don’t tell stories, Adrian!

As a young child I would often have been admonished with, “don’t tell stories, Adrian!” With decades of hindsight, I think that this was, for those admonishing me, a more polite, better class version of “don’t tell fibs!” And this itself was much better than, “don’t tell lies!” which would have been considered ‘common’.

Both telling lies, or telling fibs, was breaking the ninth Commandment. But was telling stories actually a sin? And what about storybooks? What about Rupert Bear, Winnie-the-Pooh, Peter Pan, and the Little Prince?

In the first instance, I can imagine myself thinking, quite literally, “but I’m not telling stories...” And now, looking back, I would like to think that then I’d be thinking something on the lines of, “my thoughts wander about a lot - I think I’m in lots of different places, not all at once, just one at a time, places I imagine I want to be in - isn’t that like telling stories to myself?” Though I am certain that I would never have considered actually saying this out loud (nor even as a whisper), as the consequences would have been painful.

I still tell stories...

always wear clean underwear, Adrian...

“Always wear clean underwear, Adrian.”
This was the only piece of advice I can remember being given to me by my mother - though maybe it was more of an instruction rather than advice. That would make sense. I will leave it to you to imagine a context in which this instruction could have been delivered as it has little bearing on what follows.

So, one day, after the instruction had often been repeated, and it didn’t seem impolite, and she seemed in good spirits, I asked my mother, “why do I need to change into clean underwear every day?”

“In case you get run-over, and you have to be taken to hospital in an ambulance. The doctors and nurses won’t think very much of a boy wearing dirty underwear, will they? Nor his parents!”

Imagining being run over, flattened, crushed by some unnamed vehicle - surely there would be lots of blood and other stuff messing up all one’s clothes, not just underwear? Would it hurt - would I die? Would I go to Heaven?

But then I thought (very much to myself) “but I’m not going to get run-over. I have a guardian angel. The Catechism had told me so.”

One didn’t answer back in those days. In any case, I had

From infancy to death human life is surrounded by their [angels’] watchful care and intercession. Beside each believer stands an angel as protector and shepherd leading him to life. Already here on earth the Christian life shares by faith in the blessed company of angels and men united in God. (Catechism of the Catholic Church. 336)

niggling doubts about guardian angels, and it really would have been a bad idea to have expressed those doubts.

Obviously, I cannot remember my stream-of-consciousness thinking about guardian angels that would occasionally come to the fore in my impressionable Catechismic mind, but I have a feeling that it may have oriented around amazement at how crowded the world must be if we all have an angel close to us, at least we Catholics; where do they go when we are rushing around in the playground, do they bump into each other like we do, do they fall over like we do; how do they fit those huge wings in on a crowded bus; do they fly to keep up when we are riding our bikes fast; how do they manage without sleep; what do they like to eat; how big are they; do they have names; or are they really just for we Catholics; does mine know that I am thinking this? I knew that I couldn't actually ask any of these questions as this would surely show lack of Faith - and probably reap punishment.

I was walking back home from town when I became aware of my whole body folding gently around the front of a moving 4x4. The next memory is lying on the road looking up as the 4x4 stopped just above my head. Thanking.

I'd missed most of the action - I'd been flung into the air, landing some 6 metres from the collision, at a roundabout at rush hour. My first response was to test moving feet and



"I heard a bang, then I saw a man flying through the air." RTC witness statement.

hands - was I paralysed? At-scene triage had a broken right leg, broken right arm, broken hip, and fractured skull - luckily, I had rag-dolled...

But while they were cutting me out of my clothes in the ambulance, I had the opportunity to thank my mother, as I was wearing clean underwear. And there was not much blood (and no 'mess') as technically I had been 'run into'.

This accident happened over fifty years after my mother's giving me the invaluable advice.

And my guardian angel had long-since given up on me. Or maybe I had given up on them.

