The Boy Behind the Curtain

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF TIM WINTON

Tim Winton spent the first part of his childhood in Perth, Western Australia. When he was 12, his family moved south to the Western Australia city of Albany. Winton attended the Western Australian Institute of Technology, now called Curtin University, and studied creative writing. It was there that he wrote his first novel, *An Open Swimmer*, which marked the start of a successful literary career. Winton has gone on to publish several novels, four of which won the prestigious Miles Franklin Award. He has also written works of nonfiction, plays, and children's books. Though Winton is widely involved in campaigns to protect Australia's natural habitats and species, he rarely makes public appearances except to promote these causes or at the launch of a new book. He lives in Western Australia with his wife.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Winton's essays in *The Boy Behind the Curtain* draw explicit attention to the experiences that prompted Winton to write them. "The Battle for Ningaloo Reef" is a relatively straightforward narrative of Winton's experience campaigning for the isolated Ningaloo Reef off Australia's western coast, while "Using the C-word" deals with contemporary Australian perspectives on class disparity and inequality. Over the period of these essays' development, stories of assault and violence toward captive refugees on Manus Island and Nauru came to international media outlets' attention, prompting "Stones for Bread," which Winton originally delivered as a speech for the Palm Sunday Walk for Justice in 2015. The essays are inextricably linked with Australia's political climate and often provide opportunities for Winton to dissent or encourage his fellow Australians to work toward change.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Many of the essays in this collection detail events in Winton's life that have made their way into his fiction. Winton's 1995 novel *The Riders* is an example of this—it follows a family that relocates from Australia to a cottage in Ireland, a move that echoes Winton's family's stay at Leap Castle in Ireland, which Winton explores in the essay "Letter from a Strong Place." In "The Demon Shark," Winton focuses on Peter Matthiessen's nonfiction work *Blue Meridian*, which forms the basis for much of his fascination with sharks and the mysteries of oceanic life. A similar essay collection that deals with class, place, and the Australian life is Eda Gunaydin's *Root & Branch*, which chronicles Gunaydin's working-class upbringing in an outer suburb of a large city—mirroring Winton's childhood—and her surprisingly sudden transition to the middle class that came along with her PhD studies at university.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Boy Behind the Curtain: Notes from an Australian Life
- **When Written:** 2007–2016
- **Where Written:** Western Australia
- **When Published:** 2016
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Autobiography, Essay Collection
- **Setting:** Western Australia
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

The Winton Fish. In 2016, a pair of Melbourne University researchers discovered 20 new species of fish in the Kimberley region of Western Australia and decided to name one after Tim Winton. Winton commented that it was a "great honor" that the scientists chose him, and not a scientist, to be the namesake of one of the species.

Repeat Winner. Winton is one of only two authors to have won the Miles Franklin Award four times. The other four-time winner is Thea Astley.

PLOT SUMMARY

The Boy Behind the Curtain is a collection of essays that presents a collage of author Tim Winton's life. It presents a particular focus on Winton's childhood, his connection to the Australian landscape, and his social and political views.

The opening essay, "The Boy Behind the Curtain," describes Winton's childhood habit of aiming an unloaded **rifle** at strangers passing beneath the front window of his house. The habit isn't one young Winton rationalizes; he keeps it secret from the rest of his family, and he eventually stops using the gun altogether. As Winton reflects on this time in his life, he realizes that he was drawn to the gun for its promise of power at a time when he felt particularly helpless. Subsequently, as an adult, he refuses to have a gun in his house.

In "A Space Odyssey at Eight," Winton recalls his trip to the cinema as an eight-year-old with his friends to watch Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*. The film horrified and alienated

Winton's friends. As an adult, Winton recognizes the experience as a time when he began to understand the power of creativity. Watching the film again as an adult, he understands the statement it makes about the ability of human creation to far outlast the creators themselves.

The following essay, "Havoc: A Life in Accidents," opens with young Winton witnessing a motorbike crash and the subsequent chaos that unfolds when his father attempts to help the rider. The fear this experience inspires in Winton is a holdover from when, a few years earlier, his father was himself critically injured in a motorbike accident; the incident altered the course of Winton's life changed dramatically. Present-day Winton connects these incidents by suggesting that danger has punctuated his life. No matter what, danger will find him. And as a writer, he realizes that danger fuels his stories, just as it fueled his father's career as a police officer.

"A Walk at Low Tide" is a brief sketch of Winton's regular walk along the shoreline at low tide. On this particular morning, he pays special attention to the creatures littering the beach, acknowledging their stories and the complex part they play in their ecological system.

"Repatriation" follows Tim Winton on a visit to Mt Gibson Sanctuary, a destocked sheep station that a philanthropist has transformed into a nature reserve. As he drives through the landscape alone, Winton reflects on his first visit there a few years before, when scientists explained to him their hope that the boodie, an endangered marsupial, would one day return to its natural habitat there. He ventures across a gathering of stones that marks out an ancient gathering place for different Aboriginal peoples. He suggests that both the people and the natural flora and fauna that were once at home in this place are showing signs of strengthening and returning.

In "Betsy," Winton recalls the 1954 Hillman Minx his grandfather drove which ended up being his father's car, too. Betsy, as his grandfather named her, is humiliatingly ugly and outdated, and an unfortunate turn of events leads to Winton's father quietly decommissioning her.

"Twice on Sundays" details Winton's experience growing up in a family who attends church several times each week. Sundays are exhausting for young Winton with their demands of multiple church services and community evangelizing. Throughout his adolescence, he begins to question the church's insular attitudes toward politics and social change, and the community grows frustrated with his constant challenges. Winton remains a Christian throughout his adulthood, and though he's wary of the tribalism that churches foster, he's still drawn to the practice of collective ritual in repetitive prayers and rousing hymns.

"High Tide" is another brief sketch illuminating Winton's connection to the **ocean**. On a particularly hot day, he and a companion swim out toward a reef that's swarming with sea life and observe the flurry of aquatic traffic.

In "The Wait and the Flow," teenage Winton distances himself from the surfing community as it becomes more aggressive and sexist throughout the 1980s. Eventually, he finds a group of likeminded, mellow surfers and embraces the habit again, enjoying the meditative pattern of waiting for a wave and allowing it to carry him to shore. The pattern is similar to that of his writing process—in writing, it's not fresh waves but new ideas that carry him to shore.

"In the Shadow of the Hospital" dissects Winton's complex thoughts and emotions surrounding the idea of **hospitals**. Winton and his father's hospitalizations were times of pain and uncertainty, so living almost next door to a large hospital brings chaos into Winton's life. But when his wife is working as a nurse on an oncology ward while heavily pregnant with their first child, the hospital's contrasting purposes—to protect life and to facilitate death—strangely combine. Tim's subsequent experiences of meeting his first grandchild in a hospital and seeing his father with a new pacemaker encourage him to consider the hospital as a place of not only fear but hope and progress.

"The Battle for Ningaloo Reef" follows Winton as he becomes an unlikely campaigner for a vulnerable coral reef off Australia's western coast. The experience teaches him to value connections between people of diverse political and ideological backgrounds, as he sees that even the unlikeliest members of society may want to make a difference.

In "Letter from a Strong Place," Winton spends half a year at the Gate Lodge of Leap Castle in Ireland where he's undertaking a writing residency that the owner of the castle gifted to him. The surroundings are so laden with history that they begin to suffocate Winton, who's used to Australia's sparse landscape.

"Chasing Giants" follows Winton and his wife paddling out to find a pod of humpback whales. Winton often chases the whales for ages without catching them—but this time, they encircle him, and he wonders at their shared intelligence.

Winton's explores his obsession with sharks in "The Demon Shark," first by exploring Peter Matthiessen's book *Blue Meridian*, which documents the filming of a great white shark, then by analyzing the Australian tendency to villainize sharks and people's resulting indifference when sharks are mistreated and endangered.

In "Using the C-word," Winton wrestles with the modern urge to avoid using the word "class" when discussing inequality. This is a stark contrast to his working-class childhood, during which everyone seemed aware of their class and relative social mobility. He comes to terms with his own status as a middle-class novelist while knowing many of his family members are not able to read his books for lack of education, and suggests that an unwillingness to reckon with class boundaries will only perpetuate inequality.

"Lighting Out" follows Winton as he drives east across the border with South Australia after a frustrating summer of writing. He grieves the many pages of work he had to cut in order to salvage his novel.

In "Stones for Bread," Winton rallies his fellow Australians by reminding them that many of them, or their ancestors, came to Australia as refugees, and asking them why they feel exempt from welcoming people to their country who seek refuge.

"Remembering Elizabeth Jolley" is a portrait of Winton's writing teacher, the celebrated Australian novelist Elizabeth Jolley. Winton reflects on the shrewd advice she gave him about the writing industry.

Winton returns to the subject of the ocean in "Sea Change." When he takes his now elderly father out fishing, he realizes that the restrictions on fishing are a sign that Australia is beginning to take seriously the need to protect their aquatic habitats. Winton hopes that the beauty of the ocean will be preserved for his grandchildren to enjoy.

In the collection's final essay, "Barefoot in the Temple of Art," Winton remembers the first time he experienced the National Gallery of Victoria as a barefoot, uncomfortable child. The experience was one of the first times he realized the power of creativity and his desire to live creatively. Now, as an adult, he notes the parts of the gallery that have become outdated and admires the changes that make the museum a more welcoming and progressive place.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Tim Winton – Tim Winton is the protagonist, author, and narrator of *The Boy Behind the Curtain*. One of Australia's most celebrated novelists, Winton appears as a child, a young adult, and a grandparent at different points throughout the essays in the collection, and he reflects on the events that formed his understanding of society and politics in Western Australia. Over the course of the collection, Winton examines his father's recovery from a near-fatal motorbike accident, his own involvement in a perilous car crash, and the birth of his children—constant clashes with peril that teach him that life is dependably uncertain. Winton also describes how, though reluctant to enter the public sphere, he finds himself campaigning for natural wildlife and urging his government and fellow Australians to wrestle with their discomfort and biases, particularly as these biases relate to welcoming refugees and thinking about class divisions. As Winton critiques the landscapes and circumstances in which he finds himself, which span from a castle in Ireland to an art gallery in Melbourne, he searches for a way to feel at home in the rugged, sometimes hostile landscape of coastal Australia.

Tim Winton's Father – Winton's father is a policeman who, when Winton is five years old, comes home after a near-fatal motorbike accident looking almost unrecognizable. Because Winton took his father's strength and reliability for granted, he struggles to come to terms with his father's accident, which disrupts his feelings of security. Winton's father thus becomes a symbol of the fragility of life. Winton's father is a confident man even outside of his comfort zone, which he demonstrates when he encourages an attendant to allow his family into the National Gallery despite the fact that they're not wearing shoes. In conversation, he often recalls elements of the past that show Winton just how much Australia has changed since his own childhood.

Tim Winton's Mother – Winton's mother is the full-time caregiver to Winton and his three siblings. When Winton's father comes home from the **hospital** with barely any physical ability following his traffic accident, the weight of her role becomes even heavier, and young Winton finds himself helping her and sharing her otherwise secret worries. Winton's mother is outwardly cheerful, even during stressful times.

Tim Winton's Wife – Winton's wife is a nurse and the mother of their three children. She works as an oncology nurse at the **hospital** until the day she gives birth to their eldest son. Winton considers it strange that his wife is caring for dying patients despite being so ready to bring new life into the world. Winton's wife represents an ironic, ever-present connection between his family and the hospital, a place that represents fear and uncertainty for him.

Tim Winton's Eldest Son – Winton's eldest son appears as both a child and an adult in *The Boy Behind the Curtain*. He's the only one of Winton's children present when the family spends half a year on the grounds of Leap Castle in Ireland, and his need for entertainment leads Winton to explore more of the ancient castle. Winton's eldest son's appearance as an adult and new parent, showing Winton his first grandchild, helps Winton to reconsider the idea of the **hospital** as not only a place of fear but one of joy.

Tim Winton's Grandfather – Winton's grandfather is a person about whom Winton hears dozens of colorful stories involving theater and other eccentricities, but by the time Winton is a child, his grandfather drives Betsy, the most embarrassing car Winton can imagine. Though his grandfather is inextricably tied to that embarrassment, he is also a voice of reason in Winton's life, encouraging him to get an education and to use his own mind to its fullest potential.

Tim Winton's Estranged Friend – Winton's estranged friend appears in the essay "In the Shadow of the Hospital." He calls Winton to ask him to visit him at Fremantle **Hospital**, having seen the roof of Winton's house from his hospital window. This friend jolts Winton into considering the many people who look down from the hospital yearning for human connection, when previously he reduced the idea of the hospital to a monolith of

fear and chaos.

Motorbike Rider – The motorbike rider appears in the essay "Havoc: A Life in Accidents" when he crashes on the road just ahead of the car young Winton rides in with his father. His crash, and his following violent struggle to escape Winton's father's care, jolt Winton into recalling the fear he felt when his own father was almost killed in a motorbike accident. He stands as a symbol for the fragility of Tim's safety—a reminder that danger can upend his life at any moment.

The Stranger – The stranger appears in the essay "Havoc: A Life in Accidents" as a visitor at the Wintons' house when Tim Winton's father is recovering from his motorbike accident. He carries and bathes Winton's father, and Winton's experience witnessing a strange man caring for his vulnerable father reveals to him the surprising kindness of strangers.

Elizabeth Jolley – Elizabeth Jolley is one of the most prominent writers in 20th-century Australia and Winton's writing teacher in college. Though Winton doesn't immediately warm to Jolley and finds her sense of fashion and obsession with German art music alienating, she ends up being a touchstone in his creative journey, especially through her shrewd advice about the fickle publishing industry.

Dr Geoff Gallop – Dr Geoff Gallop is the Premier of Western Australia in the early 2000s, the years on which "The Battle for Ningaloo Reef" focuses. His wholehearted efforts to listen to the public and halt plans for a resort that would devastate Ningaloo Reef surprise Winton, who is wary of politicians' habits of adding caveats to their promises.

Peter Bartlett – Peter Bartlett is the owner of Leap Castle and one day phones Winton out of the blue to offer the castle's Gate Lodge to him for a half-year writing residency. His generosity and sociability are highlighted by the party he throws upon his return to the castle and his desire to fill it with antiques, books, and other items that bring him joy and comfort.

Peter Matthiessen – Peter Matthiessen is the author of *Blue Meridian*, the book that chronicles the making of the documentary *Blue Water, White Death* which Winton searches for but never finds a copy of. Matthiessen researches for the book by going on the diving expedition led by Peter Gimbel, and his descriptions of the tensions between the divers demonstrate his close attention to human nature.

Peter Gimbel – Peter Gimbel is the American filmmaker and diver who directs the documentary *Blue Water, White Death*, the making of which Peter Matthiessen chronicles in his book *Blue Meridian*. His ambition and reckless courage cause tensions between members of the crew, and he prioritizes novel filmmaking, going out of his way to get the best shots of sharks while putting other divers in danger.

Ron Taylor – Ron Taylor is Valerie Taylor's husband and one of the two Australian divers who accompany Peter Gimbel on his documentary expedition to film a great white shark underwater. Matthiessen describes Ron as being sharklike in both mannerisms and appearance, and Ron sporadically demonstrates seemingly unnecessary violence toward sharks, perhaps because he has friends who have died in attacks.

Valerie Taylor – Valerie Taylor is Ron Taylor's wife and one of the two Australian divers who accompany Peter Gimbel on his documentary expedition. She and Ron are something of a celebrity couple in Australia, and Valerie brings the glamour to their pairing. She and Ron balk at Gimbel's flagrant ambition, and their reserved nature seems both obvious and distinctively Australian when compared to Gimbel's brash, American extraversion.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Tim Winton's Paternal Grandmother – Winton's paternal grandmother is a woman whose oddities make her stand out. She lives in a tent outside the house rather than inside with Winton's grandfather, and greets him by waving her leg. Her habits add to the eccentric reputation Winton's grandfather cultivates.

Tim Winton's Maternal Grandmother – Winton's maternal grandmother appears briefly during the essay "Twice on Sundays," in which Winton describes his family's Sunday visits to her house. She berates young Winton for his family's religious zeal, which demonstrates that his parents' conversion to Christianity was a bold diversion from their own upbringings.

Martin Copley – Martin Copley is the man who established Mt Gibson Sanctuary, the wildlife reserve Winton visits in the essay "Repatriation." His genuine care for Australian wildlife and his respect for the scientists working at the sanctuary surprise Winton, who is usually skeptical of philanthropists' true intentions.

Betsy – Betsy is the 1954 Hillman Minx car that Winton's grandfather drives later in his life. Her outdated style and dull coloring embarrass young Winton who, even when looking back nostalgically, cannot find many positive things to say about her.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

DANGER, VIOLENCE, AND DEATH

Tim Winton's life is studded with violent accidents and, especially as a child and teenager, he finds himself drawn to dangerous objects and circumstances. From the unloaded **gun** he aims at strangers passing by his house to his habit of testing his lung capacity in cramped underwater caves, he toys with the concept of his life and others', not quite realizing what's at stake. But when shocking events put at risk the things and people Winton takes for granted, as when his father is almost killed in a motorbike accident, or when Winton himself wakes up in **hospital** after being injured in a car accident, Winton learns that danger and violence are untamable forces: any control he thought he had over them was just a façade. But he also realizes that even though a person can't control when danger and violence will strike, they can control how they think about and respond to danger and violence. For instance, the kindness a stranger shows Winton's father in the aftermath of his accident, and the complete vulnerability Winton feels when he's in severe pain in the hospital following his own accident, prove to him that responding to adversity with love, care, and thoughtfulness can help a person exercise some control over danger. Tim still swims with sharks and whales and treks across the wilderness—he never attempts to completely avoid danger. Instead, Tim's brushes with danger and death help him to appreciate the fragile bonds that connect him to loved ones and the beauty of the natural world he treasures so deeply.

CREATIVITY

After injuring his back in a car accident as a teenager, Tim Winton's plan to supplement his creative endeavors with practical work was no longer viable, and he had no choice but to support himself through his writing. While Winton turns to writing to analyze his fears, to strengthen and understand his sense of place, and to honor his childhood and the ones he loves, it's also an act that's fraught with questions of identity and class—and at times can be an almost destructively challenging activity. After a harrowing summer spent struggling with an unruly manuscript, Winton is so exhausted from writing his novel that the only cure for his restlessness is to get in his car and drive for days to reach the border. It's clear that while writing is Winton's occupation, it's also an extremely vulnerable and intense activity that he can't easily wrangle into a typical, dispassionate day job. He also faces insecurity as a writer whose craft enabled him to achieve a comfortable, middle-class lifestyle: though Winton's successful writing career has allowed him to strengthen his own narrative as someone who comes from a working-class childhood, his success also distances him from that very narrative. And as an educated, well-read man, he feels alienated from some of his family members who left school without literacy. It becomes increasingly clear that the writing life is less a choice for Winton than it is an inevitable necessity; it's something that draws him in despite its stresses and difficulties because he feels bound to tell stories, no matter how much pain is involved in the process. The Boy Behind the Curtain thus presents a complex and unromanticized picture of creativity; while the act of writing often serves as a lifeline for Winton, it can just as often be challenging and destructive.

NATURE

In the autobiographical stories that make up *The Boy Behind the Curtain*, author Tim Winton establishes himself as an emphatic protector and lover of nature. His stewardship of Australian wildlife is lifelong and includes childhoods spent in the **ocean** and on the shore, campaigning to preserve Ningaloo Reef, an isolated reef near Australia's western coast, and tracking the progress of Mt Gibson Sanctuary, a nature reserve that was once a sheep station in Western Australia. Yet Winton often feels like an unlikely campaigner, rougher and less elite than those around him. He also participates in contradictory habits that further complicate his relationship to nature. For instance, he loves to fish, but he also campaigns for an imperiled reef. And though he understands the need to protect and preserve nature, he at one point drives his huge vehicle through a protected piece of the Australian wilderness. These contradictory habits suggest that humans don't have to sever their relationship with nature in order to protect it—rather, he thinks it's possible to simultaneously protect and continue to enjoy the natural world. Winton thus suggests that if humans want to enjoy and benefit from the delicate ecosystems of the planet, they must also respect them. As long as humans honor this relationship with nature, both can continue to benefit.

