

PATRICK HOLLAND

The Source of the Sound

When my soul is bathed in light that is not bound by space; when it listens to sound that never dies away ...

—St Augustine, *Confessions*, Book 10.6

These memories seem to belong to someone else. I share a name and a place of growing up with the eighteen-year-old boy who inhabits them, also a sister who was fourteen then and has never grown older. A calendar on the library wall tells me fifteen years have passed. I turn from the window and the commercial street where neon-lit advertisements impress their inanities upon the night, and I recall the half-dozen of her spoken phrases that I still possess, and I remember her sleeping in a room where I stood awake; the touch of her hand in the dark. So much more I have lost to this world of gathering noise. I wonder what can be retrieved, though I will not retrieve or lose much more. A year ago I was diagnosed with a rare heart condition. I will not explain it, because it bores me. Suffice to say that any year, any day my losses may cease ...

We lived in the Brisbane Valley, that un-thought-of tract of land an hour west of the city. It was one of those anomalous places that sit outside the myth of our country, that I suspect our country is full of: there were more cold nights than warm; kangaroo and red deer stood side by side in the mist-shrouded woods; and the expansive, breathing emptiness of plain, highway and hills was the universe and not somewhere on the outskirts of it. Today the place grows steadily into an undistinguished outer suburb of both Brisbane and Ipswich, which sprawling cities care nothing for it and will shortly lose it forever. But back then we were isolated.

We were very poor and very happy and not aware of either. We did not know the world's meanest habits. And in the twilight of my childhood, I could hear words my sister had not yet spoken.

The words were neither auditory nor imaginary. I was as certain of the ability as I was of my ability to breathe. I remember one instance clearly. Irene slept in my room when our father left late at night for where she did not know and I would not tell her. I was staring out my bedroom window onto the plains. The words "*you must always look after me*" came like pencils of light from the immense emptiness. And then she spoke them. I patted down her dark hair and smiled and returned my eyes to the plain. Nothing seemed very extraordinary back then and with her.

As children we were very wild and very religious. The two states seemed perfectly harmonious. Religion was a thousands-of-years-old Eastern book, and icons of fierce-eyed long-bearded or serenely feminine, miracle-working saints. Our mother died giving birth to the daughter who took her name, and the only adult guidance we had came in the form of an ageing Ursuline nun, a tireless domestic worker and devout mystic. Once a week Sister Maria Nivard would come to our house to

STORY

make sure we were fed and clean. She would bake us a simple cake, or bring bread and canned fish and soap. Despite all her learning and the hardships of religious life she was as meek as a kitten and was careful to avoid our father, who mocked her "superstitions"—"A religion for worms that takes life from a corpse," he quoted in front of her. Then she sighed and her fading blue eyes seemed to be staring at something far away.

But when she had us alone she told us the kinds of stories our teachers and father could never tell: of missionary work in India, of the incorrupt bodies of St Cecilia and St Bernadette Soubirous, and the propositions of St Augustine, which she had a knack for making simple. In the language of children we contemplated time, light, darkness and the spaceless substance of angels.

Sister Nivard told me the universe was made after the principles of music. On my mother's neglected piano she held down middle C and played an E to show how the first note sounded sympathetically, to prove harmony was in nature and not only in the mind. And she revealed the mystery of melody: that we may transpose it into the various modes so all the notes are changed; quicken or slow the tempo; hear it through a man-made instrument as well as sung ... so in the end we have something that in physical substance has nothing in common with the original. Yet we recognise it. We recognise it anywhere ... "Even if a count lasts a second or a year."

I asked if the pattern would not be lost if a note was sustained for a year.

I believe I was thinking of my mother when I asked that.

"Not if we were pure and patient of mind. It would not be lost to God, who sees all time as we see a picture."

We turned from the piano. Irene was asleep on the bare floorboards in the sunlight that poured in the living room window.

Sister Nivard smiled. "Isn't she beautiful?"

I nodded.

"Do any of the local boys think so?"

"No," I said sharply, a little shocked at the question that had never occurred to me.

Sister Nivard explained inherited guilt and the inevitability of sin. My sins were so great I prayed kneeling by my bed, sometimes from nine until midnight, watching a candle that burnt my eyes until I saw sparks.