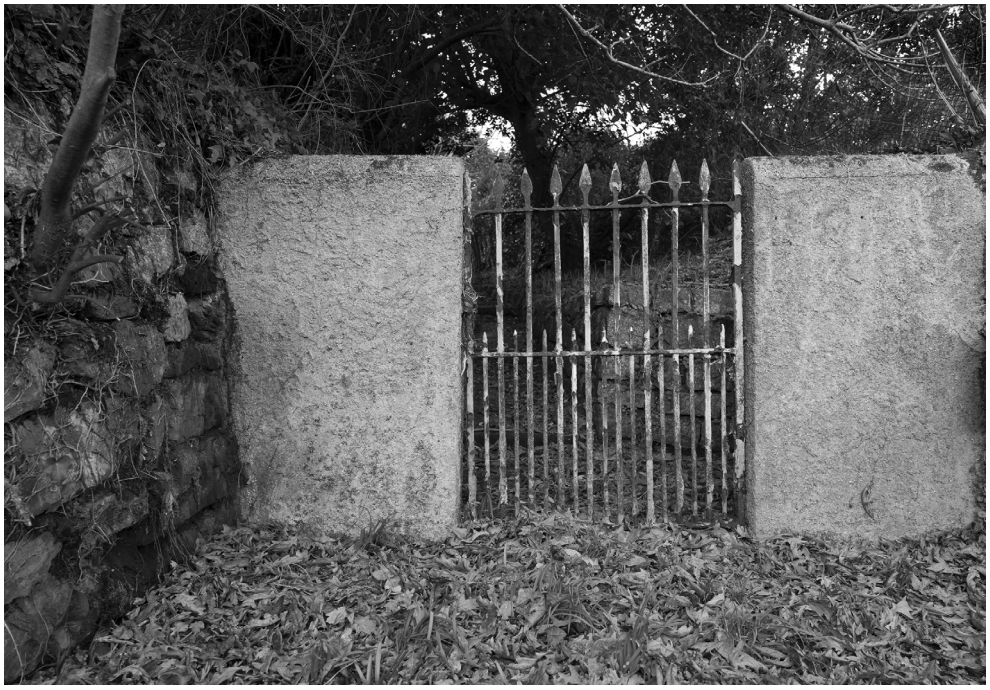
Postscript: I have a feeling that this recently discovered photograph may become my version of the 'little girl in the winter garden (le Jardin d'hiver)', only here, the 'little girl' is an adult, and I am the toddler.

On 25th February 1980, Roland Barthes was run into by a laundry van while he was walking home through the streets of Paris.

One month later, on 26th March, 28 months after the death of his beloved mother, he died from the pulmonary injuries he sustained in the accident.



Aunt Hilde: between waking and sleeping



I think that I was seven - that this was in the year my mother died. I was staying over at my grandmother's house, as this may have been the time when she, my mother, was on a pilgrimage to Lourdes to take the water, and to pray to St. Bernadette for healing.

It was a very warm summer's evening and I was still awake, irritated. There was too much light, too much life pouring in through my windows. I simply could not get to sleep while everyone else was out and about in the sun. It must have been June too, as there was a blackbird still in full song.

Aunt Hilde, who was visiting my grandmother, had come upstairs to see why I was still awake.

I clearly recall asking her, "why can't I remember falling asleep?"

"Because you haven't been to sleep yet."

"No, Aunt Hilde, not just tonight, why can I never remember falling asleep?"

"Well, it's because when you are asleep, you are asleep. And you can only remember some of your dreams from your sleep, and maybe then for only a short while after you have woken up."

Aunt Hilde commanded both awe and fear in me – she was a Spiritualist. She spoke with the dead. I wondered if she

Between February and July 1858, Bernadeta Sobirós experienced 18 visions of a dazzling light and a white figure at the entrance to the Grotte de Massabielle, near the town of Lourdes, Hautes-Pyrénées. At first, she simply talked of seeing *aquerò* (Gascon Occitan for "that"), then later, *uo petito damizelo* ("a small young lady").

When I woke, I was shocked to see that there was a little fellow standing next to me, bright as a new pin. He didn't seem at all bothered that we were in the middle of the desert, miles from anywhere. He did not look lost, nor did he seem weak with exhaustion, or hunger, or fright. Nor was he shocked to encounter me in this desolate place.

spoke with Catholic dead, but I didn't enquire of her, as it seemed rude, and liable to cause problems. Yet my child-logic informed me that of all people, she must have an answer to this kind of question. Though I was unsure why I had come to this conclusion.

"No, (sheepishly) why can't I remember the last moment before I go to sleep? The moment in the middle of being awake and being asleep."