CHILDHOOD AND HOME

Though Tim Winton's parents weren't wealthy, and though he experienced periods of distress throughout his childhood, he nevertheless sees those early years as a time of paradise furnished by the wide-open space of the **ocean**, the endless potential of the shoreline, and the seemingly infinite bounty of the sea. His love for the rugged openness of Western Australia becomes even clearer when he spends a few months on the grounds of Leap Castle in Ireland and feels suffocated by the weight of history and the damp, dark, closed-in landscape; when, one morning, he wakes with the sun on his face and thinks of home. For Winton, the idea of home seems to be endlessly bright and possible. When he faces doubts about the future of his country and its natural environment, he almost always stumbles back to a place of hope that stems from his gratitude for his childhood, the connection he has to his home, and his hope that his children and grandchildren will have similarly fond memories of childhood. In other words, he wishes not to preserve his happy,

free childhood as a relic, but for it live on in the experiences of his children and grandchildren. Winton's attitude suggests that nostalgia for the beautiful parts of childhood, home, and the past contributes to a desire to protect those precious things for generations to come.

ISOLATION VS. COMMUNITY

Throughout his life, Tim Winton has many experiences with different kinds of communities. From the church community of his childhood to his university peers and mentors to his fellow campaigners in the bid to protect Ningaloo Reef, Winton seems to feel affection and respect for the groups of people who surround him while also feeling uncomfortable in their midst. This discomfort and resistance to tribalism seems to come from his journey within the church as an adolescent, which became fraught when he began to challenge the older church members' increasingly insular attitudes and beliefs. Winton's frustration with this close-minded thinking leads him to value his independence, and he discovers he can be a person of faith without conforming to the group mentality that seemed counterproductive to him. His desire for independence appears to go hand-in-hand with his love for isolated, wide-open spaces: it's in the lonely, vulnerable landscapes of the Western Australian wilderness, or far out in the **ocean** trying to catch a wave, that he feels most meditative and at peace. While Winton finds strength and solidarity in community, those qualities are only useful to him as long as he isn't dependent on them. Thus, while *The Boy Behind the Curtain* portrays community as a positive, rewarding experience, it suggests that a person can only reap these benefits it they maintain a strong sense of self.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE OCEAN

Throughout Winton's life, the ocean symbolizes both boundless freedom and unidentifiable danger. As a child, Winton feels that the ocean is his backyard—he's less afraid of it than of the prospect of losing it. And even as an adult, the ocean's offerings of life and action unleash his imagination to roam free. In "High Tide," he observes the bustling traffic on a reef and compares it to a scene by Kubrick, whose *2001: A Space Odyssey* similarly opened up the world of creativity and story for him. Winton's deep connection with the ocean leads Winton into activism as an adult. For instance, he participates in the battle to protect Ningaloo Reef from prospective developers. Winton is compelled to save this vast expanse—and its corresponding freedom—for his grandchildren to enjoy just as he did before them.

But the ocean also symbolizes dread and danger. As a boy, a trailer at the cinema instills in Winton a peripheral fear of sharks—a fear that seems to hold sway over much of Australia. Consequently, the ocean symbolizes the potential danger at the edges of Winton's everyday life. His inability to resist getting close to whales and sharks, along with his obsession with the documentary *Blue Water, White Death*, demonstrates that danger, like the ocean, is a constant presence in his life.

GUNS

In *The Boy Behind the Curtain*'s title essay, the unloaded rifle that young Winton points at unsuspecting passersby symbolizes the general violence that often replaces dialogue in difficult situations. Reflecting on his boyhood habit of standing in the front room of his house pointing an unloaded rifle at strangers, Winton realizes that he turned to the gun when he felt he lacked the language to express himself. He recognizes that people around him with fewer resources and less support do the same, but in their case, it's a loaded gun, and the consequences are terrible, even fatal. Winton considers the gun as having the same power as a religious icon and as being almost as universally revered as the dollar sign. Acknowledging that the gun is an easily accessible source of danger and wary of the temptation of power it presents, Winton refuses to keep a gun in his home as an adult. When he fires a rifle around his children for the first time—harmlessly, for fun—their shock and fear remind him that the gun represents the kind of violence he wants to protect them from.

THE HOSPITAL

The hospital symbolizes the fear that often accompanies life's most transformative and uncontrollable moments. The hospital first becomes an emotional place for Winton when Winton's father spends considerable time there recovering from a devastating motorbike crash. When Winton's father returns home from the hospital, five-year-old Winton sees how his father's stay at the hospital transformed him into a vulnerable, broken man. The experience teaches Winton to see the hospital as a place from which people emerge changed—often for the worse. Whenever Winton's father returns to the hospital for subsequent procedures, Winton is overcome with dread, not knowing what state his father will be in when he comes home again. When Winton himself is taken to hospital after a car crash as a teenager, feelings of pain and fear dominate his time there. In each of these experiences, the hospital embodies a point in Winton's life in which the future is uncertain and difficult to see.

Over the course of Winton's adult life, however, the hospital

becomes a more complex symbol for such transitional phases. Though living practically next door to the frenetic chaos of Fremantle Hospital overwhelms him, his proximity to it allows him to reconnect with an estranged friend who is at the end of his life. Winton meets his first grandchild in a hospital, and he later feels gratitude for his father's new pacemaker, which was installed in a hospital. These experiences allow Winton to appreciate the hospital as a symbol of transformation not only related to fear, but also to hope, new life, and human connection.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Pan Macmillan edition of *The Boy Behind the Curtain* published in 2018.

The Boy Behind the Curtain Quotes

Without words I was dangerously powerless. The gun served as a default dialect, a jerry-built lingo that may have been less sophisticated than a laundry list, but it came with ready-made scripts that had been swilling about in the back of my mind since infancy. These were storylines as familiar as the object itself. But the lexicon of the gun is narrow and inhuman. Despite its allure it was insufficient to my needs.

Related Characters: Tim Winton (speaker), Tim Winton's Father

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 8-9

Explanation and Analysis

After Winton's family relocates to a new house in a new suburb when he's 13 years old, he has a hard time expressing himself with language, and he nurtures a habit of pointing his father's rifle at passers-by through the front window of the new house. In this passage, Winton suggests that it's not only the gun that was dangerous, but also Winton's inability to express himself any other way. Turning to the gun meant he sacrificed the nuance and sophistication of language, replacing it with an object and a single action that could have devastating consequences.

This passage suggests a dichotomy. On the one hand, there's language, with its infinite variations and its capacity for complex expression and explanation; on the other, there's the gun, a monolith of violence and power whose only connection to language is through the stories it appears in on television and in film. On the one hand, a boy could express himself by using words, claiming his voice, and making human connections; on the other, he could turn to the cliched scripts that wouldn't truly say what he wanted to express. While the gun seemed to offer young Winton power, it in fact took away much of his agency—and he eventually realizes this as he becomes able to express himself once again with language. Winton thus suggests in this passage that his creativity and eventual ability to express himself through his writing saved him from a dangerous habit and reconnect him with other human beings.

A Space Odyssey at Eight Quotes

It sent me through a Star Gate of my own into an expanded reality. It wasn't just my introduction to the possibilities of cinema, it was a wormhole into the life of the imagination, where artefacts outlive the tools with which they are wrought as well as the makers who once wielded them. In that parallel universe useless beauty requires neither excuse nor explanation and wonder is its own reward.

Related Characters: Tim Winton (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 28

Explanation and Analysis

When Winton first sees the Kubrick film *2001: A Space Odyssey* as a young boy, he's perplexed, overwhelmed, and intrigued by the film's unsettling silences and its lack of obvious narrative. But the film also introduces Winton to the possibilities of the imagination. In shirking the conventional rules of plot and dialogue, the film teaches young Winton that there are endless possibilities for creativity.

In the world of the imagination, Winton discovers, he is not bound by physical capacity or even his own lifespan. He can create something that will surpass his own existence. It's possible that Winton's early experiences with danger are what make this such a compelling idea to him. Having seen how his physical world can crumble in an instant after his father was almost killed in a motorcycle accident, for instance, Winton finds the idea of controlling or transcending his physical environs an attractive possibility.

Havoc: A Life in Accidents Quotes

Sometime during that long convalescence I came upon the helmet Dad had been wearing when he was hit. Made of laminated cork, it was cumbersome, and it felt unstable in my hands. The crazed pattern of cracks dulling its whiteness gave it an unnerving broken-eggshell texture. For a long time—for years, I think—I continued to seek it out, to turn it over in my hands, to sniff the Brylcreem interior, and try to imagine the sudden moment, the awful impact, and the faceless stranger behind all this damage.

Related Characters: Tim Winton (speaker), Tim Winton's Father

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 40

Explanation and Analysis

After Winton's father is catastrophically injured in a motorbike accident when Winton is five years old, Winton comes to see his father's helmet as a symbol of the thin barrier between the safe, stable life Winton was used to and the chaos of the outside world. The helmet is hefty and clumsy, signifying that the idea of safety and protection we have as children is similarly ill-conceived. Meanwhile, Winton's description of the cracked helmet as looking like a cracked egg demonstrates the fragility of that protection: it's delicate and breakable, not as solid as young Winton might have assumed.

Furthermore, young Winton's habit of finding and holding the helmet is faintly echoed in his later habit of finding and wielding his father's gun. The parallels between these two moments in Winton's life suggest that he'll continue to be drawn to objects that signify danger and disrupt the boundary between safety and chaos. That disruption will both attract Winton and repulse him as he comes to terms with the fragility of his life and the lives around him.

The whole thing was a garish sideshow, absurd and sinister. In that ugly flashback I heard myself laughing like a deranged clown. I was a university student but I couldn't even tell the ambos who the prime minister was. And in the ambulance I could not move a limb. Some bloke with hairy arms was holding me down. It wasn't a rescue—it was a kidnapping.

Related Characters: Tim Winton (speaker), Tim Winton's Father

Related Themes:

Page Number: 45

Explanation and Analysis

When Winton is a teenager, he's heavily concussed and injured in a car accident, and though he doesn't immediately remember the circumstances or direct effects of the crash, the memories float back to him over the following years. One of the most unsettling memories of the scene involves Winton's rescue from the scene of the accident by the paramedics (or "ambos"). Far from being a moment in which Winton appreciated being cared for and helped, he remembers his deranged laughter, confusion, and inability to move. The paramedic remains in his memory as "some bloke with hairy arms"—a dismissive, detached description which highlights Winton's discomfort in the situation.

Though this was a moment in which Winton was saved, helped, and taken to a place of recovery, he remembers it as a "kidnapping," suggesting that he viewed his lack of agency in the situation and his experience of being moved and placed by other people as a type of imprisonment. This attitude suggests that, until this moment, Winton was used to fending for himself, and his physical strength and bodily ability to define him. When the accident takes away these qualities, , the situation becomes a horror scene: unable to look after himself, Winton at the whim of people around him. Winton's unease also suggests he holds limited trust in the people and structures which exist to help and protect people.

A Walk at Low Tide Quotes

If you can ever know something you'll understand it by what it has given, what it owes, what it needs. It has never existed in isolation. And ghosting forever behind its mere appearance is its holy purpose, its billion meetings with the life urge in which it has swum or tumbled or blossomed, however long or however briefly.

Related Characters: Tim Winton (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 57

Explanation and Analysis

When Winton walks along the beach at low tide, he often has to remind himself to pay attention to the creatures scattered there—to view them not only as objects, but as subjects with stories that make up a complex web of the natural world.

While Winton is describing tiny shore-dwelling creatures, his comments extend to his attitudes about the widely varying habitats in Western Australia as well as the confusing relationships between human beings in the various communities in which he has lived. He echoes this careful observation in his descriptions of Mt Gibson Sanctuary and in his analysis of his church congregation, both ecologies in which Winton seems to have found a "holy purpose" or higher calling. This passage demonstrates that, though Winton's discomfort with his close-minded church community led him to become estranged from it, his awareness of the spirit and his practice of faith are very much alive in his care for the natural world around him.

The passage also implies that, though Winton often describes himself as someone who's uncomfortable with being at the center of social groups, preferring to hover at the edge, he's constantly aware of the relationships creatures and people have between each other, and the fact that one living thing cannot exist without a vast network of support.

Repatriation Quotes

❝ It takes a while for it to sink in, but the closer you get to the desert, the more life there is in the land; once you're fully beyond the reach of modern cultivation there are trees again, and from their shadows come enough birds, reptiles and mammals to let you feel you are finally back in Australia. Each time I traverse the dead zone of the wheatbelt and reach this territory, my mood lifts—and then I think, What kind of man cheers up at the sight of roadkill?

Related Characters: Tim Winton (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 63

Explanation and Analysis

As Winton drives through the northern wheatbelt and into the desert, he observes that desert life is much more abundant than the land farmers attempted, and failed, to cultivate for production. Though it seems counterintuitive, there's actually a richer ecology in the desert landscape than in the land that humans have attempted to tame in order to profit from it. This contrast implies that nature, even at its most brutal, will find ways to survive and thrive where human innovation cannot, and that growth for growth's sake might only end in destruction.

Winton's observations of the shadows that shelter animals in the desert signifies that, where the natural world is allowed to grow in its own way, it can provide the necessary habitats for a rich food chain of creatures. An environment blasted by direct sun, as in the Western Australian desert, still provides shade, especially because it hasn't been tamed into a monoculture by farmers and the government. It's a complex and delicate ecology that wheat farming entirely contradicts.

❝ Still hunkered by the old warren, Underwood confessed to a conviction that somehow, one day, the boodie would return to Mt Gibson. His tone was wistful but also defiant, as if over time he'd inured himself to ridicule on this point. I thought again of the potent space that an absence becomes. The lost boodie is just a part of a wider absence, a pattern of extinction that haunts this continent.

Related Characters: Tim Winton (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 71-72

Explanation and Analysis

Winton recalls a previous visit to Mt Gibson when a group of scientists showed him the abandoned habitats of several different native species. By describing Underwood's desire as a "confession," Winton suggests that this is the scientist's precious and private wish, and he's showing vulnerability by sharing it. It's a surprising description of a scientist, given that scientists aren't often depicted as particularly sentimental. Winton's unusual description of scientists also implies that the project at Mt Gibson is close to the hearts of the people working there. Seeing these species return to their homes would bring them visceral joy and relief.

Furthermore, Winton connects the idea of the Australian wilderness to a kind of spirituality by saying that the absence of these native creatures is really a "haunting." This isn't a scientific or data-based scenario for him—it's a scenario that bothers him on a deeper level, and the passage once again suggests that Winton, despite having left the church, still feels deeply connected to a kind of faith.

Twice on Sundays Quotes

❝ Churchgoing was my introduction to conscious living. Nowhere else was I exposed to the kind of self-examination and reflective discipline that the faith of my childhood required. I'd be surprised if anyone at my boyhood church had read even a page of Tolstoy, but it seems to me now that the question that ate at him so late in his life was the central issue for us, too. *What then must we do?*

Related Characters: Tim Winton (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 100

Explanation and Analysis

As a child, Winton goes to church with his family several times a week and becomes deeply embedded in the practices of ritual and interrogative thinking that happen there. On reflection, Winton finds that the church pushed him to examine himself fully, and he suggests that without a churchgoing habit, he wouldn't have begun to do this until much later in life. Winton demonstrates this reflective discipline in the essays "A Walk at Low Tide" and "The Wait and the Flow," in which he connects the habits of paying careful attention and taking time to reflect to his creative practice.

Despite Winton feeling like he grew up at the outskirts of society due to his family's abnormally devout behavior, he notes here that the attitudes church instilled in him actually resonate deeply in the most famous stories in western society. Thus, rather than alienating him from the common ways of thinking, Winton's fate actually profoundly connected him to them. The fact that the churchgoers around him, who wouldn't have read any dense literature, came to the same core question as Tolstoy himself suggests that the apparent differences between a faithful mindset and an intellectual one are less real than one might assume.

❝ Language, I was to discover, is nutrition, manna without which we're bereft and forsaken, consigned like Moses and his restive entourage to wander in a sterile wilderness. As a novelist I seem to have spent every working day of my adult life in a vain search for the right word, the perfect metaphor for the story or sentence at hand, while so often writing about characters for whom words are both elusive and treacherous. I didn't catch the bug at school, I picked it up at church.

Related Characters: Tim Winton (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 108

Explanation and Analysis

Frequent churchgoing offers Winton the opportunity to be immersed in strange and spiritually rich stories. In this passage, Winton uses two separate metaphors to describe his relationship to language. The first compares language to the bread-like manna that falls from the sky in the biblical story of Moses—a miracle in the desert when there's no other food around. This metaphor suggests that Winton considers language a miracle, something that arrived for him when he had little else to give his life meaning. This echoes his reflection on the time in his teenage years when he felt he had no other means of self-expression but to secretly point a gun from the front window of his home—language returned to him and saved him from the danger that was so tempting.

The second metaphor here compares language, and particularly Winton's love for it, to a bug or a virus, an illness he contracted at church. The metaphor suggests that language is something to be shared between people—a contagious joy. It also suggests that a love for language can spread quickly amongst people who are constantly sharing stories and songs, just as they did at Winton's church.

High Tide Quotes

❝ Ashore there's a wary osprey astride a bleached stump and beneath him the charred remains of a bonfire from last winter. Drop your face back in and it's something out of Kubrick, all hurtling colours and shapes and patterns so intense as to be slightly mind-bending.

Related Characters: Tim Winton (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 125

Explanation and Analysis

On the scorching hot day when Winton and his companion duck into the ocean to refresh, he makes note of the stunning differences between the desert-like shore and the flurrying ocean. He creates a stark contrast through his

imagery—the osprey, a bird of prey, sits among charred and bleached wood in a picture of sparseness and hunger, while underwater there's only life and action.

Winton's description here illuminates the hugely diverse and fascinatingly brutal elements of the natural Australian landscape. Even in the heat of summer when barely anything can survive on land, Winton finds life in the water. The fact that he knows where to look to find ample sea life suggests he's deeply familiar with the ocean and its inner workings. It's his habitat as much as it is the fishes'. Furthermore, his reference to Kubrick, the director whose film *2001: A Space Odyssey*, opened young Winton's eyes to the endless potential of the imagination, implies that for Winton, the ocean is perhaps as nutritious for his imagination as are the vast reaches of outer space.

The Wait and the Flow Quotes

❝ Waiting and flowing were anachronistic notions, they'd nearly become foreign concepts, but to me they were part of an imaginative lexicon, feeding something in me that had to do with more than surfing. The child of a pragmatic, philistine and insular culture, I responded to the prospect of something wilder, broader, softer, more fluid and emotional. It sounds unlikely but I suspect surfing unlocked the artist in me.

Related Characters: Tim Winton (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 132-133

Explanation and Analysis

When Winton was a young adult, surfing offered a place of meditation and self-realization that he couldn't find elsewhere. The qualities he lists here, "wilder, broader, softer, more fluid and emotional," echo feelings Winton had at church, as he details in "Twice on Sundays." This echoed language shows that that though the church congregation became too repressive and insular for Winton to truly thrive there, he could still access that spiritual side of himself when out catching waves.

Winton's description of surfing "unlocking" his inner artist aligns with many other moments in this book's various essays in which Winton experiences or witnesses something that lights up his imagination. It seems that there are several keys that together unlock his artistic side. His time in church, his first art gallery experience, the film *2001: A Space Odyssey*, and waiting and flowing as a surfer all allow Winton access to the imagination and creativity that drive his career as a writer, which suggests that a vital element of an artistic life is the ability to be open to new experiences and to approach them with curiosity.

❝ I show up. I wait. When some surge of energy finally arrives, I do what I must to match its speed. While I can, I ride its force. For a brief period I'm caught up in something special, where time has no purchase, and my bones don't ache and my worries fall away. Then it's all flow. And I'm dancing.

Related Characters: Tim Winton (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 135

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Winton describes his writing practice and its similarities to surfing. For Winton, the two activities share the concepts of energy and force, implying that writing is not only an intellectual activity but a physical one, too—one that's as affected by muscle and momentum as surfing is. This physical description continues with the idea of dancing, which suggests that when he's having a really good writing moment, coordination, rhythm, and joy are all in play.

Another element of this passage is the idea that, just as when he catches a wave, when Winton grabs hold of an idea, he feels transported to a kind of ethereal plane in which practical worries are irrelevant. It's a stark contrast to his saga of rewriting his colossal novel in "Lighting Out," where a deadline eats at him over the summer. Here, in this theoretical moment of creative joy, he can ignore deadlines and the demands of the physical body. It's a moment that helps the reader to understand why Winton continues to write despite those other moments of huge frustration, stress, and self-hatred: the joy of surfing is addictive for Winton, and so is the euphoria of a good writing day.

