

I'm plagued by a recurring dream that comes to me only in parts. Or so I've thought. Because recently I've come to realise that what I'd taken to be separate parts are in fact connected, like limbs of the same body. The realisation felt like I'd put together the pieces of a puzzle. That the dream had started as a story that someone had cut into pieces and shuffled wildly, then presented to me as I slept in a random sequence that has lasted for almost sixteen years. But though it makes sense to me to think of it this way, I now believe the opposite is the case: that the dream started as one random fragment following another with no original whole, only finding that whole somehow as it went, moving *towards* (I can put it no other way) something that did not yet exist.

The dream is about my father: my father and me in East Berlin. Which is strange because I have never been to East Berlin, and yet in the dream I am the same age as my father and seem to know the city better than he does. But what is even stranger is that my father, too, had never been to East Berlin: as a recently married man, he once told me, he had lived for a brief period in the west of the city, but he had lived in Istanbul for many years more by the time he was the age in the dream (his parents had fled Baghdad when he was still

a boy), and it was to Istanbul he was forced to return with my mother after my birth and before their escape to Australia.

For some reason this dislocation affects me more than anything else, perhaps because it reminds me of a similar dislocation he told me about on another occasion. He remembered being left alone with the Kurdish peasant girls who lived in his home. The girls were quite young, only ten or twelve years old, though at least twice the age of my father, and had been brought by their families from the border villages to Baghdad, where they worked as servants in more affluent homes. They became my father's earliest friends. When it grew dark, he said, they all huddled together on a low divan and began telling stories about werewolves and vampires. Of all the folktales he heard, my father said, only the ones about werewolves and vampires stayed in his memory. 'Every detail of them is present in my mind,' he said, 'but not in the language I heard them in. I heard them in Kurdish, but I know them in Turkish; this mysterious translation is perhaps the oddest thing I have to tell you about my youth.

'My parents – your grandparents – spoke to me in Arabic,' he went on to say. 'But the peasant girls at home knew only Kurdish, so I must have learned it with them. But since Kurdish was never spoken at school, as I grew up and my parents could no longer afford to keep the girls, I soon forgot it completely. I don't know at what point in time this or that translated itself. It could only have happened later, after we had taken refuge in Istanbul. I never probed into the matter; perhaps I was afraid to destroy my most precious memories with too careful an examination. I can say only one thing with certainty. Those stories from my earliest childhood are present in my mind in all their freshness, but they are tied to words I did not know at the time.'

Through all his explanation, his eyes were wide with amazement recalled. And he concluded by telling me it seemed natural to him even now to remember them in this language. ‘I don’t have the feeling that I am changing anything,’ he said. ‘It’s not like the translation of a book from one language to another; it’s a translation that happened of its own accord. I can understand it in no other way.’

That’s all I remember him telling me, though the words might have changed in my memory. I suspect he told me some of the stories – they still thrilled him – but none of them remain, no matter how hard I try to salvage them. The dislocation of my dream is of another order, and yet I experience it, like my father, as one of language. My parents spoke Turkish to me in our home in Istanbul, though they spoke Arabic to each other. My father also spoke fluent German, though he never spoke a word of it to me or my mother as far as I recall. And yet when my father and I speak to each other in the dream, it is in German.

Two weeks before the accident, I found myself thinking again about my father and his life. I was at an exhibition of paintings by Francis Bacon, which I’d come upon after walking up from the harbour in the nearby Botanical Gardens. I didn’t like the paintings, but there was something in them that troubled me, and the afternoon I thought again of my father was the fourth afternoon I had been to look at them in a week. Bacon paints bodies that are tortured, stunted, caged, displayed, turned inside out or outside in (it’s never clear exactly), allowed an escape but not wanting one, perhaps because, despite the mutilation, there is no suffering, it seems, no pain, which is exactly what history does to the past, to the reality of human wretchedness – history and dreams – it divests it of its pain.

Bacon's paintings look as if a human being has passed over them, leaving behind a trail of its presence, just as history and dreams, like a snail, leave their slime.