She frowned, then smiled. "It's not that simple. It's not like the difference between morning and afternoon - midday by the clock. No, it's more like the difference between daytime and night time - you can watch that happen, but it is impossible to say exactly when night time begins, even though it's just a matter of light and dark. And Ah! If you remember that moment you are trying to find between being awake and being asleep, you may never escape from it, passing through a gateway into another realm of lucid sleep, so they say."

I knew that she was trying to calm me with her common-sense logic, nearly as much as I was really annoyed by the things that 'they' do or 'they' say. Yet this simple statement shocked me to the quick. Why should remembering a single moment do this? How could this be? Wasn't it dangerous to leave moments like these lying around for children to find? But, how could I remember something if I never woke up, if

the future was held back in the present, and the present was stuck somewhen?

"How, why?" I pursued.

"Well, maybe it's because you would be neither awake nor asleep. We should be one or the other - we can't be both at the same time can we? But being neither may be very serious, a long way away from the rest of us, maybe even in another world, another time, another us."

She was wise, but didn't really have a solution that I wanted to hear. And I was worried that 'another us' meant her spirit world, and the dead. I read myself to sleep with my pictorial comforter, de Saint-Exuperéy, maybe something like:

"[...] I gave up on my glorious career as an artist. Grown-ups never understand anything on their own, and it's a nuisance for children to have to keep explaining things over and over again." (from *The Little Prince*, Antoine de Saint-Exuperéy, 1943)

I do not believe that we ever spoke of it again, though I continued to try to map my nightly falling without any success. It was almost as if the soft seduction of falling proscribed its memory, that observation somehow interfered with the actual falling; that the falling knew that it was being observed; that having passed through, the gate to consciousness was firmly closed behind you; and though you

It may have seemed a sort of blasphemy (conceptually - though I am sure I'd never heard the word as such) to search out a state between sleep and waking, between being dead and alive, neither dead nor alive, both dead and alive; but the soul persists and the faithful departed will be resurrected in the Final Judgement - the last binary opposition, if you will.

could still catch sight of all that lay there, it was impossible to recall any of those experiences. And, thankfully maybe, in the waking, this other realm would cast you back to your own world.

Perhaps I was also afraid of the consequences of success.

And now as a grown-up, I often wonder at our faith in our mind and body waking us up each morning after we have willingly put ourselves to sleep the night before.



Aunt Hilde in her heyday (early 1930s)

Then, as regards the actual connection between the spirit and the body I consider that the body by reason of being a living body can "attract" and hold on to a "spirit", whilst the body is alive and awake the two are firmly connected. When the body is asleep I cannot guess what happens but when the body dies the "mechanism" of the body, holding on to the spirit is gone and the spirit finds a new body sooner or later perhaps immediately.

(Alan Turing, in an essay written for Christopher Morcom's mother, c.1930)

Sleeper



skeard: on the Night Riviera Sleeper from Paddington to Cornwall,
the way back home, at around 06:15, Friday 3rd March 2023

Once, it had been a damp 24C, the faintest glimmer of an analogue clock, all-but total darkness; it was easier to see with my eyes closed, though maybe to understand, or remember rather than to see. Those days of C41 and E6 deep-tank lines.

Now cuddling, soft warm darkness, gentle undulating motion, a barely audible whoosh from the old school air-con. Womb-like? But dry - my sister died of an endometrial carcinoma. At right-angle to the direction of travel - unusual - overnight berth in cross-channel ferry; or a lucky four seats in cattle class, unlike the forwards/backwards up front and upstairs.

It is not a fast train, easy on the minor irregularities in track that otherwise seem amplified while standing or sitting or typing. The train stops regularly, to catch its breath. But no announcements - I don't know where I am - and mostly no sound from others once they settle down. No phone chatter. Just the carriage, the whoosh, and one's breathing and shuffling. Thinking of the magical sound of being in a building, in a train, in an empty Paddington Station - hearing space.

Where had these feelings come from? I scoured more, I could find nothing in my own experience, a lot was blocked, I'd been told. But four decades ago, my daughters in carry-cots on the back seat of our car, sideways on. Had my mother done this too? I have only the faintest memories of being in

that car, black, with cracked and dessicated brown leather seats - they all were. I can imagine, create a pot pourri of old leather, cigarette ash, petrol, oil, and the 50s.