In the Shadow of the Hospital Quotes

It wasn't just a health facility. At times it was more like a furnace or a power plant. In summer the air around it was thick with screams and sirens and the drone of cooling towers, and in winter its beige mass blocked out the sun. It was a constant, implacable presence.

Related Characters: Tim Winton (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 147

Explanation and Analysis

Winton writes about his experiences with hospitals and how his attitude toward hospitals has changed over the course of his life. Living next to a huge hospital feels oppressive for Winton. The hospital seems to take over the neighborhood, becoming more than just a place of healthcare but a kind of monolith of horror. Winton's descriptions of Fremantle Hospital as "a furnace or a power plant" suggest it seems to pollute the air, an ironic image when one considers that the point of the hospital is to heal, rather than to make those around it unhealthier. There's nothing inviting about the "beige mass" that Winton describes as blocking the sunlight. It seems that the hospital exists at the detriment of those nearby—it holds so much chaos and pain that it can't help but let some spill out.

Winton's foreboding description of Fremantle Hospital makes clear his reservations about hospitals, which he's fostered from a young age, ever since his father was taken in for a new procedure and Winton would worry that he'd never come home. He can't shake the idea of the hospital as a place of grotesque and terrifying transformation, which is perhaps why he uses the inhuman images of the furnace and the power plant, suggesting that what's happened in the hospital was more mechanical than medical.

Afterwards I often looked up at that dreary building as the sun lit its windows and thought of strangers staring out in hope and regret as the rest of us went about our day oblivious. It was sobering to think of all the yearning that spilt down amidst the treetops and roof ridges, a shadow I'd never properly considered before.

Related Characters: Tim Winton (speaker), Tim Winton's Estranged Friend

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 151

Explanation and Analysis

After visiting his dying friend in hospital, who has seen the roof of Winton's house from the window of his room, Winton reconsiders his relationship to the hospital and its patients. Instead of it blocking the sun, as he described it earlier in the essay, now the sun lights its windows, creating an image gentler and more benevolent than the brutality Winton described before.

While before, Winton described the hospital as similar to a power plant—a mechanized monolith with no room for care or community between human beings—he now focuses on the human emotions that are present within the hospital's walls. Having had a moment of shock and vulnerability when he saw his dying friend, Winton is now more able to connect to the hospital, to imagine its patients as subjects just as he does to creatures on the shore at low tide. This change in perspective suggests that taking a careful, empathetic inside look at something may be the only way to access its full meaning and potential.

The Battle for Ningaloo Reef Quotes

It seemed to me at the time that this movement might have been named after the wrong colour, that nothing was as likely to stir the imagination of Australians so much as the sea. With Save Ningaloo we stumbled onto the only sacred site in the mind of mainstream Australia—the beach. Somehow the childhood memory of clean seas and the workaday longing for respite in salty air and the dream of retiring to a still-living coast resonate in the suburbs like nothing else.

Related Characters: Tim Winton (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 172

Explanation and Analysis

After serving as a vital part of the campaign to preserve Ningaloo Reef, Winton reflects on the surprisingly strong sway the movement had over the general Australian public. He argues that the fervent support for the campaign was

based in a deep and shared love amongst Australians for the ocean. It's a love based both on nostalgia—the idyllic ocean adventures typical of an Australian childhood—and the hope of returning as retirees to an unchanged, thriving landscape.

Winton suggests here that his childhood in the church was not his only source of spirituality or religious ritual. The sea is sacred too, a place of worship and devotion. Just as Christians take their church habits seriously, Australians have a firm respect for the ocean. It's this respect, joined with the nostalgia and hope Winton mentions, that drove so many people to speak out against the resort development at Ningaloo. Winton's reflection suggests that activism cannot succeed if it's a purely intellectual process—you have to target emotions and ideals, too.

Letter from a Strong Place Quotes

❝ I'm conscious that everything I see from here is named and storied, not just the wells and wishing trees and cryptic dirt mounds, but every hedge, it seems, every wood and boreen. All of it heavy with a past that's palpable and rich, moving in its way, even if it doesn't quite mean anything to me personally.

Related Characters: Tim Winton (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 177

Explanation and Analysis

Over the months when Winton lives in the Gate Lodge at Leap Castle in Ireland, he becomes familiar with the distinctive landscape that surrounds him. Even though this landscape is relatively new to him and far from home, his respect for the environment is as thorough as that which he demonstrates on his native shoreline, as in "A Walk at Low Tide" when he pays careful attention to the habitat. This attitude suggests that Winton is grateful to be invited and present wherever he ends up, despite feeling more at home some places than others.

Winton's description of the past that surrounds him as "heavy" implies that it's difficult for him to understand and bear the past. He's able to be an impartial observer here, but he's also hesitant to take on the full weight of the myth and story attached to the castle. It seems that he's happier, or at least more comfortable, in newer places with less history—perhaps he'd rather write stories for himself than have stories provided to him.

❝ A few days ago I woke with a light shining in my face. I thought I'd fallen asleep reading and left the bedside light on. But no, it was the sun shining in the window, warm and strong and clean for the first time since we arrived. Spring had come, and it made me think of home.

Related Characters: Tim Winton (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 185

Explanation and Analysis

Late in his time in Ireland, Winton wakes up with the sun on his face. His initial disorientation demonstrates that, until now, his time at the Gate Lodge has been marked by gloomy days and very little light. From his description, the sunlight he has experienced has been dampened by the cold. It's more likely that, this morning, the light is coming from a bulb than from the sun.

When Winton realizes that the light is in fact sunlight, it's a visceral reminder of home. This suggests that, for Winton, home is a place marked by clean air and bright light, which means that it's fundamentally different from the place he's been living in for months. The idea that it's spring itself that makes Winton remember home also quietly symbolizes the fact that home, even as an adult, is a place of potential and growth, where nature blooms and so can he.

The Demon Shark Quotes

❝ In the wake of that cold, sweaty minute in the Astor it wasn't as if I was consciously and constantly afraid of sharks but they were a liminal presence thereafter, something lurking in the water beyond the pleasure of the moment. It hardly ruined my life but it did divide the mind in a way that was new. For along with the creaturely joy of snorkelling in the open water behind the reef there was now a twitch of anxiety. The eye searched for something even when I wasn't looking.

Related Characters: Tim Winton (speaker), Tim Winton's Father

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 199

Explanation and Analysis

Young Winton sees a trailer for a movie about a shark attack, and it profoundly shatters his idea of the ocean as a place of safety and abundant adventure. The fact that he is now constantly aware of the threat of a shark and at least partially anxious while in the water strikes a strong contrast between his descriptions of careless bliss while surfing in "The Wait and the Flow." Here, awareness of danger has caused a small loss for Winton.

This moment in the cinema also mirrors the transformation Winton underwent following his father's catastrophic accident. Before the accident, Winton had no reason to expect or fear that his parents were in danger; afterward, he was constantly on high alert in circumstances in which his father could be at risk. The trailer for the shark movie similarly transforms Winton's attitude toward the ocean; after watching the trailer, Winton is perpetually attuned to the possibility of danger.

Finally, Winton's description of "the eye" as something quite apart from his own body or agency further exaggerates that, in the face of danger, he's unable to control his own impulses. Even if he's intellectually aware that there's little danger, his eye acts of its own accord, watching out for him even if he doesn't want it to.

❝ When anglers like the legendary Alf Dean "fought" tiger sharks and great whites they did it for pleasure, for some sense of mastery, then they dragged them ashore and hung them from gantries. I remember enormous, distended carcasses suspended from meat hooks and steel cables on jetties on the south coast. The dead sharks often had their lengths and weights painted on their flanks as if they were machines.

Related Characters: Tim Winton (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 207

Explanation and Analysis

Winton recalls his childhood, which was furnished with images of dead sharks that divers had beaten in what they thought of as battles. Winton's scare quotes around the word "fought" imply he doesn't think much of Dean's actions and doesn't consider his fight with the shark to have been an evenly matched one. Here, the reader gets a strong sense of Winton's disdain for people who inflicted harm upon sharks.

Winton's rich language here paints a colorful picture of the cruelty humans enacted upon sharks. They treated sharks like trophies rather than vulnerable living subjects, which conflicts directly with Winton's view of nature as a vast and delicate ecology in which each creature plays a valuable part. Winton's description implies that people felt more comfortable treating sharks this way not only because of their representation in the media, but because of the practice of painting each shark's measurement on its dead body—not only using its skin as a canvas with which to express one's own pride and smugness, but also transforming each shark from a once-living being into a statistic.

Using the C-word Quotes

❝ Their faces and voices were completely familiar. They smelt like the people of my boyhood—fags, sugar and the beefy whiff of free-range armpit—but despite the cheerful, noncommittal conversations we had on our slow ascents in the lift, I felt a distance that took many months to come to terms with. Like the expatriate whose view of home is largely antique, I was a class traveller who'd become a stranger to his own.

Related Characters: Tim Winton (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 233

Explanation and Analysis

Though Winton grew up in a working-class family, his education and successful career enabled him to work his way up to the middle class. Still, when Winton is around working-class people, he feels a visceral connection to them, something his detailed descriptions of the way they smell makes clear. This implies that Winton's connection to the working class is somewhat nostalgic and perhaps a little sugar-coated. It also reminds the reader that wherever he can, Winton searches for common ground and community.

But Winton can't claim that working-class status anymore—there's a distance, now, between his existence as a writer who's essentially self-employed, and the people who do manual labor or hold uncertain, casual jobs for people who don't always have their best interests in mind. The distance Winton feels between himself and people he used to be able to relate to is like a geographical gulf, and he acknowledges that it means his understanding of his working-class childhood is likely out of date and irrelevant.

No matter what his upbringing, his new social and financial freedom separates him from the identity he had as a child.

Lighting Out Quotes

"First kill your camel. Next, light a big fire. After that get a cauldron big enough to hold your hapless dromedary. If it becomes necessary, hack the beast of burden to pieces and keep the pot at the boil for days on end. Then take a straw and a suture needle and begin spitting your rendered camel through the tiny aperture.

Related Characters: Tim Winton (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 247

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Winton creates a metaphor that describes the painful process of wrangling his colossal, messy manuscript into a coherent novel. He's essentially rewriting the biblical metaphor of a camel passing through the eye of a needle—an impossible scenario. Using this as his base material, Winton suggests that the task ahead of him is virtually impossible, and he's only attempting it because he has no other option.

Winton's take on the metaphor is gruesome and violent, echoing the frustration he feels with his writing ability. The imagery of the cauldron, an antiquated piece of equipment, adds a fantastical element to the image, a reminder that this is both metaphorical and a completely absurd thing to attempt. Finally, Winton's suggested method of achieving the task—spitting the camel through the eye of the needle—is entirely distasteful, an image of barbarism and clumsiness. It's such a strangely concocted image that it seems Winton could find no other way to describe the haphazard, ridiculously tricky process of making his novel fit for publication.

"As I bore down upon them I saw the two wedgetails had the body of a third eagle between them. A little unlikely, but there it was. Probably mown down by a truck. They were struggling over the carcass, each bird with a wingtip in its beak so that in the midst of this tug of war the dead raptor rose from the gravel to its full span, dancing upright, feathers bristling in the wind. I was tired and slightly loopy, it's true, but it looked to me as if that eagle were taunting me, capering at the roadside as if to say, *Here I am, not gone yet!*

Related Characters: Tim Winton (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 250

Explanation and Analysis

After driving toward the border between Western Australia and South Australia, Winton makes an abrupt turn back toward home. On his furious drive west, he notices a surreal scene of wedgetail eagles at the side of the road. Wedgetails have been bothering him over the course of his trip because one of the scenes he cut from his unwieldy novel featured the death of one of those same birds.

Now, seeing this absurd scene in which two wedgetails fight over a dead one, Winton's attachment to that scene becomes clear. His description of the dead bird as "rising" and "dancing" is a little fantastical, and this suggests that the image is as much a product of his imagination as it is a real event at the side of the road. His observation implies that one's perceptions of their environment are as much a product of their mood and mindset as a true reflection of what's really going on.

Stones for Bread Quotes

"According to this new dispensation Australia does not belong to the wider world. We're nobody's fool. We have no obligations to our fellow humans, unless it suits us. Why? Because we are exceptional therefore beyond reproach. What makes us so special is not clear but we are determined, it seems, to distinguish ourselves in the world by our callousness, by our unwavering hardness of heart.

Related Characters: Tim Winton (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 256

Explanation and Analysis

In this essay, Winton reflects on contemporary Australia's problematic political and social attitudes toward refugees. He wrestles with the idea that, though most Australians are (or are descendants of) immigrants, many of them fear asylum-seeking strangers and are reluctant to offer them refuge.

The first part of this passage is heavily sardonic, mocking the attitude that Australia has no obligation to accept refugees—that it's somehow, inexplicably, exempt from the responsibilities that other nations have. Winton's insistence

on using the collective pronoun, including himself in the "we" he repeats, reveals his willingness to be held accountable for this insular, cruel attitude just as much as any Australian should be. Nevertheless, it's clear that he disagrees with such an attitude. Perhaps due to his working-class background, his education or profession, his experience working with diverse groups of people as on the Ningaloo campaign, or an inherent desire to show kindness and hospitality to other human beings, Winton is ashamed of country's refusal to welcome the people who most need safety and protection.

Sea Change Quotes

❝ The good old days may be long gone, yet here we are, as ever, launching a boat from the beach in a quiet bay under cloudless skies, bobbing on clean water. In an hour we'll have enough sweet-tasting fish to feed two households.

Related Characters: Tim Winton (speaker), Tim Winton's Father

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 278

Explanation and Analysis

Winton goes out fishing with his father, who comments that the new restrictions on fishing mean he's no longer able to bring in the same huge bounty that he did when he was younger. In this passage, Winton pokes gentle fun at his father's idea of the "good old days" by describing the current-day fishing trip as an idyllic scene of blue sky, clean water, and abundant fish even within the quota. His description suggests that though people have endless nostalgia for the way life used to be, perhaps the changes that have occurred in the meantime haven't been quite as dramatic as they think.

There's also a mildly biblical element of this scene. Winton invokes the idea of fish being plenty for two households—just as Jesus, through a miracle, allowed a group of fishermen to catch a huge number of fish. The idea of abundance and sustenance, which bridges these stories, introduces the idea that nature's offering is generous and miraculous—even more so now that the government has introduced certain restrictions in order to protect that natural environment.

Barefoot in the Temple of Art Quotes

❝ There were many things I didn't understand, stuff that made me uneasy, stripes and splashes and globs on pedestals that had me scratching my head. There seemed to be no limit to what people could think of, and that was a giddy feeling. On and on the galleries went. And on and on I trekked, until finally I yielded in dismay, backtracked like a sunburnt Hansel and found my clan hunkered by the entrance, spent and waiting.

Related Characters: Tim Winton (speaker), Tim Winton's Father, Tim Winton's Mother

Related Themes:

Page Number: 293

Explanation and Analysis

As a child, Winton visits the National Gallery in Melbourne for the first time with his family, and he's overwhelmed by the eclectic art on display there. It's another situation in which confusion and overwhelm thrill young Winton instead of alienating him, just as Kubrick's *2001* does. He's attracted to the art even when it frightens him, echoing his thrill-seeking behavior in other situations.

Winton reflects on his first experience of the gallery and compares himself to Hansel from the Grimm fairy tale "Hansel and Gretel," in which two siblings become lost in the forest and stumble upon a gingerbread house. This comparison suggests that the gallery is Winton's own forest, full of danger and the unknown—and that, like Hansel and Gretel, he's searching for excitement and temptation. Whereas the gingerbread house was Hansel and Gretel's source of excitement and temptation, for Winton, it's the museum's art. Winton's reflections on this childhood memory demonstrate his growth as an artist and a curious viewer of the world.

Finally, the fact that Winton's family is waiting, exhausted, for him at the museum entrance while he traipses through the gallery strikes a strong contrast between their enjoyment and his own. Art seems to nourish Winton, just as he suggests language does in "Twice on Sundays"—it enables him to keep moving and discovering new things even when others have finished looking. This contrast establishes young Winton as someone drawn helplessly into the creative world, and it hints at the central role that the imagination will play in his life and career.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

THE BOY BEHIND THE CURTAIN

In the 1970s at the age of 13, Winton, the narrator and author, has a habit of hiding behind the curtain in the front room of his house and aiming a rifle at oblivious passers-by. Though the **gun** has been battered over the years and painted an unsightly shade of brown by his father, who swapped his fishing rod for it, it enchants Tim.

The description of the gun, and Winton's attraction to it, suggests that it's an object of both great power and ugliness. Though the gun isn't particularly impressive in itself, it represents a mystical force that young Winton can't resist.

Winton loves taking the **gun** out to shoot rabbits and foxes. On Sunday afternoons, he's entrusted with five or six bullets and roams nearby paddocks—a privilege he earned through months of safety training. He knows the dangers of guns back to front, always using the safety catch and never travelling in a vehicle with a round in the breech. Sometimes on his outings, he doesn't fire a single shot—not just because the rabbits and foxes are hard to aim at, and not because Winton is squeamish about dead things, but mostly because the gun signifies a level of power and responsibility that overwhelms him.

Winton's meticulous behavior, and his parents' rules surrounding gun use, imply that he's aware of the dangers a gun represents and is also respectful of his parents. There's tension here between the idea of the gun as a useful tool and its threatening power. Winton's hesitation to use the gun suggests he doubts his ability to resist its power: there's a fine line between using it to kill pests and being tempted by its potential for greater harm.

The **gun** Winton uses isn't a particularly powerful or glamorous one, but he knows it can kill. That capability both horrifies and entices him. The gun is kept at the back of his parents' wardrobe, and its bolt is stored separately in his father's bedside table, while the bullets are kept on the dressing table. Tim's parents are aware that Winton knows where the gun and its parts are, but Winton is forbidden to touch them. Yet even though Winton understands the gun is off limits, when the house is empty, he habitually takes the gun from the wardrobe and aims it at passers-by.

The gun is such a powerful and enticing object for Winton that, despite all his safety training and awareness of danger, and despite the fact that his childhood seems generally happy and secure, he can't resist holding it and even pointing it at people—something inherently threatening. His habitual behavior is calculated and violates his parents' rules, which strikes such a direct contrast to his regular reverence toward the gun that it demonstrates the gun's almost magnetic pull.

Tim's family's home, which they've recently moved into, is on the top of a hill, which gives him an expansive view. He doesn't know the people walking by; they haven't done anything to him. The feeling of looking at them though a **gun** sight allows him to imagine them "transformed in an instant." Winton doesn't plan to put a bullet in the gun, yet he doesn't succeed in convincing himself of his innocence: he knows that the bullets are close by and that he is a real threat.

Though young Winton assures himself that he'll never actually use *the gun to harm the passers-by, there's a tension here in the knowledge that, if he wanted to, he could load it within seconds. The gun is a volatile weapon: its easiness and its temptation mean that Winton's innocence could be ruined in a second, and that danger tantalizes him.*

Looking back on his 13-year-old self, Winton knows he didn't fully understand the implications of his actions. He didn't know what it would've felt like to have a **gun** pointed at him; nor did he know how much trouble he would've been in if he'd been seen—especially in a town in which his father was a police officer. As an adult author, Winton struggles to find the reason why his teenage self indulged in this habit.

Winton's attraction to danger and violence isn't an easy thing for him to understand, even decades after his gun habit died out, demonstrating that the turbulence of adolescence mixed with the rich symbol of the gun created a confusing, irrational habit. Further, at the age of 13, Winton wasn't yet able to understand the true nature of the danger that a gun presented.

Winton describes his behavior as a "compulsion," fueled by sneakiness and anticipation. The empty house was an exciting setting, and the practice of finding a stranger and locking them in the **gun**'s sight was calming for him. He realizes that, at that point in his life, he felt "besieged," under the stress of moving towns, homes, and schools, and bewildered by the effects of puberty. The gun acted like a "religious icon" for him—a point of focus. He notes that only the dollar sign can rival the gun in the strength of the image these days.

By describing the gun as a "religious icon" and his behavior as a "compulsion," Winton implies that there was something spiritual about the gun as a symbol and his reverence towards it. Much like religion, the gun's presence helped him to make sense of his life and exercise some control over it.