Like everyone, I have seen the euphoric television ministries; like everyone in the Arts faculty at the university where I spent my early twenties I was a nominal socialist. I begrudged the church for chaining a boy to his bedside for guilt, the guilt I would not lose now for all the world; the guilt I indulge this night I sit lonely at my window at another university, remembering a post-graduate classmate with whom I shared evenings such as this three years ago. One afternoon she and I walked along Ithaca Creek in the city's north-west. She pushed her dark hair from her eyes and told me one day soon she would like to get married.

I nodded.

"Irene," I whispered by accident when at dusk I found a feather-tailed glider's nest in a grey gum. I was a way behind her on the track. I watched to see if she heard. If she would turn.

I am separated from that girl tonight by only a few physical miles, a telephone call rather than the ocean of death, yet I do not go to her. Perhaps she is already married and would not welcome me. There are many kinds of distance. How strange I would feel arriving on her doorstep ...

STORY

In the year that she died the town's neglected boys and I would walk down to Lake Wivenhoe to keep a vigil we did not understand: lighting fires at the edge of the woods; watching sparks fly into the cold night air and the stars falling down at the edges of the plain; finally scattering the fires with our boots and walking in the dark in fields that were not ours: yet we claimed them, as the last and only ones awake when the dark seemed to enfeeble all men's claims.

One night I left the boys early. Something told me Irene was not sleeping, and wouldn't till I returned. Not many weeks later she would be killed by a man who could not bear her beauty, a man who packed groceries at a shopping centre fifty kilometres east on the highway. But this night she was still close enough to touch ...

I came into her room and whatever anxiety my truancy had caused vanished from her face. She did not care that I was late, only that finally I had come. She kissed the lamp-lit hands of the Black Madonna of Czestochowa and brushed her hair from her eyes: as though I were in any danger in that landscape I knew so well. Her hair was black and her face, always, ghostly pale. Some women of the town thought she looked sick. She was not sick, though in infancy she had both diphtheria and anaemia and might have died at any hour.

She asked me if we could go to the back steps and watch the stars. Tiptoeing and whispering along the creaking corridor meant the laws of the house were recognised; they were only being respectfully disobeyed. So even if our father was home and heard us, we knew he would not rise.

From those splintered steps we watched the night. We sat in silence punctuated by the wind that blew waves through the long grass and sang in the plainwire of a paddock fence. Irene turned her eyes to the firmament while I watched the inconstant terrestrial lights. I did not delight in naming the constellations as she did. Since birth my right eye has been amblyopic and cannot bring anything into focus, and at twelve my left eye began to fail. So I wondered what made the lower lights. I brought Irene into my game. We imagined a wandering torch searched for some unjustified runaway child; red brake-lights on a back road indicated a young man's tragic path to a card game or conspiratorial meeting of horse thieves; a far distant orange glow was lovers kissing by lantern light ... Finally I watched the plain for the simple wonder of narrow light upon an immense darkness. I imagined that the lights of farmhouses and distant highway lamps had no physical source, that they were manifest for no other reason than to separate the dark.

Was it directly then, after admitting my dream of the lights, that I heard her silent voice: "Follow me, I know the way home."

I laughed.

"I thought we were home?" I spoke aloud.

She furrowed her brow.

An ephemeral creek cut my father's land and disappeared into the wood to the north. Irene pointed to it and took my hand. We climbed through the barbwire fence at the back of the yard and walked to the water, to that part of the creek where cypress pine and river sheoak hugged the bank. We came out of the trees, to a gouge, six feet wide in the grass, where the water and the Milky Way ran a parallel course and the land took on a strange beauty, like a performance of music that exalts a phrase you have heard a hundred times but never truly till now. Irene looked across the plain. She laughed. Whatever place she had been leading me was not here, though perhaps this resembled it; perhaps this echoed it. She looked to the stars with questioning eyes, as though her words had come from there. I too looked up and felt there was a

STORY

pattern, like music or poetry, but a pattern too deep, too broad and patient to discover in a lifetime let alone a night. Irene looked now to the heavens, now across the earth. "This is wrong," she said. "Just slightly wrong. But God remembers how it should be." Then she sighed and smiled so her eyes were crescents. I looked into her eyes and, like her words that led me, like the starlight that reached us here, near and distant at once, I would leave my body behind if I might.

