ONE

I remember, in no particular order:

– a shiny inner wrist;

– steam rising from a wet sink as a hot frying pan is laughingly tossed into it;

– gouts of sperm circling a plughole, before being sluiced down the full length of a tall house;

– a river rushing nonsensically upstream, its wave and wash lit by half a dozen chasing torchbeams;

– another river, broad and grey, the direction of its flow disguised by a stiff wind exciting the surface;

– bathwater long gone cold behind a locked door.

This last isn't something I actually saw, but what you end up remembering isn't always the same as what you have witnessed.

We live in time – it holds us and moulds us – but I've never felt I understood it very well. And I'm not referring to theories about how it bends and doubles back, or may exist elsewhere in parallel versions. No, I mean ordinary, everyday time, which clocks and watches assure us passes regularly: tick-tock, click-clock. Is there anything more plausible than a second hand? And yet it takes only the smallest pleasure or pain to teach us time's malleability. Some emotions speed it up, others slow it down; occasionally, it seems to go missing – until the eventual point when it really does go missing, never to return.

I'm not very interested in my schooldays, and don't feel any nostalgia for them. But school is where it all began, so I need to return briefly to a few incidents that have grown into anecdotes, to some approximate memories which time has deformed into certainty. If I can't be sure of the actual events any more, I can at least be true to the impressions those facts left. That's the best I can manage.

There were three of us, and he now made the fourth. We hadn't expected to add to our tight number: cliques and pairings had happened long before, and we were already beginning to imagine our escape from school into life. His name was Adrian Finn, a tall, shy boy who initially kept his eyes down and his mind to himself. For the first day or two, we took little notice of him: at our school there was no welcoming ceremony, let alone its opposite, the punitive induction. We just registered his presence and waited.

The masters were more interested in him than we were. They had to work out his intelligence and sense of discipline, calculate how well he'd previously been taught, and if he might prove 'scholarship material'. On the third morning of that autumn term, we had a history class with Old Joe Hunt, wryly affable in his three-piece suit, a teacher whose system of control depended on maintaining sufficient but not excessive boredom.

'Now, you'll remember that I asked you to do some preliminary reading about the reign of Henry VIII.' Colin, Alex and I squinted at one another, hoping that the question wouldn't be flicked, like an angler's fly, to land on one of our heads. 'Who might like to offer a characterisation

of the age?' He drew his own conclusion from our averted eyes. 'Well, Marshall, perhaps. How would you describe Henry VIII's reign?'

Our relief was greater than our curiosity, because Marshall was a cautious know-nothing who lacked the inventiveness of true ignorance. He searched for possible hidden complexities in the question before eventually locating a response.

'There was unrest, sir.'

An outbreak of barely controlled smirking; Hunt himself almost smiled.

'Would you, perhaps, care to elaborate?'

Marshall nodded slow assent, thought a little longer, and decided it was no time for caution. 'I'd say there was great unrest, sir.'

'Finn, then. Are you up in this period?'

The new boy was sitting a row ahead and to my left. He had shown no evident reaction to Marshall's idiocies.

'Not really, sir, I'm afraid. But there is one line of thought according to which all you can truly say of any historical event – even the outbreak of the First World War, for example – is that "something happened".'

'Is there, indeed? Well, that would put me out of a job, wouldn't it?' After some sycophantic laughter, Old Joe Hunt pardoned our holiday idleness and filled us in on the polygamous royal butcher.

At the next break, I sought out Finn. 'I'm Tony Webster.' He looked at me warily. 'Great line to Hunt.' He seemed not to know what I was referring to. 'About something happening.'

'Oh. Yes. I was rather disappointed he didn't take it up.'

That wasn't what he was supposed to say.

Another detail I remember: the three of us, as a symbol of our bond, used to wear our watches with the face on the inside of the wrist. It was an affectation, of course, but perhaps something more. It made time feel like a personal, even a secret, thing. We expected Adrian to note the gesture, and follow suit; but he didn't.

Later that day – or perhaps another day – we had a double English period with Phil Dixon, a young master just down from Cambridge. He liked to use contemporary texts, and would throw out sudden challenges. '"Birth, and Copulation, and Death" – that's what T. S. Eliot says it's all about. Any comments?' He once compared a Shakespearean hero to Kirk Douglas in *Spartacus*. And I remember how, when we were discussing Ted Hughes's poetry, he put his head at a donnish slant and murmured, 'Of course, we're all wondering what will happen when he runs out of animals.' Sometimes, he addressed us as 'Gentlemen'. Naturally, we adored him.

That afternoon, he handed out a poem with no title, date or author's name, gave us ten minutes to study it, then asked for our responses.

'Shall we start with you, Finn? Put simply, what would you say this poem is *about*?'

Adrian looked up from his desk. 'Eros and Thanatos, sir.'

'Hmm. Go on.'

'Sex and death,' Finn continued, as if it might not just be the thickies in the back row who didn't understand Greek. 'Or love and death, if you prefer. The erotic principle, in any case, coming into conflict with the death principle. And what ensues from that conflict. Sir.'