Nothing happens to 13-year-old Tim, and after a few months his habit dies out. He becomes less dependent on the **gun** for a sense of calm. It turns out that his parents have no idea about what he's been doing. He begins to enjoy his new life in the new town, making friends and going surfing. He becomes more confident and regains his ability to communicate with language—a void that the gun, he later presumes, filled for a while.

The death of Winton's gun habit comes as he learns to express himself in a new setting, which speaks to the powers of language and belonging. When Winton feels he's a real, valued member of society, and that he can contribute via self-expression rather than the mirage of violence, his dependence on such a violent symbol is no longer necessary.

Reflecting on this period in his life, Winton knows that he might've met a worse end if he'd been a boy from a rougher background. He was a mostly happy teenager, but someone in unhappier circumstances could've used the **gun**'s potential to tragic effect. The gun, he suggests, is a short-cut to the kind of power that wealth or intelligence offers. Its proliferation in the media has made people see it as the only way to achieve victory and success or to communicate what they feel has been overlooked. Winton highlights the contrast between the overwhelming number of mass shootings in the U.S. and the lack of household guns in Australia and says it's a good thing that most Australians will never handle a gun.

The gun, Winton realizes, can compound the tragedy of an already bad situation, and dependence on it correlates directly with its potential for danger. Because he didn't need it as much, or depend on it as desperately, as those in rougher situations around him, his habit petered out and didn't end badly. He realizes that its representation in the media has led to people thinking it's a viable alternative to language-based communication, but just as it lacks the nuances of language, the results of using it are brutal and rough.

Guns continue to fascinate teenage Tim; he joins the cadets for the sole reason that it allows him to "blow stuff up." He hunts with his father into his twenties, but then he stops shooting completely. After living in the city, where guns aren't used or seen, he develops an aversion to them and becomes uncomfortable around them when he visits relatives in rural areas. He feels torn between his fascination with firearms and the dread they stir in him.

Winton's relationship with guns is a microcosmic expression of his relationship with danger. While guns and danger attract him, and he enjoys testing them to their limits—or his own—he's also repulsed by their potential to change lives in an instant, and his own attraction to them repulses him, too.

As a parent, Winton doesn't keep any weapons in the home, though his children are still exposed to guns in every piece of media. When his children are still very young, a man uses a **gun** to murder 35 people and injure 23 more in Tasmania, an island off Australia's coast. The event causes Australia to immediately reform their gun laws. Days after the attack, a woman accosts Winton at the gates of his children's school about an aspect of his books, while her son repeatedly acts out firing a toy gun at him. The violence of the encounter disturbs him, especially the small child's aggression.

Winton's behavior as a parent is different to his own parents': while he was trusted with the knowledge of gun use and the location of the gun in his childhood home, he refuses to even allow a gun into his children's home. This suggests that Winton, having experienced the temptation of the gun, is wary about allowing others to access it—and the child's behavior might disturb him so acutely partly because he remembers his own childish habits.

When Tim's children hear a **gun** fired for the first and only time—on a paddock of Tim's brother-in-law's farm—their excitement quickly turns to fear. When Winton takes his turn with the gun, though he's only firing at clay discs and isn't a danger to anyone, he faces severe disapproval from the kids. Now, around 20 years later, he's living in a rural area, and a gun would be a practical help to ward off pests, but he still won't keep one in the house. To him, it's a "dark presence" and holds too much power. He worries for his friends who have guns at home, knowing that if they were to go through a rough time, the gun might hold more power than they could control. He knows that his ability to put down the gun as a teenager and find a different form of expression made him happier and safer.

Even when Winton uses the gun in a harmless activity in a partially controlled environment, its sound and presence spark fear in his children, and it's implied that their fear strengthens his apprehension toward allowing guns in his home. Even if he were only to use a gun to ward off pests—a very real need—its presence holds immense potential for more harm. There's a fine line between using the weapon for necessity, and reveling in its tricky power in a time of personal turbulence.

A SPACE ODYSSEY AT EIGHT

When Winton is in fourth grade, his teacher wheels a television into the classroom and finds the channel for the 1969 moon landing. The children watch Neil Armstrong step onto the surface of the moon, taking cues on the importance of the occasion from their teacher's emotional reaction. The event doesn't excite Winton as much as it excites the adults around him; it seems like an inevitable progression of the space race and something people have anticipated for a long time—and, after watching Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, he feels like he's already been to space.

The moon landing has more impact on the adults around Winton than it does on him and his peers: he grew up at a time of technological advancement, which made the moon landing feel like just another step in humanity's progress. The fact that the moon landing footage isn't as exciting to Winton as Kubrick's fictional representation of space suggests he's more compelled by events of the imagination than those in real life, hinting at a creative career in his future.

The year before, Winton and a group of his friends go to the cinema to see *2001* for the first time. The opening and its uneasy, suspenseful music spook him and his eight-year-old friends. A teenager sits down next to him and says, "Don't you just love this?" A pack of apes has appeared on the screen, but they don't do much for a few minutes. Eventually, breaking the tension, the sun rises on the plain to reveal the Monolith, a tall geometric object. The apes react with chaos and violence, and then suddenly, the viewer is transported to the stars.

Winton's reaction to the estranging violence of the film's opening sequence echoes his behavior in situations of danger: he's both compelled and repulsed. Furthermore, it's a reaction that suggests that this is Winton's first time seeing a film that spends such a long time depicting nothing happening, which is perhaps why it's such a creative awakening for him.

The film continues to perplex Winton and his friends—it seems to lack an ordinary narrative, and yet the sense of dread it creates about being taken into space and isolated never dissipates. Though Winton contributes to his friends' unforgiving critiques of the film on the way home, the film moves him in a way he can't understand. It holds sway over his imagination for many years after, and its excitement endures longer than that of watching men actually walking on the moon.

The dreadful isolation of space in the film echoes some of Winton's later experiences in the Australian desert, where he's both amazed and overwhelmed by emptiness and isolation. Later, Winton will drive into the desert and feel as connected to his creative spirit as he did in this movie theater.

As an adult, Winton still revisits this film occasionally, but it's never a nostalgic experience. Each time, he thinks about how technology will soon swallow up the human race and then spit it out into space. He applauds Kubrick's use of sound—not only his choice of music, but the way he uses silence to instill fear in the viewer, especially when the astronaut is abandoned in the vacuum of space. The sound of astronauts' breathing creates claustrophobia and anxiety, saying more than language could.

Winton's lack of nostalgia when watching this film as an adult suggests he's still compelled by the idea of vast nothingness. His appreciation of Kubrick's creation of a claustrophobic effect will play out later in the book, as Winton describes his teenage years, when it becomes clear that imminent danger makes him feel alive.

Winton notes that the irony of *2001* is the transformation of the human characters into robotic beings followed by their murder of the robot HAL, who has become more and more sentient. The viewer must question who the real monster is—and who the real robots are. Winton notes that as a middle-aged viewer, he pays more attention to the human cost of progress that the film reveals. The astronauts' families send their loved ones into space not knowing if they'll see them again or what they'll have become if they ever return home.

Winton's changing reaction to the film—his increasing focus on the families left behind after the astronauts' departure and death—suggests that as he's matured and become a father, his connections to other human beings have become both more precious and apparently more tenuous. He's aware of the effect his attraction to danger has on others, and he's no longer just playing with his own life.

Winton thinks about what humans will become at the hands of technology; the film suggests that progress will lead to the end of humanity as we know it, and this prospect doesn't excite him. He isn't sure he'd show the film to an eight-year-old today. But though it overwhelmed him as a child, it also opened his eyes to the power of filmmaking and the vast realm of the imagination, as well as the idea that the products of human creation can far outlast humans.

Winton is deeply attached to the world around him and the people who populate it. Perhaps it's this that helps to spur his creativity in response to the film: the idea that if he creates something, its humanity will outlast him.

HAVOC: A LIFE IN ACCIDENTS

At nine years old, Winton sits in the passenger seat as his father drives them home from the beach. They've been fishing, but it was Winton's desire to spend time with his father, not the fishing, that attracted Winton to the outing. Out of nowhere, a motorbike zooms past the car and overtakes them, speeding up the road into the distance. But then the motorbike's taillight disappears suddenly. Winton's father stops the car and tells Winton to stay where he is.

Winton's priority is to be close to his father, rather than simply to fish, which suggests that there's something precious and urgent about his connection with his father. Winton's father's decisive behavior and protection of Winton is echoed in Winton's own later actions, suggesting that this is a moment of profound learning for him.

Winton leans forward to see his father kneeling beside a motionless body before dragging the motorbike off the road. He returns to the car and drives to find a phone and call an ambulance, and then he drives back to the injured rider. His calmness disturbs Tim, for whom the scene is immensely stressful. The rider is convulsing on the ground. Tim's father tells Winton to continuously pump the brake pedal so that the ambulance can see their lights from afar—a task that might've only served to keep Winton occupied. The rider's face looks like a raw piece of meat.

Winton's father's ability to remain calm while chaos and violence unfold speaks to his training as a police officer—but it's behavior that rubs off on Winton, despite never completing police training, as shown by his actions in later scenes. This emulation suggests that Winton deeply respects his father. His description of the rider's face as raw meat implies that violence and danger can transform a human being into an animal.

The rider tries to get up and begins to scream, and as the ambulance approaches, he yells and struggles more violently, saying that he needs to go. Tim's father holds the rider down. When the ambulance arrives, the chaos deepens, and the rider's father appears, first weeping at the sight of his son and then attempting to throttle him and to fight the paramedics and Tim's father. Winton is shocked at the sight of the man attempting violence on his own son, and he panics at the sight of his dad being threatened.

This scene demonstrates Winton's subconscious attitudes toward his father. Winton takes his dad's strength, calmness, and presence for granted, which would explain why the victim's father's behavior is such a shock for him—this new man behaves in the exact opposite way.

The police arrive, and Winton and his father head home. His father downplays the incident to his mother, but Winton feels rattled and out of control. Later, as an adult, when he attempts to make sense of his fear, he realizes that it echoed the fear of almost losing his father a few years before that incident. At the time of the motorbike crash, he'd gotten used to his dad's scars and the scent of his anti-inflammatory ointment, but the sight of his father in danger brought up the anxieties he felt when his father had first been badly injured. Looking back, he sees his life as a "topography of accidents."

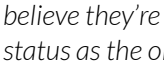
From a place of retrospection, Winton realizes that the accidents and moments of chaos in his childhood echoed and reverberated against each other, making each moment much bigger than its own isolated incident. It's times of immense, immediate stress that remind him of his vulnerability, and that of his loved ones, while in day-to-day life, this is something he can often forget.

Winton grew up as a child of a police officer who worked in the Accidents Branch dealing with traffic collisions and sometimes attending fatal incidents. As a child, he learns to tread carefully around his father, vicariously bearing the emotional burden of witnessing fatal crashes and the exhaustion of dealing with human mistakes. The fear he sees on his mother's face helps him understand the dangers of his father's job. When Winton is five, that fear surfaces when a driver runs a stop sign and hits his father, who was on his motor bike.

Winton's father's occupation as a police officer and the incident that almost claims his life accumulate to make Winton wary of human behavior: so much of his childhood was made fragile by the mistakes of other people.

Tim's father is catastrophically injured in the crash; when the paramedics find him, he's close to death. His chances of survival and recovery are slim. His state is so dire that two of his colleagues resign after visiting him. Winton is the oldest child and the only one who truly registers what's going on as his mother struggles to keep the family afloat. When his father returns home, completely disabled, he's enraged that a stranger has ruined his family's once-stable life.

Though Winton's father's accident didn't happen when he was on duty, his identity is so bound up in his work as a police officer that his colleagues apparently see the accident as a part of the job, and believe they're at less risk if they find other occupations. Winton's status as the oldest child seems to cause him to grow up quickly, something also implied by his capacity for rage even as a five-year-old.



Winton habitually seeks out his father's helmet—the one he was wearing during the accident. The inside of the helmet smells like the father he remembers, while the outside reminds him of the near-death experience. The helmet is all that stood between his father and death.

The helmet in this scene is a metaphor for the thin boundary between normalcy and chaos that Winton's life will continue to explore. There's only a brittle layer between life and the father he knows, and the danger lurking behind every corner.

Tim's father's accident and long recovery force Winton to grow up quickly and become useful in the household. He must take on the role of the strong eldest sibling and help his mother with things he doesn't understand. The house feels dim and stagnant, transformed from what it used to be. They welcome visits from family and friends, but one visitor is a complete stranger who offers to bathe his father.

The changes to Winton's role in the family and the physical atmosphere of his childhood home signify that danger, in the form of his father's accident, has shattered the world he grew up into in more ways than just altering his father's body.

Winton finds it extremely strange that a strange man is undressing, carrying, and bathing his father, and the idea of a stranger washing his father as though his father were an infant appalls him. But Winton learns that, while strangers can ruin your life (like the one who hurt his father), they can also show great kindness. One day, the stranger brings olive oil with him and anoints Tim's father's feet as in the Christian tradition. After his father's recovery, Tim's parents become lifelong Christians.

Winton's reluctance to welcome and accept the stranger and his care imply that the society he grew up in does not commonly represent men as either caring or vulnerable. Further, his realization that the stranger has good intentions, and his parents' acceptance of the Christian faith, suggest that people can build strong community bonds in times of great turbulence.

Tim's parents' newfound faith and hope rejuvenates Tim. Looking back, he realizes that the stranger's actions were a miracle of decency and grace in a world that Winton learned could be horrific and vile.

Though as a child, Winton was caught up in the horrors of human actions, hindsight allows him to see that those horrors are often balanced by the kindness of others.

After Tim's father recovers, he returns to work; he initially works the Accident Desk and then draws up schematics of accidents for the courts to refer to. He has no memory of his own accident, but reflecting as an adult, Winton knows that it must've been hard for his father to return to the kind of work he'd once been implicated in. His dad eventually gets back on motorbikes and sometimes drops Winton off at school; Winton pretends to enjoy this, though he's terrified.

Winton's father's behavior, and Winton's own pretense of enjoyment, echoes a stoic mindset that was perhaps encouraged by the society of the 1970s—men, in particular, were expected to portray an image of strength and resilience. Nevertheless, Winton's father seems to genuinely enjoy his dangerous work. This is a further display of the way that his identity as a police officer is inseparable from his existence.

Winton realizes as an adult that the motorbike accident he witnessed with his father bothered him so strongly because it felt like an echo of the time his life unraveled as a child. Many years later, he wrote a story about a similar incident, but this time the boy pressing the brake pedal leaps out to defend his father. He knows, looking back, that his father's near-death experience unsettled him permanently and would keep resurfacing in echoing events throughout his life.

Winton's creative career enables him to recall and process incidents from his childhood that were confusing and overwhelming at the time. In his writing, he's able to give himself more power and agency than he has in real life. Through this process, he's also able to figure out the patterns of his life and how they have shaped his mindset.

Eight years after witnessing that motorcycle accident, Winton finds himself in a car crash, the only passenger in a car that plows through the perimeter wall of a girls' school. The driver escapes unhurt, but paramedics cut Winton of his seatbelt and take him to hospital in an ambulance. After leaving the hospital, Winton feels extremely weak and rattled and tries to work out whether he's feeling grief or shock. He hasn't lost anyone, but he feels enfeebled and stuck.

Winton's shock at feeling weak and profoundly changed after the accident suggests he grew up taking his strength and bodily ability for granted. This may have been a core element of his identity, and now that it has been taken away, he's not able to go on with life as normal.

The accident and ensuing recovery focus Tim's mind. He's been drifting along at university, but after returning to work, he writes three books before graduating. He realizes that the life he imagined—supplementing his writing with manual labor—is no longer viable now that his back has been injured. He must support himself with writing alone, which, looking back, he realizes fueled him to follow his childhood dream of being a writer.

Winton's reassessment of his own ability, and his subsequent increased motivation as a writer, demonstrate that writing really is the only thing he can rely on—yet it has to be fueled by necessity. This is an idea that Winton will return to later in the book.

As a teenager, Winton toys with near-death experiences. He crawls into tight underwater crevices with only a snorkel and challenges himself to find his way out before he runs out of air. Though he puts himself in situations of severe danger, he feels completely alive when he manages to escape unscathed.

Winton's thrill-seeking behavior seems to be fueled by the idea that he has agency over his own life. Though the situations he puts himself in are dangerous, he has the ability to escape them—something he didn't have in the accidents described in the essay.

Looking back, Winton reflects on the fact that those and other moments of danger were times in which he knew himself the best. He suggests there's an innate sense people use to feel danger approaching and to accept the inevitable process of surviving it. He describes finding a crashed car with a mother and child, helping the child to stay calm by enlisting her to press the brake pedal as his father once told him to. In this incident, Winton himself is the one helping with the injured driver until the ambulance arrives. He becomes robotic on the outside and hysterical on the inside, and he wonders whether this is his truest state.

Winton's behavior in stressful situations as an adult mimics his own father's actions in similar situations, suggesting that a fight-or-flight response might not be purely innate, but partially learned. Winton's experience as an adult perhaps allows him to reflect on his knowledge of his father—his father may not have always felt as cool and calm as he appeared, but necessity may have driven him to act without obvious emotion or fear.

As an adult, Winton no longer goes looking for trouble, though trouble seems to have followed him through his life. He considers the idea of surprise and danger in the surrounding world. Though people go out of their way to find thrills, even inflicting pain on themselves or others to interrupt their own boredom, they expect and rely upon predictability. Winton notes that a magazine rejected one of his stories because it described a shark attack that "came out of nowhere." Even though his friends claim to enjoy surprises, he knows that real, unexpected danger is something that will always disrupt a seemingly safe life. And yet he knows that his life as a writer, like his father's as a police officer, relies on danger and chaos—it's accidents that fuel stories, just as they shape each person's identity.

Winton's reflections on the nature of danger suggest that the dangers in his life have taken two discrete forms—those that he had no control over, and those he sought out. It's the moments of danger that appear without warning and offer no choice or agency that truly scare him, and even if he doesn't seek those dangers out, he'll never be able to avoid them. This is compounded by his occupation as a writer, for whom conflict and chaos are the key ingredients to narrative—another way in which he takes after his father, who couldn't help but return to the police force as soon as he was able.

A WALK AT LOW TIDE

Before sunrise, Winton heads out on his daily walk along the shoreline near his house. Though the landscape seems uneventful, he returns every day and sees that it's a new place. The creatures living in the **ocean** and the sand have been moving, leaving marks in the sand; as the sun rises, he sees different parts of nature scattered along the beach.

Winton's ability to notice small changes and the tiny lives on the seashore suggests that this practice of noticing is vital to his creative work. Further, his appreciation of the sea creatures illuminates his love for the ocean and the littoral environment of the shore.

Though Winton walks the beach every day and often sees new things, he rarely actually pays attention to what he's seeing. He treats the things he sees "as though they are objects, rather than subjects." When he is really paying attention, he appreciates each thing's subjecthood—the story it might've had before it arrived on the beach, or the life it still leads.

Winton's effort to treat even the tiniest creatures as "subjects" echoes the grammatical guidelines relating to subjects and objects in a sentence: a subject does something, while an object has something done to it. It's important to him to grant these creatures agency and the capacity for action.

Winton occasionally realizes that each of these trillions of creatures on the shoreline has its own life, and he appreciates the vastness of nature and its yearning for growth. Taking the time to look beyond what they first appear to be—to imagine their stories and the part they play in the world—is to acknowledge their "holy purpose" and to be changed in return.

The idea that these creatures have narratives, origins, and goals reflects on Winton's career as a novelist, in which his attention is always on plot and character. Meanwhile, his suggestion that there's something holy about the natural world echoes his attachment to religion and faith which he later explores in "Twice on Sundays."

REPATRIATION

In 2008, Winton drives north from Perth to Mt Gibson Station through what used to be extremely biodiverse eucalypt woodlands. Over many decades, wheat farms, which had a prosperous two generations before succumbing to a devastating drought, destroyed the woodlands. Now, the current generation of farmers out here are being paid to replant the same trees their ancestors tore down.

The sparse land, and the fact that the current farmers are replanting the trees that existed in the first place, suggests that decisions based on human greed lack the long-term strength and stability that is demonstrated by untampered nature.

Though some still consider the northern wheatbelt Winton is driving through a heroic piece of history, to Tim, the land is desolate and grim. As he drives toward the desert, the landscape seems to dwindle into utter lifelessness before, surprisingly, bursting into life again, revealing roadkill and flora and gnarled trees. As he gets farther from cultivated land, the wilderness's fulness reveals itself.

