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The Wilderness

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Extract

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I

In amongst a sea of events and names that have been forgotten, there are a number of episodes that float with striking buoyancy to the surface. There is no sensible order to them, nor connection between them. He keeps his eye on the ground below him, strange since once he would have turned his attention to the horizon or the sky above, relishing the sheer size of it all. Now he seeks out miniatures with the hope of finding comfort in them: the buildings three thousand feet below, the moors so black and flat that they defy perspective, the prison and grounds, men running in ellipses around a track, the stain of suburbia.

The pilot shouts something and points to the right. In the distance a wood is being felled and they can see a tree lean and crash, then another, like matches.

'Surreal from here!' the pilot shouts.

'Yes,' he replies. 'Quail Woods. Falling.'

He leans forward and touches the shoulder of the pilot without knowing what he means by the gesture. A sense of grounding perhaps – he wishes to be back on the ground, and feels nauseous, and a little afraid. In any case the pilot must mistake his hand for a flapping neck scarf or even a bird gone off course, because he doesn't turn.

'My son!' he shouts. 'Down there, in the prison!'

The pilot nods and puts his thumb up; maybe he has not understood.

'I built that prison, the new part, back in the Sixties,' he calls into the wind.

'Yes,' the pilot returns. 'It's awful, I agree. Blight on the landscape.'

He leans as far out as he dare. Can he see his son? Can they see one another? He eyes with dim envy the mechanical, antlike grace of the men running round and round. That one is Henry. No, he is mistaken. That one, perhaps. That one? Impossible to tell, he decides. They are all thin from here, and besides, the wind blurs his vision. The prison is sliding behind them now as the pilot turns east and a limb of shoreline comes into view.

'My son went mad,' he shouts to the pilot. He wants to clear up this point straight away, given that the world has more sympathy with the madman than it does the criminal. 'For a while, after his mother died,' he qualifies. After all, the world has a short attention span even for madmen.

The pilot's word of reply is whipped away by the wind. It sounded a little like 'no', as if the wind itself, the very atmosphere, has simply disagreed with him.

To steady his lilting mind, he focuses on the pilot's thick neck and the roll of collar, wondering what that material is called. It isn't leather, but something like leather, and quite a common thing, the sort of thing he should know. The sort of thing he used to know. Gingerly he touches it and then pulls away, clasps his hands together and brings them to his chin. He closes his eyes and feels a slight churning in his stomach; if only they could go slower, or down.

Now he casts his thoughts out for Henry and all he gets is the usual clamour of data. Henry, after Helen's death, running

across the field behind the Coach House with a carving knife, following the wing lights of a plane, shouting, 'There is God, you holy bastard, come back!' Some might say this is not a happy memory, but he would object that it is not the happiness of a memory that he is looking for, it is the memory itself; the taste and touch of it, and the proof it brings of himself. He reaches forward again in an attempt to attract the pilot's attention.

'Down soon?' he manages.

Another thumbs-up from the pilot, and a turn deeper into that mass of sky that seams with the sea, where everything is unmanageably large and wonderful, everything is *excessive*, he thinks. He consoles himself with confining thoughts of the prison, its four T-shaped wings and cramped cells.

They sail on; if he had more choice he would panic. As it is, where the engine's roar deafens him and the wind whips his limbs neatly into his body, he finds himself compressed into an involuntary composure, pinned back and down into his thoughts. At this moment there is just the image of Henry running manically across the field after that plane – the memory as vivid and isolated as a night landscape brought up sharply by a bolt of lightning – and then a converse image of Henry, sometime later after a period in hospital and drugs that made his hair fall out, tying on the apron Helen had once bought him and beginning a long, sleepy bout of baking: his specialities were *hamantaschen* and almond cakes from his grandmother's handwritten Jewish cookery book. The house smelt of hot sugar for weeks.

There is something about this utter deflation of his son that irks him more deeply than any other run of events, so that he can see him in ever-decreasing magnitudes, like an object receding.

The prison comes briefly into view again over the edge of the plane, then disappears. He closes his eyes. Some time ago, after