She took my hand again.

"Let's go back."

An hour ago a colleague called and told me not to come to her house if it became too late, if I was tired. I told her I would see her tomorrow; that we would walk in the woods again in the afternoon, or perhaps drive into the western hills to some tracks I walk alone and often. The tracks branch off the road through the cedar hills and the road goes to the place I grew up, but I do not ever drive so far. In July I walked the cooling forest with her; I watched her tie her dark hair, to see if she might tie it in a knot without a band; and I wondered if she might recognise some track or other, some tree: the old Watkins fig whose cavernous roots a dark-haired child had hidden and slept in all those years ago.

I suspect this woman is already tiring of my strange ways, the solitude and pensiveness that have been called poetic temperament by my few friends, but in that unlikely "later" I might yet live to see, will make me merely a strange old man. "Loneliness made him like that," people will say. And they will be right; and they will be wrong.

She wished me goodnight over a crystal-clear telephone line. I did not answer. She laughed and complained I was not listening to her. But I was listening, to the timbre of her voice, and to the fading light in the eucalypts and cedars falling through all the lost afternoons of childhood; and I was listening to the night when a policeman came to the stairs and told me the most terrible thing I will ever hear and I fell to my knees and prayed to God to bring her back to me, though it was against his law and will, and I would suffer anything rather than be without her. I was given hope by the strange events that followed her: her unlikely survival of infancy and the words she could place inside my mind, as though they existed without the world.

And now, fifteen years and a world away in a Brisbane university library, I was listening, as ever, for words my soul so longs to hear again: the words that led me one night to a place that was almost the place she meant, but that, finally, she had been unjustified in seeking.

I am a composer of theologies, an amateur cosmologist. I have sat many times at this window, creating logical scenarios to appease my longing for the supernatural. The fifteen years she has been gone from me must be no more than a moment to the One who commands all time; and if my friend leaves my sight for a moment in the evening I do not cease to believe in him ... But there are times that I cannot reclaim her face. I still possess the sound of her voice, but even that is leaving me. And I wonder if I have ceased to believe in her. Is my sitting by the window and the dark now, thoughts turned to the dark-haired pale-skinned girl who called me tonight, asleep in a suburban house only streets away, an act of faith or despair?

I felt the familiar pain in my chest, the pins and needles in my feet that meant I should walk. I stepped out into the courtyard. The crisp night air took my breath. Rob the gardener had stayed late. He stopped and stared.

STORY

"You alright, Grey?"

"Nothing I can't walk off."

I was alone at the edge of the courtyard. I do not know how long I stood and stared at the stars. I forgot about the pain, forgot about my breath. The constellations and coloured giants were as vivid as flames jumping at the ends of tapers. A dark-haired girl walked between the buildings. Only the starlight lit her face. I smiled.

"I didn't think you'd come."

She pressed my hand and turned me along the path.

IVY

Ivy, follow me around, whatever
Wind me girdle-tight—like veins to sever
When I hack through with words and palette knife
See you come back so curly—greening alive
Laugh, make it tall, have to be so clever

Fashion—my great-nana in lace and chive
had Myrtle, Gladys-Ivy, farm and hive
Saw we have no endings, never say never
Ivy; follow me around

Gladys had my mother, eight kids, boys five
Jocelyn-Ivy raised to be "good"—wive
Got stuck on my dad, children—however
I want to breathe, not be chastened ever
Climb me to the sun, boot me to the low jive
I run to be free, Gypsy Lee forever
I-vee, follow me around

Ashley Morgan-Shae

THE NOLANS AT ST KILDA PIER

after Giggle Palace, 1949, by Sidney Nolan

The world was light on laughs
time to smile again
remember the family photo
just the three of you
a formal pose and formal clothes
leger-de-main, leger-de-leg
in short pants
suitable in serge
dressed in her best
illusions, allusion
backs to the horizon
blue sea-saws, meets sky
crowds would soon blow in
try to get ahead
land on their feet
over there it wasn't giggles
and beer and skittles
to be king and queen
at the palace pier
on the bored walk
great for graffiti
for having a spray
can you paint an angry penguin
draw a line in the sand
of the lucky country

Sheryl Persson