes in self-sufficiency with regard to fruit and vegetables up here, has found some hardy dwarf apple trees on the internet. When he finished the last of the four boat trips required to bring them from Colla, Jake came to consult him about roofing timbers and the Research Fellow in History found herself failing to dig holes for Icelandic trees while her offspring licked birdshit off pebbles.

'Moth eat worms in a garden,' said Moth, sitting down on my bare foot. I wriggled my toes under his bottom and he giggled. I didn't seem to have another sock.

'Raphael?' I shouted. Sometimes this house is too big, although mostly I enjoy the way the stone walls muffle infant rage. There were clean socks in Giles's sock drawer, folded into pairs, so I put one on and held out my hand to Moth. 'Come on. Let's go plant some trees.'

I'm working on what to do with Moth while I attempt anything other than interactive childcare. It never arose at home. In Oxford, I mean. If I was at work I was working and if I was at home I was attending to the children, performing constant triage to read to whichever one seemed likely to have a tantrum first. Finally the far shores of supper, bath and bed, a few curtain calls relating to misplaced teddies, drinks of water

and/or the necessity of reaching a clearer understanding of momentum and inertia before going to sleep and then intellectual life re-established itself, at least until Moth woke for the first time. No one expected me to plant trees. No one expected Moth to entertain himself. I'd never planted a tree. I could hear the rhythmic slap of Raphael's space hopper in the paved yard at the front of the house.

'Moth? Do you want to come and see how the trees grow?'

Moth continued to stagger across the tussocks, trampling nascent daffodils in the quest for birdshit. Perhaps it contains some nutrient crucial to toddler development that is inexcusably missing from my cooking.

'Moth? Shall we do some digging with Mummy's big spade?'

No response. I followed him.

'Mummy's big *sharp* spade?'

He looked round. 'Sharp spade?'

I nodded. 'Very sharp.'

'Very sharp spade.'

A pause.

'Moth very sharp spade.'

He turned back and trundled towards the sharp spade. Getting him away from the birdshit and towards my intended field of operations could only be progress. I yawned and stretched. Hours to go until bedtime. I tried to think about digging a hole in the ground.

Moth stalked around the trees, each muffled with a burlap sack, and seized the handle of the spade. He couldn't lift it.

'Moth very sharp spade!'

'Yes. Moth, love, do you want to help Mummy dig a hole? A nice deep hole for the trees to put their roots in?'

He began to drag the spade across the grass, a hunter so proud of his mammoth that he can't wait for back-up.

'No. Moth spade.'

'But the spade is for digging holes. Shall we dig a hole? Moth and Mummy?'

‘No.’

‘But Moth, look. This is how we use a spade.’

I took hold of it. He pulled it back.

‘Mummy put it back. Moth spade.’

‘But look, love—’

He cast himself to the ground and flung his arms out. The screaming suggested an innocent who had just seen Herod’s minions coming his way.

‘All right, all right. Moth spade.’

He had already drawn the next breath and eyed me as one might the minion being told that this particular child was in fact a girl.

‘All right, Moth play with the spade. Mummy will find something else.’

‘Moth spade.’

He sat up beside it and began to stroke the haft.

‘Hush, little spa-ade, don’t say a word, Mummy gonna buy you a mockin-bird.’

There was a trowel in a trug by the bundled trees. It had as little impact on the matted roots of the turf as one might have expected.

‘If that mockin-bird don’t sing, Mummy gonna buy you a diamond ring.’ He leant forward and kissed the spade’s handle. ‘Moth’s love. Sleeping now.’

I wondered whether, once the spade slept, I could reintegrate it to the adult world.

‘Has the spade gone to sleep?’

‘Shh.’ He patted it. ‘Quiet, Mummy. Spade sleeping.’

I knelt up to get more weight on the trowel. I might as well have been digging with a spoon. The space hopper had fallen suggestively silent.

We had a kind of potato omelette that I told Giles was frittata for lunch. It would have been better if I’d either boiled the potatoes first or started frying them about an hour earlier than

I did, but one advantage of a boarding-school childhood is that Giles can and will eat all but the worst misjudgements. In theory, I disapprove of cooking. It's not a coincidence that ready meals and supermarkets appeared at the same time as equal opportunities legislation. In practice cooking means that you can hide in the kitchen wielding knives and listening to Radio Four and still be a Good Mummy, thus achieving a variety of domestic servitude which is still not, I believe, what Mary Wollstonecraft, Emmeline Pankhurst or Betty Friedan had in mind. It's even less fun here, where I can't get Radio Four most of the time, vegetables come seasick from Colla once a week and the olive oil that Giles is accustomed to dribble over my more questionable creations like a kind of upper-class ketchup is probably more expensive than heroin. Which might in any case be more effective.