Winton is at odds with much of the Australian public in his attitude towards the wheatbelt. Where others see the efforts of human progress, he sees only destruction. Even the desert holds more life and richness than this destroyed patch of land, implying that as Winton sees it, nature has the right idea.

Winton feels out of place this far inland, identifying strongly as a coastal person and feeling at home in "the littoral" (near the shore). Out here, the littoral is at the edge of the desert where life still flourishes. And he feels that something is changing out here—private citizens are taking it upon themselves to protect biodiversity. Australia's record of mammal extinction is the worst in the world, mostly due to land clearing, which left native animals vulnerable to introduced predators' attacks.

Winton is comfortable at the edges of things, the places where one landscape changes into another, whether that be at the seaside (where land becomes sea) or in in-between spaces, like at the edge of the desert. This comfort is reflected in his attitudes to tribalism: where one group of people agree on something in a close-minded way, he'll find himself at the edge of the debate, pushing the bounds of the rigid debate. He prefers to be in an environment of change and discovery than to be firmly rooted at the center of any community.

Over the past decade, non-government organizations have been purchasing land in Australia to preserve and protect it, including the Australian Wildlife Conservancy, which runs Mt Gibson Sanctuary. Winton is returning to the sanctuary for the first time in several years. He pulls in and drives along a road shadowed by small trees interspersed with abandoned mining materials. He reaches the gate at the State Barrier Fence and spots an emu carcass that has been caught in the gate's wires.

The scene along the side of the road Winton drives demonstrates the changing landscape of this nature sanctuary—it's in the process of abandoning its status as mining land and transforming back to the natural habitat it once was. The emu carcass in the fence hints at the brutality of the Australian wilderness and the futility of manmade structures there. Even when a fence is intended to protect nature, it could end up destroying it.

Winton touches the earth and notices how fragile it is. The soil erosion and habitat loss caused by the introduction of hoofed grazing animals like sheep and cows is still evident. As a child, Winton never saw any of the marsupials he learned about at school—not because they were shy or nocturnal, but because they'd mostly died out. He reaches the homestead alone.

The fact that the grazing animals destroyed much of Australia's natural habitat is another suggestion that, in their desire to make the land produce value for them, humans have instead contributed to that land's destruction.

In the spring of 2001, the homestead and surrounding buildings were full of life, a hub of scientists and their vehicles and equipment. Winton arrived then for the first time, knowing only that the project was run by a wealthy philanthropist—and skeptical of his intentions. Accustomed to the general Australian attitude that, once you'd wrestled some kind of success from the cruel, inhospitable wilderness, you had no generosity for charity, Winton doubted that someone would set up a sanctuary like this with truly good intentions. But when he met Martin Copley, the philanthropist running the sanctuary, in 2001, he realized that this project was built on science and a true desire for conservation, and that it respected its scientists and their findings.

Winton's trepidation in meeting Copley reflects his understanding that Australia, being so brutal and difficult to survive in, doesn't leave much room for community, kindness, or care for the natural environment. Copley's respect for scientists suggests that, instead of trying to gain something from the land around him, he wants to work with and for it—to truly conserve, instead of tokenizing or disregarding the land.

Back in 2008, Winton leaves the homestead and drives on to reach Lake Moore before the sun sets. He stops when he sees a mound that looks like a malleefowl's nest, but when he gets closer, he realizes it's been empty for a long time. He drives on and stops at the clearing where, seven years ago, he was shown some boodie warrens. Boodies are small kangaroo-like creatures which have been extinct on mainland Australia since the 1960s. The scientists that showed Winton the warrens were hopeful that one day the boodie would return to Mt Gibson.

Winton's careful regard for the landscape around him, and his ability to identify the malleefowl's nest, suggest that he feels indebted to the natural environment of his own country. Though he identifies as more of a coastal person, his care for the natural world extends to the inland wilderness too, which implies he's aware of the interacting ecologies of this landscape.

Indeed, in 2004, Winton travelled to an offshore island to release boodies into the wild. He held one against his chest in its sack before releasing it and felt a sense of great attachment watching it scamper off. Since then, those 17 boodies have grown to a population of over 100. There are still none living on the mainland, but it's a goal that seems within reach.

Winton's behavior when releasing the boodie, and the attention he's been paying to the rise of the boodie population on the island, suggest that he's invested a significant amount of hope in the return of the boodie to mainland Australia.

Winton notices how much more vegetation covers the sanctuary compared to his last visit. The flora and fauna spring up around him as he drives. He reaches the shore of Lake Moore, a lesser camping spot but one that attracts him with its ghostliness. He wanders up a slope to a quandong tree, from which he stares across the lake before heading back to his car. He cooks a meal on his stove before falling asleep for a few hours, and when he wakes up, he feels oppressed by the moonlight and can't get back to sleep.

Winton's attraction to a lesser-known, more haunted-feeling campsite is another reminder of his comfort in the outskirts (either of a landscape or of a community). He's attracted not by what's popular but something more spiritual—a holy calling that's echoed in his later discussions on faith.

Winton reflects on the lives of three girls who trekked across this wilderness in 1931: Molly Craig, Gracie Fields, and Daisy Kadibill, whose escape from colonial cruelty was made famous by the film *Rabbit-Proof Fence*. Winton feels uneasy in his relative comfort, being a white man with a big car in the middle of the same place.

Winton's ability to reflect on his status and presence in a storied, fraught landscape suggests that he's spent a good deal of time learning and thinking about the racial interactions in Australia and his status as a white person with relative comfort and agency.

In the morning, Winton wakes to the sounds of pigeons and cockatoos. He walks along the shore until he sees a dark mass—a winding group of schist stones that looks like a fish trap, though it seems there were never any fish in Lake Moore. Though the groups of indigenous people once local to this area have long been scattered by colonialist policies, it's generally agreed that this was an important meeting point for those different groups.

The ghostly feel of Winton's campsite combined with the purpose of the schist stones as a place of indigenous gathering implies the deeply felt absence of those scattered indigenous peoples. Where once this was a meeting place, it now symbolizes the communities' absence.

This gathering point is a protected place, but that protection is fragile, its custodian an old man living hundreds of kilometers away. Winton suggests it's less of a powerful ancient presence and more a reminder of all that has been lost by the Aboriginal people—songs, stories, traditions, and the ability for self-determination. Now, Aboriginal Australians are disproportionately ill, unemployed, and illiterate; their most common gathering is at a funeral.

The fragility of the protections over this gathering place is echoed later in the book. In general, Winton makes the case that Australia lacks official, solid protections over its most vulnerable, and arguably most beautiful, places. And this mirrors how Aboriginal Australians are similarly unprotected.

However, Winton notes that more and more frequently, Aboriginal people have been returning to this place, and in recent years they've been using the internet as a way to connect with each other and encrypt their shared knowledge. He finds it easier to be optimistic about the idea of return and growth now that the landscape itself is healing.

Though the proof that the landscape is healing is concretely evident to Winton, the idea that indigenous communities are strengthening and regrowing is more nebulous and uncertain. This suggests that while humans' destruction to the natural world can likely be healed, it's harder to heal the consequences of human conflicts and cruelty.

Winton sees hope growing in other areas. A nearby sheep station was also recently destocked and turned into a nature reserve, while land to the north has become an Indigenous Protected Area. Private groups, rather than the government, whose progress is infuriatingly slow, has done most of this work. Though fierce public protest is still deeply important to the protection of Australia's wilderness, philanthropy is making large strides in this part of the world. In the beauty of this place, Winton finds it difficult to rein in his hopes for a flourishing future.

The essay ends on a positive note that champions positive progress and hope for a thriving natural world. Winton's frustrations with his country's government are evident here. But Winton's frustration is outweighed here by the beauty of the natural world which declares its own, inarguable healing.

BETSY

Tim's father's father was the only one of his grandparents to drive a car. As a boy, growing up hearing stories of him driving his flatbed Chevy or riding his Harley with a sidecar, Winton doesn't understand why his grandfather now drives the car he calls Betsy—a 1954 Hillman Minx which, in Tim's eyes, is the ugliest car in the world. The car is a part of the family: the most embarrassing member.

Young Winton's attitude towards Betsy, a practical albeit ugly car, and his confusion that his grandfather would forgo the more glamorous vehicles of his past, implies that as a child, Winton is drawn to beauty rather than practicality. He's also embarrassed by the idea that his family would value such an ugly thing.

The car smells, at best, like "an abandoned cinema." It has a tiny engine and signal arms to alert other drivers to the turning direction. Winton will later have fond memories of the car, but in his youth, he finds it shameful. While others' old cars could be stylish and glamorous, this one doesn't have any of those perks, and he's embarrassed to be seen in it.

The image of an abandoned cinema as a derogatory description of Betsy implies that Winton finds something depressing about a cinema without an audience or films. This reflects the status the cinema holds in his life. Recall, for instance, that 2001: A Space Odyssey *was hugely influential to young Winton.*

It's not that Betsy is odd that Winton is embarrassed by her. Tim's used to oddness in his family. But the car is the last straw, and when his grandparents move into a care facility, Tim's parents adopt the car as their own. This means Tim's dad now drops him off at school in Betsy. Winton's attempts to distance himself from the car fail when his friends come over and laugh at their own faces in the convex hubcaps. But despite his and his siblings' pleas to get rid of the car, his father still thinks of Betsy fondly—partly because it winds Winton and his siblings up so much.

In this scenario, Winton's embarrassment becomes the butt of his father's jokes—but it's a friendly kind of teasing that suggests the family unit is generally solid and harmonious. Winton's insecurity about Betsy also suggests that he's still at a stage of his life in which fitting in with others seems particularly important.

One day, after eating at a Chinese restaurant, Winton and his family get into Betsy to make the six-hour trip back to the city. However, shortly into the trip, Tim's father has to make an urgent toilet stop. After he gets back into the car, Winton and his brother begin to smell something horrible. They realize their father has trailed unpleasant debris into the car via his loose singlet. At the end of this trip, their father gets rid of Betsy discreetly and discusses her disappearance in vague terms.

Just as Winton's embarrassment makes him feel desperate to get rid of Betsy, ultimately his father's embarrassment surrounding the unpleasant scene drives him to finally retire the car. It's a scene that demonstrates how shame and humiliation can overpower practical thinking.

Looking back, Winton suggests he was too quick to judge Betsy—after all, she survived several eras of human life and represents something lasting which is rare in a time of "instant obsolescence." But he admits that if he saw her today, he'd burn her immediately.

Though Winton tries to appreciate Betsy for her impressive strength, he retains much of the disdain for her that he had as a child, which suggests that his aesthetic preferences haven't changed much over his life. It also suggests that his childhood embarrassment is still a potent driving force.

TWICE ON SUNDAYS

During childhood, Winton finds Sundays ominous and melancholy. Even as the end of the weekend approaches, he and his family are gearing up for yet another exertion: the Sunday evening church service. Instead of a relaxing Sunday night, ahead lies the evening gospel service followed by the Fellowship Tea—a chance to deliver the Good News to newcomers.

By framing his Sunday night activities as distinct from what one would typically expect from the end of the weekend, Winton sets up the idea that his family was out of the ordinary, and their churchgoing habits didn't align with the behavior of most of their neighbors and friends.

Tim's family stands out for its devout habits—frequent churchgoing is no longer a common practice in Australia in the sixties. And even the label given to them as a "twice-on-Sundays" family falls short of their actual frequent attendance at church and Sunday school. Each Sunday morning, they round up the neighbors' kids and take them to the church. Being kept from the beach, especially on a fine weather day, is grounds for mutiny, but the kids comply partly because Tim's dad is a police officer.

The neighborhood kids' compliance with the Winton family's churchgoing implies that Winton's father holds a great deal of clout in his community. This scenario suggests a strong contrast between the general Australian public and their preference for the beach, and the Winton family's strict adherence to their church's schedule.

Sunday school begins with a sung chorus which starts sleepily but eventually corrals the children into a unified, energetic force. The endorphins from the singing buoy the kids through the rest of the service, which features dry analysis and spiritual criticism.

The singing at church is able to wake up and enliven the congregation, implying that music is a tangible force that binds a community together. This is an idea that Winton will return to later.

For Winton, the stories in the Bible are "imaginative bread and butter." The stories from the Old Testament, though morally confusing, are most exciting, but the Jesus-centric stories fuel his righteous spirit. He tunes out during the prayers but rejoins in the singing, which is like a balm after confronting moral dilemmas all service long. At the end of Sunday school, Tim's father drives the kids back to their homes and returns in time for the 11:00 service, when the singing begins again.

Winton sees Bible stories as laying the most basic groundwork for his imagination. His attraction to the confusing Old Testament stories is echoed in his deep yet puzzled attachment to 2001: A Space Odyssey*—it seems he's attracted to stories he can't quite understand, whose values don't quite line up with his own.*

The hymns, prayers, baptisms, and communion precede the sermon, upon which churchgoers judge the quality of a service. Winton experiences the sermons as things he must survive physically and mentally—tests of the spirit more than inspirational speeches. After the service, the Winton family eats a roast dinner before setting out for family visits.

Just as critics judge works of art, the church congregation passes judgment on the quality of a sermon, suggesting that a church service is itself not totally estranged from secular art. This comparison is strengthened by the fact that Winton feels he must survive a sermon just as he must survive anything else arduous.

At Tim's mother's parents' house, Winton and his immediate family are considered strange for their devout religious habits. One Sunday, his grandmother berates him in the kitchen for his family's behavior, before offering an apology in the form of a wrapped chocolate. After the visits, the family heads back home to eat before heading back out for the evening service. The evening service is more upbeat, serving a younger audience, and features an extended altar call which usually results in someone "surrender[ing] … to Christ." Winton finds the Sunday of church services and other commitments more demanding than a day at school.

The fact that Tim takes the brunt of his grandmother's irritation reminds readers that, as the eldest child, he's expected to be more involved in the leadership of his family than his siblings are. It also contributes to the harrowing nature of a full Sunday schedule in the Winton family, in which Winton must experience a vast array of emotions and attitudes from haranguing to worship. There's a suggestion that church must be survived, or else it'll beat you—or win you over, as in the altar call.

Because Australia is so irreligious, Winton feels that he grows up in a counterculture: the church is like his family. Though his fellow churchgoers don't interact with serious literature or culture, church is his "introduction to conscious living," where people are constantly interrogating the point of life. Looking back, Winton realizes that the church community was in many ways much more progressive than those outside of it. As a churchgoing boy, he begins to understand what it means to be a part of civil life. Church is his introduction to "politics, high language, story and music," and it encourages love in actions—helping and being active in the community while the rest of Australian society seems more focused on pragmatic and concrete progress.

Church provides Winton with much more than one might expect: debate, discourse, the discipline of self-reflection, and the drive to be active in his community. Though he feels like an outsider among his peers at school or in the neighborhood, it's likely that this civic training lays the groundwork for his later activism, as well as his commitment to being a novelist even when the rest of society values productivity and profit over the softer values of kindness and creativity.

Tim's parents converted to Christianity as adults and joined the local Church of Christ, which takes the Bible extremely literally. The sect is a "bare-knuckles, no-frills affair": the prayers in the Sunday service are formless and improvised, there are no religious costumes, and baptism, more important than even weddings, is restricted to those old enough to decide it for themselves. Winton is baptized at age 12. The Sunday service follows a strict order of events and includes communion with grape juice instead of wine. Still, the services, though rigorous, are joyous and somehow casual.

Winton's congregation takes each element of the church service very seriously, and their dislike for costume and aesthetic embellishments suggests that their priorities are honesty and simplicity. Here, there's no room for action without intention. But rather than this creating a sterile, unfriendly atmosphere, it seems to allow the congregation to interact freely and comfortably with each other, implying that community building is just as serious an undertaking as spiritual worship is.

The congregation is made up of manual laborers and their families; the men wear their only suits to church. Though hardly anyone has much education or worldly knowledge, they're hungry to learn and improve themselves. Just as in Jeanette Winterson's novel *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, Tim's experience is of a group of people bound by camaraderie and kindness—people seeking "to liberate themselves and transform society," just as if they'd been communists or members of a theater group.

Winton's description of the congregation quietly suggests that their attendance at church is a kind of performance. The men wearing their only suits to church reveals that for them it's a special occasion—a place to bring their best selves and make action happen in ways that aren't possible in their regular lives. Church enables them to become fuller versions of themselves.

Winton realizes that faith depends on story, which is the vehicle for all theological teachings. He learns his favorite bible stories by heart. Church reveals to him the power of language through the written Bible and the spoken rhetoric—language only matched by Shakespeare, which feels strangely familiar to him when he reads it at school because its incantation matches the sound of what he's heard in church. Debates in his Bible study groups teach Winton the power of single words—they spend ages debating words like "wine" and "demon." He discovers that language is a kind of nutrition.

Winton's realization of the value and potency of story is something he'll carry with him long after he leaves the church. Though his church is a sparse affair, he's still able to access the richness of language in the mystical words of the Bible. This no doubt influences his adult writing career.

Though at school, Winton feels that peers and teachers might ignore him, at church, people recognize him as a fellow member and treat him with patience. Certain elders become closer to him than his own grandparents, paying attention to his spiritual journey. At the age of six, Winton asks an elder to tell him how big his spirit is; the elder takes Tim's hand and presses it against his chest. He tells him it's about the size of his fist. This image stays with Tim. He's moved by the patience and grace shown by the elder in that moment.

At Winton's church, each member is valued, cared for, and taken seriously. This kind of respect is something Winton attempts to demonstrate in his own forms of worship later in life, like when he walks along the shore at low tide and contemplates the rich meaning of each living or once-living thing there. Church teaches him to commune with the things and people around him, to treat each one with great care.

Winton appreciates the kindness and community of the church, but amid the turbulent politics of the 1970s, its theology falls short of answering pressing questions on topics like the Vietnam War and gender equality. Winton notices the mindset of those in the church becoming short-sighted and inflexible, focusing on prophecy and conspiracy. The church transforms from a community fixture to an insular group. Meanwhile, Winton becomes what others in the church describe as "obtuse" and a "stumbling-block," challenging scripture and his elders for answers.

While Winton is invested in the church, he also actively engages with social and political issues in the wider community, and is frustrated when members of the congregation refuse to contemplate the ways that theology and the complex, violent world collide. The church begins to fail Winton when it stops acting as a force of connection and community, suggesting that these things are the most important to him.

Winton has become a wide reader, and his excitement for the philosophy of thinkers like Bonhoeffer and Barth grates against others in group discussions. Though other church members worry for Tim's journey and faith, the larger worry is for the security of the group, and Winton finds himself becoming a "wayward son." He's surprised by the fact that the church has become a hurdle to his own faith. He knows that his parents are devoted to the church, and he doesn't want to worry them with seeming disloyalty, but the church's insularity and growing tribalism make him uncomfortable.

The church, a place that was once so welcoming and a symbol of strong community for Winton, begins to shut him out. Winton is still deeply committed to his faith, and others' worries suggest that their idea of faith and the spirit is fundamentally at odds with his. While he searches to connect his faith with the whole, complex world, the rest of the congregation wants to shut that world out.

In particular, the thing that bothers Winton about the church's changing attitude is the repeated idea by members that "this world is not my home." This idea seems, to Tim, like a dismissal of the miracle of human life and the world around them, and it seems particularly absurd when the members of the church had generally safe and happy lives and enough food to eat. Winton is eager to live in communion with his neighbors and the natural world, and when he shares this idea with others in the church, they grow defensive. He leaves church life slowly and quietly. Looking back, he doesn't regret calling out the issues he saw, but he realizes that he was unaware of his own privilege as a university student among elders who had mostly left school in their early teenage years to become laborers.

The elements that young Winton loved about the church—its energy and joy—seem to have disappeared as he's grown up. He's dismayed by the attitude of the congregation that the beauty and joy of the world around them are insufficient, while for him—as he describes in essays like "Repatriation" and "Barefoot in the Temple of Art"—they make life abundant and exciting. In hindsight, he's able to see that his extended education allowed him to find so much joy in those things, rather than feeling afraid of them.

Through his twenties, Winton moves between different, more progressive churches, but he doesn't feel satisfied by what they offer. He realizes that language or theology can't solve the mysteries of faith and life. He continues to hear from the members of his childhood congregation who write with care and concern. As an adult, his best friends are—or have been—believers, and their common childhoods provide fuel for good jokes and shared memories. Winton still has a fondness for the liturgical form of worship—its repetition and structure.