We almost always lie in line with movement. So why is the sleeper as it is, as it does for me, to me. I am being cocooned in a warm, unthreatening, palpable darkness; a hinterland of reality; unphotographable, *la Chambre noire* - is this too fanciful? Like being dead and alive and neither dead nor alive - not waiting for the box to be opened to find out. Luxureating in an infrareal state - going off on one. Is this a survivable, version of Milton's 'darkness visible', surely not?

Should I read less?

Morphine - maybe that's what I'm remembering. Trauma Ward. Half my body in casts. Once I'd learned how to transform the epic snoring of others into a crackling log fire, or whatever worked at the time, I remember that same feeling of serene comfort, with the added benefit then of being able to create and enjoy my own animations, hallucinations as they are called by those outside, but real, actual for those of us inside. It is impossible not to see how this is addictive. The snake, hat, elephant mark on the wall; the sprites dancing on the privacy curtains; floating. And oh, the dreams - or were they dreams?

And how did it get here. Was I, am I asleep?

But my drawing was not of a hat. It was a boa constrictor digesting an elephant. So then I drew the inside of the boa, to help them understand. They always need explanations...

Elvis' black soul



the homely living-room reminder of Hell's fire, here with a demonic construal

"God is an infinite sphere, whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere".

In his essay, *The Absolute and the Relative*, posthumously published in 2019, Umberto Eco employs a two-dimensional version of this aphorism to explain how, in this case, we can clearly describe in words something that is both geometrically impossible and also wholly unimaginable - that "[...] there is a difference between being able to conceive of something or not, and being able to describe it and attribute some meaning to it."

As a child brought up in Catholicism, and under the ruling guidance of priests, nuns, and the daily Catechism, I would not have had a problem coming to terms with this otherwise overwhelming description of God, had it had meaning atributed to it by the Church. It would not even have struck me as in any way odd, just another aspect of the tantalisingly near-palpable spirit world of a Catholic child, whose every living moment was monitored by a comforting, gowned and winged, but wholly invisible guardian angel just over his shoulder.

My guardian angel, my soul, the communion host becoming the body of Christ, the Holy Ghost, the Holy Trinity, were all as real, unquestionable, absolutely there (believe it or be damned), but just not visible. And there was the Immaculate

The Catechism is a comprehensive faith book of required learning about all things Catholic:

"Quite early on, the name catechesis was given to the totality of the Church's efforts to make disciples, to help men believe that Jesus is the Son of God so that believing they might have life in his name, and to educate and instruct them in this life, thus building up the body of Christ." (Catechism of the Catholic Church. 4)

Conception, the Nativity, the Crucifiction, and the otherworldliness (and fearful charisma) of priests. This was all that acts of Faith and Fear were about.

Though I do remember having problems with my 'soul' - where was it, what was it? Assuming that I had been a good boy, did my soul, did I, or did both of us go to Heaven after death. Or did we have to wait for the Last Judgement? Answers were not forthcoming - as it was unwise to pose such questions.

These were austere pre-Vatican II times of the arcane but uplifting Latin Mass, when it was forbidden to attend any non-Catholic religious ceremonies, even school assembly (as when I progressed to a CofE grammar school in 1963), and when every Holy Day of Obligation and every day in Lent was a strictly observed meat-free fasting day. And fasting was also required before Holy Communion.

Oddly, I had never read nor even handled a bible until I was given one when I went to that CofE grammar school.

I am sure that had I voiced it at the time I would have been painfully chastised, but this spirit world was just as real for me as my world of make-believe, of play, of day dreaming, of telling stories, of fairy tales (if I was ever allowed them - save for Tinker Bell - as she was just in pantomime)..

And all of this could easily be put into a day-to-day context as I have clear visual and auditory memories of being told in no uncertain terms that Elvis Presley had a black soul -

black as in evil, dangerous, to be avoided at all costs, lest I be contaminated and be damned to Hell's fires as he was surely damned. His very inner being was corrupt. He was not a Catholic. I was frightened by this - coming from my own family doctor.

Read what you will into this, but it took place while our seriously devout Irish family doctor drove me and his son, Michael, (soon to be an altar boy), and daughter, Deirdre, to my first day at a Catholic school in 1957 (the only time I was ever driven to that school - from then on it was two bus journeys plus not insignificant walking each way).