After the frittata I walked off while Giles was still making coffee. I learnt that from him. You don't say, do you mind if I go work for an hour or so and will you settle Moth for his nap and include Raph in whatever you're doing next? You don't even say, I'm just going to do a bit of work, if that's OK. Even this will be construed as a negotiating position. You just leave the room as if it has not occurred to you that someone will have to tidy up lunch, change Moth's nappy, spend half an hour hanging over the cot patting his back while Raph slides down the banisters yodelling as taught by his godfather Matthias, clean the loo, help Raph with the Lego that Moth will eat if he can and make a casserole before waking Moth, who will otherwise sleep all afternoon and stay awake all night as though he were a denizen of one of those vine-wreathed Mediterranean cultures in which adults appear to want no time at all to themselves. I sidled round the house, abstracted my laptop from the luxury green holiday cottage/building site, where I would be too easy to find, and headed along the shore towards the old village. It's barely a hamlet, really; the remains of twelve stone cottages, none

larger than the kitchen in Colsay House. They were abandoned gradually from the late nineteenth century, and only the most recently inhabited one still has most of its roof. It's been a weak summer so far, and I've wondered if I might be able to light a small fire in the hearth, but the village is visible from the big house and the last thing the working mother should do is send smoke-signals revealing her whereabouts, so I make do with fingerless gloves and a coat, which gives me the regrettably accurate feeling that I am always on the point of leaving. The house also has a kitchen table, sheep droppings on the floor and a framed photo of a young man in a Second World War uniform on the wall, but I can usually get internet access from a room with an intact ceiling, which is all I really need.

I opened the introduction, which I usually avoid because it's not very good. I find it hard to justify beginning. I do it unoriginally, with the Wild Boy of Aveyron, who is the *amuse-bouche* of more than one other history of childhood. The Wild Boy was found sleeping rough in the woods around Aveyron, in the French Alps, in 1797. He was about twelve, had a deep scar from ear to ear, and had no clothes or words. He'd been stopping in at local farmhouses for food for several years, but no one knew, or admitted to knowing, where he'd come from and when he'd left. He became the perfect subject for philosophical experiment, a human being raised without society (they ignored the people who must have given birth to him, breastfed him, stopped him eating foxgloves and birdshit when he was too young to know better and, several years later, slit his throat and left him for dead in the woods). Jean-Marc Itard, who made it his life's work to civilize the Wild Boy, wrote:

How could he possibly be expected to have known the existence of God? Let him be shown the heavens, the green fields, the vast expanse of the earth, the works of Nature, he

does not see anything in all that if there is nothing to eat; and there you have the sole route by which external objects penetrate into his consciousness.

– Harlan Lane, *The Wild Boy of Aveyron* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976), p. 39

I stared at it for a bit. God or food, which would you look for on a mountainside?

‘Mummy?’

‘Jesus Christ, Raph, what are you doing here?’

‘Mummy, do you want me to make you a dynamo for your laptop? You could sit on it and bicycle the wheels and that would make the energy for the processor. Then you could get lots of exercise while you were writing.’

‘No, I couldn’t, because I don’t get enough writing time to use up a grape. Supposing I could get a grape. Raph, please go find Daddy. Please let me write. Just while Moth sleeps.’

His hair was felted at the back where he sleeps on it and his top, bought two sizes too big three years ago, stopped short of his belly button.

‘It would probably have to be fitted somewhere, it wouldn’t be possible to move it around, but I could design it, quite easily. You’d have to go quite fast to power a game or something but for word-processing you could probably generate what you needed while you typed. I could even set it up so you could divert the power to the oven or an electric heater. I could look on the internet and find the materials . . .’

He was looking out of the window as he spoke, across to the untenanted henhouse and the roofless pigpen.

‘Raph, please. I’m sure it would be lovely. Just let me look at the introduction.’

‘We could put a gym in the blackhouse, couldn’t we, so people could actually use their own energy. There could be a treadmill – that’d be quite easy to build, some kind of hamster-wheel like the Romans used to make slaves do to lift cranes.’ He

began to whirl his hands in circles, like those people who used to walk backwards in front of planes at departure gates. ‘You could do it with a bench-press, actually, only the mechanism would be bulky, but that wouldn’t matter.’

The juxtaposition of Romantic expectation and Lockean subsistence economics demonstrated here lies at the heart of this book. The Wild Boy’s wildness is shown to exist not, as the early nineteenth-century reader might expect, in his spiritual connection to land- and skyline, but in its absence. This is not a child ‘trailing clouds of glory’ but an infant *homo economicus*, a being whose potential as consumer and producer must be liberated by a highly theorized syllabus. And it is *homo economicus* with which the more popular literature on childhood, and especially the new genre of parenting handbooks, is overwhelmingly concerned. Parenthood is no longer merely a biological state; it has become an undertaking in which it is possible to fail, and it is the possibility of failure that opens a space for the institutions that offered to replace failing families and communities.

All that we learn, I thought, all that we learn is that humanity is acquired from our parents, and can be lost, that people can be so badly damaged that they lose the capacity to be fully human. The Wild Boy never acquired language, never learnt to play or to love or even to sleep through the night. Because his parents threw him away. I deleted the first *homo economicus* and tried to think of a synonym.

‘Mummy?’

‘What?’

‘Miss Towers at school said we should say pardon.’

‘She was wrong. What is it?’

‘When we get this eco-gym set up, yeah? Do you want it to power the TV over there as well?’

‘There isn’t a TV.’

‘No, but there could be, yeah? Because if they were powering it themselves, it would kind of counteract the late capitalist cultural imperialism?’

‘Raph, stop saying “yeah” all the time.’

The clock on my laptop is slow, but even so I’d been gone over an hour and it was time Moth was waking up. Giles leaves him to sleep, not so much, I hope, because he thinks the nights are my problem as because he is incapable of acting now to change something six hours in the future.

‘Come on, let’s go wake Moth.’