Even churches that more closely align with Winton's political views aren't places he feels he belongs, implying that it's perhaps not an issue with a specific congregation that caused him to slip away from the church but an issue with any attempt at spiritual cohesion. Church still offers Winton a place for meditative reflection and joy, but it seems to lack the discourse he's interested in pursuing.

In the present, Winton still doesn't know what kind of believer he is, though he still identifies as a Christian. He's no longer as feisty and argumentative as he once was. To him, belief matters less than "the acceptance of grace." Still, on Sunday evenings, he feels that same pull he felt as a child when he was ruled by the demands of a churchgoing life.

Winton settles into an attitude that allows him to kindly and generously connect with the world around him. Focusing on grace, rather than any rigid belief or religious sect, brings him joy and makes sense to him where congregational worship and belonging didn't.

HIGH TIDE

Winton and a companion step outside into a blisteringly hot day. The heat is dry and suffocating, but Winton and his partner have been cooped up in the air conditioning for too long—it's time to go swimming. The **sea** is only 100 meters away, but they're both exhausted by the time they reach it, and even when they do, the water itself is warm and hardly refreshing.

Winton's desire to escape the air conditioning that makes comfort possible and replace it with nearly intolerable heat implies that, despite Australia's brutal weather, he still feels called to be part of the natural environment.

The two swim slowly towards a reef in the rough current. Fish and a turtle swim ahead of them. Beyond the rocky bar, the sand is desiccated, only covered by water at the fullest tide. Winton and his partner reach the reef, which is swarming with life—lagoon rays and brightly colored fish swim through in a pattern of endless traffic. They stay watching the sea life as long as they can hold on before walking back up the beach, which holds reminders of the desert-like heat.

The fact that Winton and his companion are confident about the location of the reef and the best way to approach it suggests that they've done this before, many times—they're almost as at home here as the sea creatures are. The contrast between the sea and the land on this hot day demonstrates the dramatically different environments of Western Australia.

THE WAIT AND THE FLOW

Winton remembers a conversation with a neighbor who asked him what the point of surfing was. To him, it seemed like all surfers did was sit out on the **ocean** and wait. Winton agrees—surfing is a pointless exercise, and mostly, it's just about waiting.

Winton's acceptance that surfing is pointless is less of an indictment on the activity and more of a point of curiosity, setting the essay up to answer his neighbor's question in a way that might not be totally straightforward.

At the age of five, Winton gets his first taste of surfing when his cousins push him out to the break on a longboard. After rushing to shore on the board for the first time, he's hooked. He begins to surf on inelegant Coolite boards that chafe his skin, before getting his first glass board in 1973. The best thing about surfing is the momentum of rushing to shore on a wave—it never gets old.

Surfing doesn't begin glamorously for Winton—it's a clumsy activity at first, but it hooks him with its thrill. His commitment to it, and the joy it brings him, are evident when as a child he surfs until his skin hurts. He's willing to endure pain for the happiness it brings him.

Surfing has Polynesian origins—the Hawaiian people valued its qualities of freedom and grace—and its spread has had a huge global impact and become a huge part of coastal Australian culture. In the 1950s, it was a way to express one's individuality, and it had what Winton calls its "Romantic era" in the sixties and seventies. In his childhood, it's a way to feel close to one another and to the **ocean** and to distance yourself from a normative linear mindset, focusing instead on the "waiting and flowing" it demands. Looking back, he suspects it inspired his artistic side.

Just like in church, surfing brings Winton joy partly because it allows him to connect with other people and the world around him. There are many similarities for Winton between a church surface and a day surfing, suggesting that surfing is another way he can access his spirituality, which seems to go hand in hand with his desire for creativity, too.

By the 1980s, though, surfing has developed a corporate edge, and the general population of surfers is distinguished by machismo, aggression, racism, and misogyny. Fewer and fewer women surf, put off by the unfriendly culture. Winton opts for snorkeling and diving rather than surfing—he doesn't gel with the culture either. But he misses surfing, and after moving to a smaller town, he finds a group of surfers who are milder in nature and begins to enjoy the activity again.

The insular, unfriendly edge that takes over the surfing community drives Winton away from it. This echoes the way that he distanced himself from the church because of the congregation's fear and rigidity. This pattern implies that one of Winton's core priorities is the ability to be in peaceful harmony with the people around him, and to create a welcoming community.

Surfing offers Winton a chance to experience beauty and connection. It's a meditative activity. Unlike other sports, it relies on being in communion with the **ocean** rather than exploiting it. It forces him to slow down and wait, the same way he does when he comes to his desk to write. When surfing, he has to be ready for a wave to come and bear him onward—when writing, it's the same. When an idea arrives, he's ready to catch it and follow it to the end.

The connection Winton makes between surfing and writing here also holds echoes of his thoughts about faith. For Winton, faith, just like writing and surfing, is firmly tied to the ability to be in communion with the world, to gain energy from the harmony he feels with nature and other people—whether it's singing a hymn, riding a wave, or catching hold of an idea.

IN THE SHADOW OF THE HOSPITAL

Winton mulls on the idea of the **hospital** as a shelter, a refuge in the most desperate times. We're relieved by the sight of a hospital when we need one, but the rest of the time the word holds fear and dread. He was told as a child that it was a safe place where people went to get fixed, and where babies were born, but at the age of five he realized it was a place nobody wanted to go.

Winton has already detailed his experience as a young child witnessing his father emerge from the hospital a changed man. The reader understands that Winton spend his childhood under the shadow of that hospital, so it's intriguing to return to the idea of the hospital again here.

As a five-year-old, Winton experiences the fear that **hospitals** represent when his father goes to one and comes out completely broken and unrecognizable. When he comes home, he breathes through a hole in his neck, and his eyes are red. Five-year-old Winton is terrified, but he sees his mother and others chatting to his father cheerily and plays along.

Winton's descriptions of his recovering father are frightening and almost inhuman, creating a picture of someone who has been completely transformed. It's easy to understand why he's come to think of hospitals as places to fear—who knows what could happen to a person in them after what happened to his dad?

When Tim's father is mostly recovered, he still has to walk with a stick, and whenever he has to go back to the **hospital** for more surgery, Winton worries that he'll never come home, or that he'll come home an unrecognizable stranger again. His mother, seeming to realize his anxiety about the hospital, takes him to see his father after a surgery. Tim's walk through the hospital to his father's room is like a "gauntlet of horrors," and when he reaches his father, he cries at the prospect of having to leave the same way he came in.

Though Winton's trip to see his father in hospital reassures him that he's alive and recovering, it's hardly a comforting experience. What he sees there will haunt him for years to come, and the hospital is still an image of horror.

As an adult, one of the images Winton sees when he thinks of a **hospital** is of the main character in *Johnny Get Your Gun*, a quadruple amputee covered in bandages. The horror of it is in the corner of his mind during every hospital visit he makes.

Echoing his obsession with Kubrick's 2001, *Winton's reference to a film scene here implies that he sees the world not only as it is but with the exaggeration and imagination provided by fictional stories and images.*

Though in childhood his family makes several **hospital** visits and he's well-acquainted with the place, Winton is never admitted as a child. When he's 18, though, he wakes up in a hospital bed with glass in his hair, pain everywhere in his body, and a sensation of overwhelming fear. He is disoriented, lacks memory of the accident, and feels weak and confused. He learns that, while the hospital is an unpleasant place to visit, it's far worse being a patient.

Winton doesn't gain a full understanding of the fear and disorientation one can feel in a hospital until he's a patient there himself. This period of recovery alerts him to the complete range of horrors a hospital can hold.

Even though the chaos, fear, and pain of being acutely injured or ill is overwhelming, Winton finds that it's at least a distraction. But the long road of recovery is the real challenge. The constant noise and bustle of the **hospital** prevents him from resting, and he constantly wants what he can't have—pain relief, a pillow, and some peace. In hospital, he realizes, people become worse versions of themselves: callous, greedy, and tired of being confined and infantilized. Looking back, he wonders how people ever write about anything other than wars and hospitals, and he understands why so many people choose to die at home rather than in a hospital ward.

The fact that Winton thinks that hospitals are equal to wars in their capacity for narrative and exploration of character implies that his time there was dramatic and magnified his human experience to an almost fictional level. The hospital seems to function in conflict with itself: though it's a place of intended respite, Winton can't find any peace there; all the machines and people seem to cause him more stress than they bring him comfort.

Winton ends up marrying a nurse, who brings home signs of the **hospital** in the way she smells and the stains on her clothes. Sometimes, reluctantly, he meets her in the hospital cafeteria for lunch, but he's too distracted to be a good conversationalist. When his wife is heavily pregnant with their first child, he thinks about how strange it must be for people in their last days of life to be cared for by someone carrying life in her body. And when she returns to work, he brings their son to the hospital for her to feed him on a break from her shift on the oncology ward.

Winton marrying a nurse is arguably a confirmation that he can't avoid his deepest fears, even while, as he wrote in "Havoc: A Life in Accidents," he stopped looking for danger as he grew up. Her occupation forces Winton into close proximity with the hospital. This scenario suggests that his connections with loved ones are valuable for the way they allow him to reckon with himself.

For five years, Winton and his family live next door to Fremantle Hospital, a large metropolitan **hospital**. It seems like its own world at times, more like a power plant than a healthcare facility. Winton tries to see the hospital's proximity as a reassurance—if his children need help, it's right there. The hospital also provides a great deal of excitement via the emergency entrance, where you can find people in all kinds of moods and situations.

Winton uses practical thinking to wrestle with his fears and hesitations regarding the hospital. It's another circumstance under which his care for his loved ones—here, specifically his children—helps him to come to terms with his own unconscious traumas.

Fremantle Hospital is embedded in its urban surroundings rather than isolated and set apart, as a suburban hospital might be; its bright lights and security guards often give Winton the feeling that he's unwelcome in his own neighborhood. The **hospital** seems to have its own microclimate, an "aura of hope and dread." Winton sees people enacting their lives publicly, almost like theater. Frightened hospital visitors seem to lack social awareness and lose even basic skills like driving and parking. Their emotions are on show for any passer-by to see.

This is another situation that highlights the irony of the hospital in Winton's life. While the hospital is technically a place of safety and healing, its aesthetic appearance is hostile, making Winton feel like he's better off farther away from it. Winton's description of the hospital as having an aura suggests his distaste for it is so strong, it's almost spiritual.

One night, Winton wakes to hear someone ramming against the doors of the mental health unit with his car, desperate to be admitted. Another time, he's standing at a pedestrian crossing beside a car in which a woman screams nonstop. Healthy and in no pain, Winton feels uncomfortable next to such an obvious display of distress. He realizes that his patience and empathy for many of the **hospital**'s injured patients is dissipating, especially when it comes to the Saturday night crowd, who are mostly implicated by the dangers of pleasure. Still, he witnesses kindness from strangers waiting to be picked up and from nurses and medics. Walking past the hospital on his way to work, his tasks seem inane when compared to those of the doctors and nurses emerging after night shifts.

Winton's proximity to the hospital acts like a gateway for danger to enter his life, despite his resolution not to go looking for it. His declining empathy shows that repeated exposure to horror and violence is dehumanizing, and for Winton, a more immediate connection to the inner lives of strangers does the opposite of connecting him with them—instead, he feels alienated. It's possible that his childhood experiences of danger and fear have led him to have less sympathy for those who go looking for dangerous thrills, such as the Saturday night crowd.

After a while, Tim's family moves a few blocks away from the **hospital**, tired of its incessant energy. But Winton realizes its effect extends beyond its immediate vicinity. One day he gets a call from an estranged friend who, in one of the wards of the hospital, can see his roof from his window. His friend asks him to visit. When he does, and sees his tiny, bald friend wearing only a diaper, he's shocked and thinks at first that he has the wrong room. His friend is obviously close to death. They make peace, and after his visit, Winton regularly looks up at the hospital and wonders about the people looking down through the windows. For the first time, he considers the shadow of yearning that hangs down from the patients in the hospital.

Just as when he was admitted to the hospital after his accident as a teenager, entering the hospital as a visitor reveals a side of it Winton has so far neglected. But instead of building on his feelings of stress, fear, and disorientation, this experience of reuniting with his friend causes Winton to realize that the hospital, far from being a power plant or furnace, is full of human connection, care, and desire. Only by witnessing such a vulnerable scene can Winton regain his empathy for the hospital's purpose and its patients.

When Tim's first grandchild is born, he waits in the **hospital** for the first bit of news. The place is claustrophobic, and he can't calm down. Eventually he goes out into a courtyard with his wife, where his son finds him and shows him his new grandchild. Winton accepts the miracle presented by a hospital, along with its dread. Later, his father shows him the lump in his chest from his new pacemaker. Winton knows that if he lived a few decades earlier, his father would've been long dead—instead, he's able come home from hospital the day after the procedure.

Despite having gained a fuller understanding of the hospital as a place of humanity thanks to the experience with his friend, Winton still can't shake the visceral claustrophobia and fear that being in a hospital inflicts on him. The intellectual knowledge that hospitals are places of care and life will never completely overcome his entrenched distaste for being near, or in, one.

THE BATTLE FOR NINGALOO REEF

In 2003, Dr Geoff Gallop, the Premier of Western Australia, announces that the government has rejected the proposal for a resort at Maud's Landing and that he'll be working towards acquiring a World Heritage listing for the area. The announcement promises hope for a group of conservation activists including Tim, who's shocked by the strength of the announcement. Winton and the other campaigners have spent a few years working toward this moment, and, having become used to facing wealth and influence on the opposing side, he can't quite internalize the decision.

Winton's shock at the Premier's strong announcement demonstrates that he's jaded towards politics and is used to politicians making halfhearted statements or presenting compromised plans. Though he devoted years of his life to this cause, he's surprised to see his work pay off, which suggests that he was devoted to the cause not for pragmatic reasons but because he felt emotionally drawn to it.

In 1987, the government invited proposals for a tourist development in this part of Western Australia, but for many years, nothing really happened. In 2000, though, a proposal was made to build a vast resort and marina there which would have had severe implications on **Ningaloo Reef**, Australia's longest fringing coral reef. Ningaloo, a particularly vulnerable reef due to its proximity to the shore, had been protected by its isolation, and is home to a vast number of different species. However, in 2000, it wasn't widely known across Australia like the Great Barrier Reef was. But researchers were beginning to understand its importance and could see that the resort proposal would cause severe destruction to it.

The government's invitation for, and subsequent neglect of, proposals for a development on the reef demonstrate that, at least during the late 20th century, the Australian government neither felt driven to protect the natural environment, nor particularly desperate for economic progress. The process of planning on Ningaloo Reef went unnoticed by most Australians for many years, perhaps partly because of this general lack of enthusiasm to defend areas of natural beauty.

The fight for **Ningaloo** is a fight between two different worldviews: one being that nature exists to be exploited and has no inherent value, and the other being that nature is finite and precious and deserves to be cared for. Gallop's government exists on the promise that they'll end old-growth logging, signaling a change from the former worldview to the latter, but Western Australia's politics are deeply conservative and difficult to challenge.

The current government in Western Australia seems to signal a hopeful change where the environment is concerned, but Winton's description suggests that any effort to protect wildlife at the expense of economic progress will be a difficult battle to fight.

In 2000, Winton meets with five other fledgling campaigners from vastly different backgrounds to discuss the marina proposal. Winton has been involved in marine conservation for around six years at this point and tends to feel like a "redneck" among campaigners, but in this diverse group, he's emboldened to help to spread the movement to even more people. Still, fighting for nature conservation in the **Ningaloo** battle looks like a tough process—it seems highly unlikely that anything will stop the resort's development.

Despite being a writer who has risen to the middle class from the working class, Winton's description of himself as a "redneck" suggests he prioritizes isolation and a rural life over any attempt at being a part of the suburban elite. This is another scenario, like surfing or group worship, in which community emboldens Winton and he feels buoyed by the presence of others.

With other campaigns focusing their energy on woodchipping, the campaign for **Ningaloo** has to start from nothing and find its own funding. Campaign workers borrow an office and start working from the ground up, writing letters and forming alliances with larger wildlife groups. As an author whose focus is on his novel, Winton feels out of place at planning meetings. And Western Australia, especially the rural parts, are incredibly distant from the major Australian news outlets, meaning it's difficult to raise any awareness about Ningaloo in other parts of Australia.

Winton's upbringing among extended family members who lacked the education that would allow them to read and write, as he explains in "Using the C-word," draws strong parallels to this campaign's narrative of beginning from very few resources. Winton's love for connection and being part of a community means it's a little surprising to find he feels so out of place in the meetings.

Another struggle the campaign faces is the "low moral ebb" affecting Australians' faith in the government and other leaders, meaning that any effort to make a difference is met with resignation and cynicism. Still, Winton finds there's optimism and kindness everywhere—people offer their cars, their time, their houses, and their money to the cause.

Winton realizes that the issue of material resources, or lack of them, is easier to overcome than the widespread public apathy and wariness of change. This suggests that emotions and personal connections will be the key to a successful campaign.

In September 2001, the campaign holds their first public meeting. Winton is the headline act, but he feels like an imposter. He's the campaign's hope of media attention, but only one journalist turns up, and even he leaves before the actual substance of the meeting gets underway. However, when the scientists begin to speak about the issues, the public attendees become passionate. After the meeting, many people offer help and start spreading the message.

Winton feels out of place even when he's the star of the show, which suggests he lives quite an isolated life and is hesitant to be in the spotlight. Meanwhile, it becomes evident that the campaign will be fueled more by grassroots action by everyday people than by any meteoric rise in the mainstream media.

The campaign receives a small amount of money and uses it to print bumper stickers and other materials. Public awareness begins to grow. In the local towns of Coral Bay and Exmouth, there's a 90 percent opposition rate to the resort, and people of diverse politics and occupations unite to speak out. The story reaches the media, and many people begin to agree that there should be a thorough process of evaluation before the natural treasure can be used for commercial tourism. Eventually, the campaigners arrange meetings with cabinet ministers—though Winton does his best to avoid any meeting he can.

Winton is transparent about his reluctance to meet with cabinet ministers and other higher-ups, which shows he doesn't have any romantic notion of his own heroism in the campaign. His focus throughout the essay is on the strength of a united group, and not on any individual action of his own.

At first, the campaign is treated kindly by the media, but as soon as they begin to gain momentum, they find it harder to get coverage. They learn to get media attention on slow news days and to strategize based on journalists' careers and the editors who decide which stories to run. The media is a food chain in itself: "Smaller fish are afraid to upset the big swimmers."

The media's declining interest demonstrates that the rough outline of an underdog story holds more narrative clout than a story about the complex effects of building a resort on a precious reef. Winton gains insight into the fact that the media doesn't necessarily exist to tell true stories, but to ensure its own survival.

Over the course of the campaign, Winton figures out the motivations and behavior of parliamentarians, lobbyists, and journalists. It's a cynical world which can be navigated by working out who is working for who. On the other hand, even the unlikeliest people can be your allies, no matter how rich or seemingly conservative they are. He learns to overlook his own prejudices in order to make unexpected and helpful connections.

Winton draws a distinction between the cruel, transactional spheres of politics and the media, and the welcoming, unexpectedly generous general public. Though those with more social status might seem to offer more power to make change, it's his connections with other ordinary citizens that make Winton hopeful for progress.

Over a thousand people come to the campaign's second public meeting. The event is covered in national print, TV, and radio news. Because the local media coverage has cooled off by this point, the activists take the campaign to the internet—a relatively new strategy in pre-social media days. The resort's public relations team fights back, casting the campaign into doubt, but when Tim's book wins several major prizes, he attracts more attention to the campaign. However, the campaign is running out of money and relying at this point on stunts to gain attention. The campaign runs on frenzied, desperate energy in lieu of real resources.

The campaign is obviously and dramatically growing, but its members aren't satisfied by coverage by the regular media outlets. Their use of the internet is quite a new tactic and demonstrates their hunger for success and their willingness to think outside the box. Despite Winton feeling out of place in the campaign, the results of his creative efforts bring them more media attention, proving his value as a campaigner.

After sending dozens of letters to Australian celebrities, the campaign receives a buoying response. Sports stars and actors join the cause, gaining more media attention. Though media outlets brand the campaigners as "environmental elite," they are now such a diverse group that the insult isn't believable, and the response to the media attacks is strongly indignant. In December 2002, a group of 15,000 protestors march through Fremantle, a demonstration the mayor describes as the largest in living memory. By mid-2003, sensing the high stakes of the situation, the premier takes on responsibility to decide what will happen to **Ningaloo Reef**.