Looking back now, there doesn't seem to be any specific contemporary incident that could have caused this anti-Elvis outburst. My sister was not an Elvis fan then, my parents, certainly not. All very odd. Maybe Michael's elder sister, Sheila, had expressed an interest in Elvis, or had been heard singing a develish song? Maybe this was just an over dramatic instance of pious daily homily that the family was used to.

With faith-lapse and hindsight one could say that I lived in an imaginary world, but as a young child of six at the time of the Elvis incident I had no awareness, nor meaningful concept of the imagination or the imaginary. All was real, just in different ways. How wonderful that would be today.

And Elvis surely made an impression on the devout.

Maybe this was a slow-burn response to US Cardinal Stritch who had earlier in 1957 declared, "Some new manners of dancing and a throwback to tribalism in recreation cannot be tolerated for Catholic youths," and that, "When our schools and centers stoop to such things as 'rock and roll' tribal rhythms, they are failing seriously in their duty. God grant that this word will have the effect of banning such things in Catholic recreation."

Eleanor of the dust



‘Eleanor at Loch Lomond, summer 1896’,
Douglas MacEnnis, 1899

Douglas MacEnnis is an almost forgotten Scottish pioneer of photography. The family wealth from trading with Norway and Sweden enabled him to devote considerable time and energy to creating the photographic image of Edinburgh that the city liked to promote – nothing but affluence and refinement - a match for London.

The family's trading links had given MacEnnis a passionate interest in things Scandinavian (as had his father, who had given Douglas a middle name of Søren). But in 1896 his wife and daughter were tragically killed when masonry crashed through their brougham on the way to see Ibsen's 'The Wild Duck' – MacEnnis suffered head wounds which seem to have left him permanently brain-damaged. To friends he had become "depressed, introspective and highly imaginative", but the trauma had left him time-locked in that summer of 1896. He was also seeing things invisible to others. He took to making photographs of subject matter that most would have considered worthless of attention as they were excluded from his hallucinatory vision. What appear as planar surfaces of rock, beach and ice to everyone else were seen by MacEnnis as portraits of a young woman called Eleanor. The most enigmatic of these images appears to be a perfectly exposed photogram of naturally distributed household dust. It is still unclear how this image was produced. The real identity of Eleanor also remains a mystery.

The wardrobe in the single bedroom at my Grandmother's house had a dust ghost that puthered around at night. I hated that room, and its occupant.

MacEnnis self-published “Eleanor, 29 portraits in the landscape” in Edinburgh in 1899, shortly before slicing his wrists with a photographic plate. The book actually contains 31 images. ‘Portraits’ that would have bewildered its contemporary audience as merely photographs of nothing, but which can now be seen as quietly exquisite examples of early abstract photography, wildly at odds with the conflicting photographic ideologies of the time. The images are all dated as MacEnnis’ time-locked summer 1896. It is believed that only one copy of the book is extant (in a private collection in Argentina). Very few examples of Eleanor images are in circulation.

It is worrying to note that Dr Relling, one of the main characters in The Wild Duck, has the with-hindsight prescient line, “deprive the average human being of his life-lie, and you rob him of his happiness.” Something cracked after publishing “Eleanor” - one wonders who deprived MacEnnis of his vision...

The image shown here is “Eleanor at Loch Lomond, summer 1896” from MacEnnis’ book, “Eleanor, 29 portraits in the landscape”. It appears to show fracturing sea-ice. As sea-ice is not common in Scotland, this photograph may have been taken on an unrecorded visit to Norway or Sweden.

The transient



a transient,

though you may see this as a lemon in sheep's clothing

This also all started in a novel. In a downward elevator, with a small sweet that tasted of peppermint:

“”No, steel. Cold steel. The story unfolds in his head more than in his ears and there are words but there aren’t, pictures and sensations and tastes that change and progress from the original mint and metal through blood and sugar and summer air. Then it’s gone.”

(Erin Morgenstern, The Starless Sea, 2019, p. 153)

This has been haunting me since first reading about it in 2019 - a sweet that tells a story, then it’s gone. A dream, structured hallucinations, scripted phosphenes?

And many years previously I had been drafting plans for software that could enable a computer to emulate dreaming (there was support from a University for this). And a recurring dream in which yellow repeatedly formed a link between one situation/incident and another incident/situation - yellowness, not the word, nor even “yellow” voiced, nor even the colour - an evanescent thing. But almost as I had written about this yellow in my notebook, it was gone. Never seen since.

I feel like Ive been reading too much William Gibson before I go to sleep, but if that really were the case, I’d probably not be saying nor thinking that - it would be somewhere else,

somewhen else. And I'm suddenly thinking that transients could become complusive, addictive, all-embracing visual opioids.

But what is a transient?

Should I explain? Is it too good an idea to give away before I've even started with it? Or is it too mad ever to be happen? To be allowed?

Or does this come from the whisperings of the night sprites prone to wake one with, "C is pronounced in three different ways in Pacific Ocean..." and its ilk?

shocked to the quick in a front room in New Delhi



the earliest surviving photograph of the author, some time and some place in 1951

She was planning a trip to a tiger reserve. This rather drew attention to herself. And she went on to explain that she was going to fit this trip into her work schedule.

I had seen her, maybe even noticed her, at work during the education fair earlier that day. I'd not seen her previously. And now, in the evening of that day, we were both in a group of maybe seven or eight international staff from UK universities, enjoying a social evening in our agents' front room in a very dark, and very quiet suburb of New Delhi (well, as quite as Delhi gets).

The conversation moved on to other guests, but I was intrigued as to how she was going to manage that trip at the same time as the daily demands of work. I couldn't see that there'd be sufficient time in our schedule to manage to do this. So after a while I asked her about her plans.

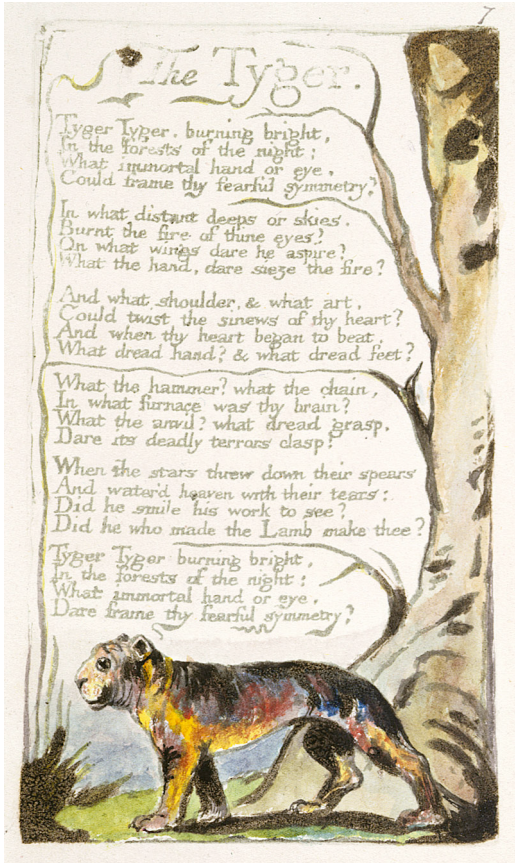
"Oh, it's my birthday, and I wanted to treat myself while in India. And while in India, why not try to meet a tiger?" she said as if it were just like treating oneself to a nice evening out in a posh resataurant back home in England.

"Are you planning this trip on your actual birthday?" I asked.

"Yes, on Wednesday."

"That's my birthday too!"

She smiled, unsure of my motive maybe; and the whole group



was now listening to our conversation.

“Is it a special birthday?” I asked.

“Not really, just getting older. I will be 55.”

This was quite a coincidence as I would be 55 that same day. And after I explained this, and for no other reason than as she was working for a university based in Leicester, I asked her whether she was from Leicester, the place, not the university. To my astonishment she said that she was from Leicester.

“This is extraordinary.” I said. What are the chances of meeting somebody of the same age and with the same birth day, from the same city, thousands of miles away.

There was now silence in the room.

“I was born in St Francis Nursing Home. London Road. Brought up a Catholic.” She said. But by now, I could barely speak, I was shaking, hit fair and square by what she’d just said.

“I was born at St Francis’ too, same day, same year...”

We stared at each other for a long time, until our host broke the electric silence enough for us to disengage for a moment. “How amazing, Helen and Adrian, meeting up and realising this in our front room!”

We continued our staring; and our respective private thoughts. Sadly, inevitably, we did not keep in touch.



this may or may not be the original building, or even the site of St Francis Nursing Home, Leicester, such is memory