The fact that the media has begun to spin rumors and make up false stories about the campaign suggests two things—first, that reporters are puppets of the rich members of society who want the resort built, and second, that they're desperately worried the campaign against the resort will succeed. But despite the media's desire to control the narrative, the public voice is louder.

On the day that the premier announces his decision to protect the reef, the campaign is greeted with happy chaos. Winton knows that the battle to save the reef isn't over, but he acknowledges the victory of the campaign. He credits this to the campaigners' passion, the power of the internet, the personal courage and progressiveness of the new premier, and the Australian love and nostalgia for the **ocean**: "the only sacred site" for most citizens. The diversity of the campaign, the generosity of the activists involved, and the unpredictable luck they stumbled into were key to their success.

Rather than reflecting on his individual part in the campaign, Winton acknowledges the complex and wide net of relationships and effort that led to the campaign's success. He knows that they couldn't have succeeded without harnessing the emotional attachment of the Australian public to the ocean—their almost religious attitude towards it seems to have had an almost miraculous effect.

LETTER FROM A STRONG PLACE

Winton wanders through the woods behind the cottage where he's staying, checking rabbit snares and noticing the house lights turn on in other homes for the evening. He walks in the shadow of Leap Castle toward the Gate Lodge, where he and his family have been living for a few months thanks to a stranger who called and offered it to them as lodging.

Winton's behavior in this scene indicates he's been at Leap Castle for some time—long enough to develop habits and feel comfortable walking through the woods past strangers' homes.

Winton and his wife and small son have spent the winter in the cottage—it's spring now, and they're almost ready to leave. Winton is deciding which of his clothes and books will make it to Greece, their next, drier, warmer destination. Every morning he's been walking to the damp cottage up the hill to light a fire and write a thousand words. Winton is conscious that every part of this land has a name and a story—a rich history. The estate is owned by an Australian who has filled the cottage with literature and art from his home country.

Winton's habitual behavior demonstrates that he's deeply committed to his creative work, even in the damp and cold conditions. His awareness of the land around him and its complex history implies he holds respect for this place, even though it's not his home. And, as in the Australian wilderness, he's curious about the different stories that have made this place what it is.

Winton writes productively, his story seeming to form its own shape. Over the winter, the cottage was so cold that his hand had trouble making the shapes of words on the page. He and his wife saw their first snow and lit their first chimney fire. Meanwhile, he's been writing about the hot, dry places of home. Every so often, he'll glance up at Leap Castle and remember where he is. The castle has had new windows installed, which has confused the birds roosting nearby—every morning, Winton collects their bodies from around the castle and looks up at new blood smears on the windows. He feels "ensnared" by the castle and its troubled history.

Like in the Ningaloo campaign, Winton feels out of place here, which suggests he only really feels comfortable in the Western Australia wilderness. His feeling of being a new presence in the midst of muddy ancient history draws a parallel with the newly installed windows—Winton doesn't quite fit. The crows' bodies and blood hint at the gruesome stories Leap Castle holds and suggest that it'll never stop being a place of danger and bloodshed.

Many people have written about the ghosts they've suspected haunt Leap Castle, and the story of its construction is far from pleasant. When the O'Carrolls had the keep built in the 14th century, poisoning and murder played a large part in keeping rivals at bay and avoiding paying the workers. Over the centuries, the murders—including a fratricide—continued. When he helped to clear out the castle, Winton found an uncovered trapdoor that led to a dungeon into which victims were dropped and left to die; cartloads of bones were removed from it in the 19th century.

Winton has once again found himself in place of violence and danger. Though his presence at the castle is due to a benevolent gift, his actual experience there is more haunted than blessed. Despite the unsavory stories Winton learns about, he still feels attracted to this place, perhaps because it's charged with a similar, spiritual absence to the one he felt at Mt Gibson.

Winton spends some of his time exploring the castle and often feeling spooked by it. He and his son wander and play in the gothic wing. But although Winton senses that the atmosphere is heavy with stories, he has no patience for the myths and fictions attached to it; Ireland "seems haunted enough" without the extra embellishments. The stories he's heard about the castle seem too florid and well-crafted to be real. Still, they built a reputation for the castle as the most haunted in the British Isles, which feeds the enthusiasm of the locals to tell their own stories of ghost sightings.

Winton's impatience for the myths and stories of the castle suggests he's more invested in the concrete reality of life rather than fabricated rumor. It's a similar lack of sympathy to the feeling he describes having when he lives near Fremantle Hospital—a frustration with those who bring unnecessary danger into their lives for the purpose of entertainment, when real life is already tragic and dangerous enough.

Despite Winton's skepticism, there are a few things that he's noticed in the past months that have helped him to understand why some people think the castle is cursed. Once, all the faucets in the Gate Lodge turned on in the middle of the night; another time, Tim's son reported hearing voices in the ceiling. And not all the stories about the castle focus on hauntings: in 1922, the IRA bombed and destroyed the building, and it still seems unclear whether they were targeting Protestants with the attack or attempting to get rid of the castle's curse.

Though the spooky happenings in the Gate Lodge help Winton to empathize with those who share ghost stories about Leap Castle, it seems he still doesn't completely buy into the mythology surrounding the place. But he acknowledges that there's something heavy about the stories—especially when they collide with actual historical events like the 1922 bombing.

When Winton arrived, the cottage where he works was a damp, rotting ruin, but with a builder's help, he patched it up into a suitable working space. Winton writes in the mornings, and in the afternoons, he takes his son to watch the construction going on at the castle, sometimes helping rake new gravel into a path, sometimes watching a demolition.

While Winton isn't particularly captivated by the history and ghost stories, he's invested in the current progress at the castle, which implies that comfort and hospitality are more important to him than perpetuating the idea of the castle as a dark, haunted place.

The current owner, Peter Bartlett, bought the castle very cheaply a few decades ago, having found some of his ancestry mentioned in its annals, and he'll live there once the first stage of renovations is complete. He plans to fill the castle with antiques, art, books, and people—to make it a joyful place rather than a haunted one. He claims that talk of ghosts doesn't bother him, but he had an exorcism performed anyway. On his birthday, he hosts a huge party in the castle, and Winton notices that not one ghost story is shared all night.

Though neither Winton nor Bartlett claim to believe in the ghost stories attached to the castle, each are suspicious in their small ways—Winton because of the confusing events at the Gate Lodge, and Bartlett in his desire to have an exorcism performed. It's clear that the castle's daunting history can't be evaded by even the most skeptical resident.

After a few months at Leap Castle, Winton realizes he feels weighed down by the history of the place. He's not accustomed to living somewhere so storied—he identifies as a "New Worlder," and the surroundings of the castle and all its nooks and niches are becoming claustrophobic to him. One day, he wakes up with light shining on his face—a new sensation—and finds that spring has begun. This makes him think of home. In the cottage, his workspace, he sets to work weaving together the tales and myths of his own childhood.

Winton's claustrophobia implies he's more at home in a wide open, even deserted, space than the complex, mazelike structure of the castle. The fact that the light in the morning reminds Winton of home demonstrates that for him, home is a place of brightness and warmth—a stark contrast to the damp, dark climate of Ireland.

CHASING GIANTS

On winter nights, Winton and his wife lie in bed listening to humpback whales breach and crash near the coast. The noise of a whale's tail is as assured and powerful as "a bookie climbing into a Bentley after another day at the track." During the day, the whale sounds distract Winton from his work. When the weather allows it, he and his wife take their paddleboards down to the water to get up close to the whales or to other large sea creatures like manta rays and dugongs. This winter, they've seen sousas—Australian bottleneck dolphins—for the first time, but they haven't been able to get a close look.

The fact that Winton and his wife can not only hear but identify the sounds of the humpback whales demonstrates that they live incredibly near the shore, and that the ocean is an integral part of their lives. Their familiarity with the sea life suggests that they spend a great deal of their time at, or in, the ocean.

Winton has loved dolphins and whales since childhood, and after whaling stopped in Australia, he's had more and more chances to swim with them in the **ocean**. When a blue whale washed up on the shore close to where he lived, he was fascinated by its rotting body. Though the humpbacks migrate annually, and he's heard and seen them many times, the sight and sound still thrill him, and he paddles out to be amongst the whales as often as possible.

Winton's fascination with the rotting whale carcass recalls his childhood attraction to danger and violence. Even though the whale carcass stinks and represents the death of a magnificent sea creature, Winton is still amazed by the natural process of its disintegration, a reminder that each phase of the life cycle deserves respect.

Early in the season, Winton will often give reckless chase to a pod of whales hopelessly far out from shore, though the exertion required is almost impossible to match. The first time he tried this, the sun was setting, and he was kilometers away from shore by the time he reached the whales. Later in the season, he takes a more measured approach, and the whales are closer to shore, seemingly escorted by a group of sousas.

Winton's dogged hope of catching the pod of whales echoes his sentimental efforts in the campaign for Ningaloo. His love for the ocean, and more generally, for Australia's wild habitats, drives him to commune with and protect it.

Winton finds himself surrounded by a pod of humpbacks who have seemingly slowed to check him out. He's overwhelmed by the way they communicate with one another—their incomprehensible intelligence. The younger whales encircle him in the shallow water, and he finds it difficult to keep his balance on his paddleboard. He braces himself as one slides beneath him. Then another whale breaches, its tail only a meter away from him, so big it could have struck him dead instantly. Winton and his wife head back in, buoyed by their good luck. As they leave the water, they see a few sharks leaving puffs of silt behind them like a fireworks display.

Winton's rapt attention in this scene demonstrates once again his desire to be one with nature and to respect each living thing's role in its complex ecology. He's so intrigued by this pod of whales that he seems to forget he's even there and could be at risk if they make any sudden moves. His comparison of the puffs of silt to a fireworks display is a reminder that he delights in every detail of the natural world, and finds each creature worthy of celebration.

THE DEMON SHARK

As a child, Winton becomes accustomed to the luxury of wide-open space that comes along with living in Australia. The **ocean** and its vastness is an endless offering to him, and he always wants more of it—it feels like home. But when he's taken to see *Oliver!* at the cinema, the trailer for a documentary called *Savage Shadows* about a vicious shark attack rattles him profoundly. The reenactment of the attack featured in the trailer seems absolutely real to Tim. It's a precursor to the widespread horror that Spielberg's *Jaws* will bring to audiences a few years later, causing an intense, collective fear of sharks in the ocean.

Winton's experience seeing the trailer for Savage Shadows, *and its subsequent effect on his life, mirrors his experience seeing Kubrick's* 2001 *as he details in "A Space Odyssey at Eight." Both viewings shock Winton; while* 2001 *has the effect of making the actual moon landing feel somewhat dull and inevitable, this trailer rattles Tim and subconsciously subtly alters his experience as a swimmer and surfer. This pattern of media experience seems to suggest that, at least for Winton, the imagination doesn't only illuminate the real world. It can darken it, too.*

The film trailer instills in Winton an awareness of sharks and the horror they signify—suddenly, he's much more aware of the danger in the **ocean**, and when he's out surfing, the idea of sharks lurks in the back of his mind. In these days, beachside aquariums are popular and rustic, the smaller fish and other creatures essentially acting as background to the sharks who are the main event. The image of the shark is everywhere—teenagers wear shark teeth on necklaces, and Winton draws an outline of a shark when he's doodling in class.

Though Winton is markedly more afraid of sharks after seeing the trailer, he also thinks about them constantly and seems to desire proximity to them, much like other young people around him. It's another instance, like his gun wielding and cave diving, which demonstrates his urge to seek out danger and be near to it, while still holding fear and reverence for that dangerous thing.

Winton becomes obsessed with sharks, reading everything he can about them and poring over images and stories of sightings and hunts. Australia seems to be equally obsessed, especially with the great white, or the "white death." Winton misses the cinematic release of the 1971 documentary *Blue Water, White Death*, which features the first extended underwater footage of great white sharks, so he's pleased by the republication of *Blue Meridian*, Peter Matthiessen's account of the making of the documentary. The filming project was led by American millionaire Peter Gimbel and involved seven Americans and two Australians, with Matthiessen along for the ride.

Winton's obsession is understandable given he's a child, and reflects his childlike yearning for discovery. But the fact that Australia as a whole is overcome with anxiety about sharks, despite having always been surrounded by them, is a little comical. It demonstrates the power of emotion and fear over common sense. Meanwhile, Winton's desire to learn more about the great white is clear by the fact that he goes down a rabbit hole to discover more about this specific documentary.

Matthiessen, a novice diver, chronicles the filming process, which becomes tense and fraught with conflict as Gimbel begins diving and filming more recklessly. One day, he and another filmmaker leave the underwater cage, allowing a small shark into the cage with the remaining diver. His actions cause rifts between crew members, especially between the Australians and the Americans. Matthiessen is fascinated by the Australian divers, Ron and Valerie Taylor, even suggesting that Ron is a shark-like figure.

It's either Winton's description of Matthiessen's writing, or Matthiessen's writing itself, that creates quite a stereotypical conflict between the Australian and American members of the crew: the reckless Americans and the conservative Australians. These qualities may have some truth to them, but the contrast feels a little comical, especially when paired with the description of Ron as similar to a shark himself.

The divers' ship steams between South Africa and Sri Lanka, and they're still without a sighting of a great white. Matthiessen focuses more on the interpersonal drama than the shark sightings, attempting to work out the tension between the Americans and Australians. Gimbel's increasingly reckless behavior puzzles Matthiessen and the Australians—he even swims amid feeding sharks and scrambles into the wound of a whale to get a better angle.

The excessively long and repetitive journey of the diving ship suggests that this documentary mission, when complete, will be truly groundbreaking. Gimbel's attraction to danger reflects Winton's own, which is perhaps why the story of the documentary fascinates him so much.

When the expedition relocates to the south coast of Australia, another diver, Rodney Fox, joins the crew. Fox is a survivor of a great white attack, after which his obsession with sharks grew even bigger. Finally, the divers spot a great white and descend in their cages to meet it. Matthiessen, despite his best efforts to remain an objective witness, can't resist the temptation to touch the great white as it swims by. Gimbel, having reached the very end of the mystery, is slightly saddened that there is no more to reveal—though it seems that Matthiessen doesn't quite share that sadness.

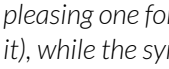
The great white's mythological status and its remarkable physical appearance has an effect on everyone in the crew, even Matthiessen, the weakest diver whose role is arguably more focused on the humans than the sharks. It's a scene that helps the reader to understand why exactly great whites have caused such a flurry among the Australian public, for whom sharks are a common feature of life: the great whites are simply impressive creatures.

Winton's children ask him, "Why did God make sharks?" He's tempted to reply, "To sell newspapers." There's an irrational fear and hatred across Australia toward sharks, and Winton felt it as a child too, despite never seeing one in the wild. He remembers seeing dead sharks—trophies from anglers—hanging by meat hooks from jetties "like public executions," and at 13, watching the sharks that swarmed the flensing deck of Australia's last whaling station being shot, and not feeling at all shocked. The widespread hatred for sharks motivated humans to destroy them.

Much like the success of the Ningaloo campaign, the power of the media in this scenario comes from the fact that their stories call on people's emotions rather than their intellect. Fear, as demonstrated here, or love and nostalgia, as shown in the Ningaloo campaign, are much stronger than any statistical analysis or expert advice. So, this is a situation which displays the tragic effect that emotionally-led decisions can have.

Though public feelings about animal cruelty have become more sympathetic and driven by justice over Winton's lifetime, people still seem to lack sympathy for sharks. Though bees kill more people than sharks yearly, they don't attract nearly as much disgust or fear, and because sharks are such a symbol of terror, humans don't feel particularly outraged by barbaric acts toward them. There's no real impetus to stop industries that continue to decimate sharks for their fins and meat, or the teenage boys who continue to maim sharks, because nobody has the urge to protect sharks.

Winton draws a contrast between public feeling towards bees versus sharks, and his conclusion suggests that the fear comes from how big and menacing the creature looks rather than the statistical proof of how much harm it causes. Because there's still a widespread fear of sharks, there's little public desire to protect them. This contrasts with Winton's experience campaigning for Ningaloo Reef, which suggests that the symbol of the ocean in general is a pleasing one for the general public (and so people wanted to protect it), while the symbol of sharks—despite their connection to the ocean—is met with irrational disgust.



Winton has had joyful and fun experiences with sharks and has found sharks to be as diverse as humans can be. He's noticed that people who spend a lot of time in the water have mellowed to sharks, and even those who have been involved in shark attacks are less prone to anger or vengeance. Most commonly, statements like that are from politicians and others who spend very little time in the **ocean** and are looking to rile up the public—yet road accidents, which cause a huge number more deaths in Australia per year, do not stir up the same kind of fear as the threat of a shark attack.

Winton's observation that people who have had proximity to sharks feel more sympathy for them echoes his experience, as detailed in "In the Shadow of the Hospital," of witnessing the inside of a hospital and consequently understanding its value beyond fear. There's an irony in the fact that most Australians fear sharks mostly because they've never met one, and this irony drives home the irrationality of public perception.

Beyond cruelty and inhumanity, the current rate of shark decimation poses huge threats to underwater ecosystems. When sharks are killed, their food systems lose regulation, creating monocultures and potentially wiping out whole ecosystems. Winton believes that public opinion and awareness of sharks needs to change in order to save precious **ocean** habitats when there's still a chance to do so.

Widespread fear of and disgust for sharks isn't only ironic or irrational, but harmful, too. Like every other living thing, sharks play an important role in the ecosystem they belong to—an ecosystem that's at risk of destruction purely because media-fueled fear makes hunting and killing sharks seem acceptable.

One day in winter, Winton notices that as a storm presses in, there's a swelling tide. He heads north in his vehicle until he reaches the beach. Wind is howling. His dog makes her way to the whale carcass rotting on the shore while Winton takes his surfboard and heads into the water to reach the peak, where he sits waiting with a small group of local surfers. They take turns riding the waves in and swimming back out. The locals tell Winton that the three sharks that have been lurking near the shore since the blue whale beached are back today.

The fact that Winton and his dog amuse themselves at the shore with different activities almost suggests an ecology of its own. While Winton is attracted to the idea of catching the waves, his dog delights in the whale carcass—and there's a lighthearted implication that this is, in a way, honoring every element of the natural world, even at the very end of a creature's life cycle.

Winton catches a wave in and begins to paddle back out when a set of strong waves trap him in the shallows. He pushes back out, but he feels something bump against his arm. He realizes a shark has brushed up against him before panicking and swimming off. When he tells another surfer, the surfer heads to shore immediately, but Winton stays out in the waves. When he catches another, he almost slices right into the path of one of the sharks. The adrenaline forces Winton to stay out surfing until he's totally exhausted.

The shark's behavior, panicking after coming into contact with Winton, demonstrates that, far from being needlessly violent, most sharks only go hunting for what they need. Winton's resolve to remain in the waves with the sharks speaks not only to the thrill-seeking side of his personality, but the fact that it's possible to feel comfortable among sharks if you understand them well enough.

USING THE C-WORD

In 2013, during an interview, a journalist asks Winton whether he really means to use the word "class" to describe the distinctions between two characters in his new novel. The question startles Tim—surely it can't be offensive to refer to the idea of class—but he soon realizes that public opinion about the word and its connotations is changing.

Winton's caught off guard by the journalist's question, which demonstrates his lack of practice mincing his words—it seems he's used to telling the truth as he sees it.

Winton suggests that Australians now think of themselves as divided between those who make an effort in life and those who don't. People no longer attribute success or poverty to systemic or historical factors. Though the gap between rich and poor is now wider than any time since World War II, Australians are ignorant of the factors outside of personal ambition that could keep someone in poverty, tending to believe that if people work hard, they reap the rewards of their labor.

Winton's observations paint a picture of a general Australian public that's willfully ignorant of their history and the entrenched inequalities in their society. To Winton, it seems that most Australians disparage the working class because, rather than understanding the lack of resources that has led to their relative status in life, they see them as lacking ambition and drive.

It seems to Winton that raising the issue of class in Australia sets off alarm bells that that person intends to declare class war or suggest a communist strategy. The political right will only indulge a conversation about inequality if there is no mention of class, which allows the privilege of the powerful and wealthy to continue unexamined.

While Winton is interested in debating this societal issue, for others, even bringing up the subject seems like an attack. This suggests that there's a fragility in the middle class—a sense of defensive entitlement that could crumble at the first challenge.

Growing up, Winton was aware of class and simultaneously told by many teachers that every Australian had a chance to prosper. He understood that he and almost everyone around him was working class, and that while he had as much value as those of higher classes, they would always have power over him. He was told by his grandfather to continue with his education, because his boss would never be able to control what he learned and thought. And while Winton was aware of class, the government of his childhood and teenage years seemed to create the possibility that he would have some class mobility that his parents and grandparents lacked.

Though discussing class in the present day is a tricky maneuver, Winton's exposure to the concept at a young age was anything but. His family was class-aware, and it's implied that this awareness wasn't an oppressive thing for Winton. Rather, it enabled him to understand his status and work out ways of claiming power over his own narrative instead of being governed by others.

Artists, though less constrained by class divisions than many occupations, mostly hail from socially mobile families, and Winton finds himself amongst a small group of writers who rose from working-class backgrounds to middle-class existences. He credits this to luck and cultural history—the hopeful political climate during his childhood—as well as his parents' encouragement. But growing up being aware of and engaged with class distinctions, he never expected the very idea of class to be a taboo topic.

Much like Winton's desire to credit the success of the Ningaloo campaign to circumstance, luck, and the help of the people around him, he credits his class mobility to a particularly lucky political circumstance and his parents' assistance. It's another scenario that suggests he doesn't spend much time thinking about his individual qualities as much as he does the world around him.

At a literary party in Soho in 1995, a drunk editor describes Winton as "chippy.". He realizes that, because he brought up the topic of having been working class, some of the wealthier attendees saw him as a touchy person who made others uncomfortable. He's surprised by this interaction, and even more surprised when it becomes normal in Australia 20 years later. The friends who call Winton out for his comments on class are always wealthy and from elite schools. He doesn't bring the issue up because he wants to be pitied—it's not his childhood that deserves special attention—but because the issue is still alive and affects Australians in so many ways.

Winton's experience at the party demonstrates the power of privilege. Even though he's surrounded by people of higher status and power than himself, those people use their status to make Tim feel like he's *the one belittling others. Winton finds defensiveness among people who are better off than him, which suggests that the comfort of wealth and high social status might only be a façade that obscures someone's deep-seated anxieties.*

Winton wrestles with the fact that his face is on a postage stamp, which is the subject of much teasing from his family members—yet some of those same family members are unable to write a letter to fix that stamp to. Those members of his family left education early not because of their own willpower or lack thereof, but because of their class. Wealthier Australians often forget that factors other than a person's own efforts can restrain a person—and that these factors play into class.

Winton's discomfort at the fact that his face is on a stamp is a direct echo of his experience feeling like an impostor as the special guest at a Ningaloo Reef event. These two reactions confirm Winton as someone who'd rather live a private life than be celebrated publicly, and perhaps that's partly because he feels such a distance between that glamorous existence and the fact that some of his family members are unable to even read his books.

Before Winton got to university, he didn't know anyone who wasn't working class; a tertiary education was only possible for him because of the current government's decision to abolish fees. That decision gave Winton and his contemporaries access to more opportunities. At university, everyone was caught off-guard by the new social order—by the possibility that their class was no longer a restriction. But while the working-class boundaries dissolved for Tim, he found that the middle class inherited a growing solidarity and class consciousness from the very richest members of society.

Winton's ability to attend university is one of the circumstances that he credits with his fortunate rise to the middle class, and something he thinks of as lucky because he knows that previous generations weren't granted the same privilege. Because of this, university was something of a microcosm of a potential society in which everyone is given the same access—partially proving Winton's argument that class differences are based not on lack of effort but on lack of resources.

By the 1980s, the working class began to dissolve, and salaries of those who were once confined to that class—bus drivers and tradespeople—were booming. However, the idea of class is still a solid part of Australian society, defining the middle class more than the working class and creating a feeling of anxiety and defensiveness among those in the middle class who are witnessing the social mobility of those they assumed were in a lower class. When Winton was a child, working-class people described themselves as "battlers," but now the middle class has coopted the term despite their extremely comfortable incomes and living situations.

The anxiety the middle class feels about the rise of members of the working class is perhaps because their strongly held belief—that they have achieved a comfortable life through their own efforts—is coming into conflict with jealousy and insularity. And despite having achieved a comfortable living, Winton notes that this growing middle-class has co-opted the term "battlers," preferring to think of themselves as hard-done-by laborers than relatively well-off suburb-dwellers.

The middle class's defensiveness and entitlement leads to governments affording them a disproportionate amount of welfare including tax cuts and subsidies, further impoverishing the working class. The wealthiest shy away from the word "class" because it would reveal the inner workings of their privilege and oppression. People once discerned social stratifications of class through accent, occupation, or the size of someone's home. But now, partly due to credit schemes, social stratification has become more obscure. It's all down to mobility, which is fueled by money—those without it have no power.

This scenario paints an unsettling picture of government decision-making, suggesting that the government is compelled by fear and serves only the loudest, largest societal groups. Because of the vague distinctions between social classes, it's possible that there's less solidarity within the working class to push back against these governmental decisions. No longer being connected by occupation or location, their common ground unsettlingly becomes having less money than others.

Winton suggests that the most overlooked class of people in Australia is the working poor—cleaners, carers, and hospitality workers with no income stability or welfare assistance who create and maintain the society in which the middle class and very wealthy live comfortably. Winton feels that he once belonged to a class that was similar to this, but he now feels like "a class traveler [who's] become a stranger to his own." He notices that people around him commonly speak about the working poor as if they have just as many choices as the middle class do, and to him, it's "morally corrosive" that they can so blatantly ignore the roles that family, geography, ethnicity, and education play in determining one's safety and success.

Though Winton has been fortunate enough to enjoy the comforts of a middle-class existence as an adult, he still strongly identifies with the working class. Because of this, he finds he has more empathy and understanding for members of this class than the great majority of Australians. Saying that he's "become a stranger to his own" also echoes his earlier choices to, for instance, leave the church; once again, Winton feels alone and as though he's no longer part of a group that was once a huge part of his life.

Winton worries that the government's preoccupation with keeping the middle class happy will limit the working class's opportunities. He feels that the clear social stratifications that were present in his childhood allowed people to discuss class and fairness much more easily, but now, the middle class's defensiveness and anxiety has obscured the conversation, and the working poor have very little chance of being understood or helped.

At the end of the essay, Winton returns to the subject of transparent debate. He implies that scenarios such as the one with the interviewer at the beginning of the essay mean there are fewer and fewer opportunities to unite and enable the working class. Winton suggests that it will take everyone becoming more conscious of what actually determines a person's class before anything will change for the better.

LIGHTING OUT

One April, Winton receives the news that his publishers are happy with his final manuscript: his book is finished. The news takes a while to sink in, and Winton doesn't know what to do with himself. By May, he's severely restless, so he gets in his car and heads for the South Australian border.

Winton's reaction to what seems like good news—a display of restlessness and anxiety rather than relief and celebration—opens this essay with an air of mystery. It's clear there's something bothering him about the manuscript, despite his publishers' happiness.

In Australia, huge distances separate state lines, so getting to the border takes a few days. Winton remembers when his family crossed this border in 1969. When the blacktop road changed to a loose limestone track, they knew that a rough ride was waiting. Tim's father sealed up the doors and windows with masking tape against the dust, and they bounced on along their way. Now, Winton drives on smooth bitumen in an air-conditioned car. After 600 kilometers, he stops for the night to cook dinner outside before dropping off to sleep in the back of his car.

The contrast between Winton's childhood journey along rough limestone roads and his present-day expedition along a smooth, sealed highway reflects the advancements of Australian infrastructure—it's as if more and more of the wilderness is tamed each year. Tim doesn't have to plan so thoroughly for his journey, which is perhaps one of the reasons he decided to undertake such a long expedition on a whim.

The next morning, Winton drives across the barren landscape, and when he finally stops, he feels "stoned," the smallest tasks requiring focused effort. The cold front catches up with him, and he feels vulnerable, exposed to the elements. He recalls how in 1969, he and his family slept in gravel craters as they made their way across the country, and his father slept with a stick beside him, having been warned by other police officers of a man who'd been attacking travelers on the road.

In this scene, it appears that Winton's attitude has changed from stubborn persistence to a mood of uncertainty and self-doubt. While yesterday he was comfortable driving along the blacktop in his air-conditioned car, today it seems that the inhospitable natural environment affects him acutely—and this suggests that his qualms about his recently-completed manuscript are catching up to him.

By the third day, Winton feels relaxed as he drives. He's aiming for Ceduna, the first town across the border, and perhaps he'll go even farther. He drives with a blank mind, then he suddenly loses his momentum and stops, wanting to make a U-turn and go home. He pushes himself on to the lookout over the **ocean**, hoping to see a whale. He doesn't see any, and when he gets back into his car, he heads west again, giving up on Ceduna and aiming for home.

Driving appears to have a profound impact on Winton's mood; the consistent motion of the car tends to put him at ease. But once again he's disturbed, it seems, by something at the back of his mind, and he displays an uncharacteristic level of discomfort at being in the wilderness alone.

Though Winton races home, only stopping to sleep, the road looks different to him. He notices roadkill littering the side of the route, and he wonders whether he was driving without seeing anything at all for the past few days. The roadkill begins to take up all his attention, and he muses on each bird-swarmed sighting as he drives. When he spots an eagle lying roadside, he feels personally affronted—it reminds him of the summer that he's been trying to escape. That night, he thinks back over the months that led up to this.

Winton's feeling that the landscape has changed on his return home implies that the journey has enabled growth or transformation for him. Perhaps those first few days of driving were necessary in order to clear the fog in his brain that resulted from his feverish work on his novel.

The preceding November, Winton has finished with his latest novel. He boxes up the hefty manuscript, ready to send it to his publisher, but he finds himself unable to send it. His growing doubt about the novel has come to a head, and now, rereading and trying to make sense of the novel, he knows it's not finished. Somewhere in the final draft, he started down the wrong path. The book has already been advertised—its publication date is set—which increases Tim's dread. His wife tells him to sleep on it, but he knows he either has to give up on the book or begin rewriting immediately.

Winton begins to explain why, the last year, he ended up in a state of such emotional restlessness. His restraint, which stops him from sending the colossal novel draft to his publisher, demonstrates that he's a tough critic of his own work and takes pride in it to the degree that sharing subpar work and having it published would cause him a great deal of distress.

Winton sends the manuscript to his friends, who all kindly agree with him—there's a book somewhere in it, but it's not a book yet. Winton is miserable. Even reading becomes stressful. One night, he rips open the paper wrapping of the manuscript and begins to wrestle it into shape. He writes out of vengeful energy, hardly believing he's trying again. The process is like trying to get a camel through the eye of a needle, requiring him first to kill the camel, then to boil it, then to spit it through a straw into the needle's tiny aperture. The next afternoon, he's written 20 pages; after 55 days, his novel is finished—an entirely different book from the one he first planned to send to the publisher. He sends it to them in time for the set publication date, and they're happy with it.

While sometimes the process of writing is meditative and joyful, much like surfing (as Winton describes in "The Wait and the Flow"), this process is more violent and haphazard. Instead of being fueled by inspiration, he's fueled by misery and frustration. Perhaps this demonstrates the difference between producing ideas and editing them—the first inkling of a story is a joy, but the process of whittling it down to only its best lines is just short of agony.

Back in the present, on his last night of travel, Winton sits in the dark by his cooling fire. His thoughts begin to drift back to the book, and he loses the calm feeling his travel brought him. The next morning, he sets off on his final stretch. He sees dozens of wedgetail eagles along the way and they make him irritable, reminding him of the 55 days of painful writing he suffered through. He mourns the lost pages he cut from the hefty novel to turn it into something good. The eagles bother him so much because one of the scenes he had to cut from the story involved a couple hitting a wedgetail eagle with their car. It was once a turning point in Tim's novel's plot, but now it's gone from the story.

Despite his vast distance from the place where he wrote his book so fitfully, Winton is still plagued by thoughts of his work. While usually he delights in the demonstrations of nature around him, today, the birds make him angry, which suggests that he was so attached to the scene he cut from his novel that it's begun to affect his characteristic respect for the natural world.


Though the eagle scene is gone from the novel, Winton still carries it, and the process of writing and perfecting it, in his memory. As he drives onward, he sees two eagles tugging a third, dead one between them, its lifeless body seeming to taunt Winton like a ghost of the pages he lost.

Though Winton's imagination has allowed him to be a successful novelist and to delight in art and beauty, this scene implies that at times, imagination can be more of a curse than a blessing, allowing ideas to bother him rather than bring him joy.


STONES FOR BREAD

When Winton considers the Australia he sees around him, he thinks of Jesus asking, "If a child asks you for bread, […] will you give him a stone?" As a Christian, Winton sees Palm Sunday as a reminder that when Jesus arrived on a parodic donkey at the gates of Jerusalem, he was beginning a movement of dissent that led to his execution. Yet Winton sees around him in modern Australia people who claim to follow Jesus but in fact are maintaining the status quo at others' expense, particularly when it comes to Australia's culture of xenophobia.

Winton's connection to faith is evident here, and his connection between Jesus and the refugees asking for entrance to Australia suggests that his relationship with Christianity is based in the ideas of kindness, love, and charity, rather than any kind of religious insularity. The contradictions between people's proclaimed faith and their hostile actions are the same contradictions that led Winton to slip away from church life, which is perhaps partly why he feels so repulsed by the hypocrisy he sees around him.

When refugees arrive in Australia, they're labeled "illegals" and mocked or ignored. The country battles against any obligation they might have to help them. Winton suggests that Australians weren't always so scared of strangers or so hostile to those seeking refuge; in 1970, huge numbers of Vietnamese refugees found safety here. But now, common sense is to respond cruelly to refugees—just as common sense accepted child labor as normal in the days of Charles Dickens. That Victorian common sense led to convicts being shipped from England to Australia, many of whom are the ancestors of the very people refusing refuge to those in need these days.

Winton's discomfort in the face of apathy and his disgust for sensational, illogical thinking here echoes his frustration with people who use their fear of sharks to excuse cruelty towards the creatures. Winton is disappointed in the current widespread mindset of exceptionalism and a lack of desire to help others, partly because he's so knowledgeable about his country and his ancestry.

Winton is ashamed of Australia's methods of cruelty toward refugees. He thinks the government hides refugees' humanity from the public so that people consider those refugees more like cargo than individual people. He considers how Australia has exempted itself from the moral obligations of the rest of the world, refusing to be told what it should do. The fears of Australians have led to a loss of general human decency and self-respect. Winton appeals to the Prime Minister and the Australian people to reflect on this insular attitude and reconsider the way they treat strangers in need.

Similarly to the sharks Winton describes hanging from gantries with their measurements painted on in "The Demon Shark," tactics of dehumanization and cold, clinical distance function powerfully in Australian society to make people feel exempt from helping refugees in search of asylum. Winton's direct address to his audience at the end of the essay suggests he's not afraid to use his platform to encourage people to make change.

REMEMBERING ELIZABETH JOLLEY

At the age of 18, Winton enrolls in a writing class at university. His teacher, Elizabeth Jolley, is different from what he expects from a university writing professor; she dresses in flowing clothing and sandals, begins classes by playing German art songs, and her polished Scottish accent alienates Tim, who's staunchly working class. His first impression of her only adds to his disappointment in the creative writing degree, which is nothing like the American programs like the Iowa Writers' Workshop, which is staffed by famous writers. Instead, his degree is quite ordinary and taught by average writers with small reputations.

Winton's feeling of alienation towards Jolley is partly, as he says, class-based—he's presumably unaccustomed to the sentimentality and luxury she seems to signify with her love of international art—and partly because it doesn't measure up to his fantasy of what a writing program could be like. The scene depicts him as an idealistic, hopeful teenager—someone who expects his creativity to be spurred on by genius, rather than gently encouraged by a mild-mannered, emerging novelist.

When Winton is at university, the writing course is still a work in progress, as is Elizabeth Jolley. Elizabeth is still struggling to break out as an artist, attempting to transcend barriers of gender and geography. In the years to follow, she publishes several novels with Penguin and becomes a local hero, producing prolifically and serving as an indispensable faculty member of the university. Tim's favorites of her novels are the ones that are less self-conscious and are more wholeheartedly personal—a risk for Elizabeth, who had to try so hard in the first place to earn publishers' and the broader literary world's respect.

Jolley's transcendence as a writer somewhat disproves Winton's initial perception of her, and suggests that she must know something of the ins and outs of the publishing world. It's possible, then, that her sentimental, carefree nature is only a façade. Winton's preference for Jolley's unself-conscious writing implies that he values honesty and bravery in writing over excessive literary tricks and devices.

As Elizabeth becomes more successful, her headshots begin to change from a brighter, smiling expression to a level stare down the camera lens. But back in the 1970s when Winton is her student, he sees more ambition than confidence in her—a drive to be respected by the literary world. She teaches Winton that the writing process is impossible to pin down, but the game of publishing is much more of a science. Elizabeth knows how to people please without losing personal agency; she's shrewd enough to get the odds to work in her favor but unassuming enough not to be a target.

Elizabeth's success, and the things she teaches Winton about gaming the literary industry, reveal that she's willing to learn the mundane ins and outs of the publishing world if it'll help her succeed as a writer. She changes just enough of herself to get people on her side, which is a skill Winton later demonstrates in his campaigning for Ningaloo Reef—appearing just enough to win the public over, though still feeling uncomfortable as a public commodity.

When people ask Winton what it was like to be taught by Elizabeth Jolley, he's reluctant to answer for fear of disrupting people's ideas of her. The truth is, he learnt more about the craft of writing by reading and from teachers who weren't writers than he did from her. Though some writers are better teachers than they are writers, Elizabeth wasn't one. Yet Winton learned a lot from Elizabeth's presence and actions, even if he didn't learn from what she taught. Her love for literature and music were strong to the point of being stubborn, and her commitment to reading her students' work attentively, no matter how dull the students were, is something Winton sees as heroic.

Winton's clearly a respectful past student and colleague of Jolley, as he demonstrates by his lack of public criticism for her. But his explanation explores the fact that the best writers aren't always the best teachers—and sometimes it's better to learn from someone's work than from the person themselves. What Winton values most about Jolley is her obvious love for art and her kindness to each student, traits that Winton replicates throughout his own life in his experiences with art and his connections to both loved ones and strangers.


While Elizabeth's student, Winton senses that Elizabeth defers to her husband's taste and shares her favorite pieces of her students' writing with him. When Elizabeth and her husband both approve of Tim's writing, he feels completely affirmed. Under Elizabeth's tutelage, Winton writes his first stories, which he later includes in his first collection. He begins his first novel at her prompting, though it takes the form of a radio play at first.

One of the most valuable things about having Jolley as a teacher is the affirmation she and her husband provide Winton as a young writer. It's this verbal encouragement, more than any craft lecture or editing suggestion, that seems to make the most impact on him.

Because Elizabeth has years of experience submitting work for publication, she's pragmatic and disillusioned but also knows what editors like. She takes publishing strategy very seriously and encourages her students to do the same. Her pragmatism sets her apart from other writers. She's involved in reading communities, visiting book clubs to answer questions about her work. Winton realizes the peril of not paying her appropriate respect when she catches him submitting sub-par work to class—she sees it as an insult and says so in such fine language that Winton doesn't realize the heft of his mistake until he's halfway home.

Unlike many writers who prefer not to play the cynical game of publishing, perhaps out of self-respect, Jolley does the opposite—but perhaps it's because she respects herself and her work so much that she's willing to maneuver through the strange rules and expectations of the industry. When Winton neglects to realize the level of respect Elizabeth is due, he's reprimanded accordingly.

When Elizabeth launches her second collection in 1979, Winton attends with his girlfriend. By this time, he's written a novel, and he wonders if the event is a sign of what awaits him—and it doesn't look too hopeful. Elizabeth writes a tongue-in-cheek inscription in his copy of her book, which he interprets as a joke about what could lie ahead in his own career: writing insincere notes in strangers' copies of his book.

Winton's experience at the book launch is far from glamorous, which suggests he doesn't continue to pursue publishing for the glitz and excitement, but because writing is a genuine and necessary passion for him.

SEA CHANGE

Early in the morning, Winton and his father take the dinghy out to go fishing. Tim's father is over 80 now and can't pull himself into the little boat, so Winton helps him climb in. As Winton gets in after his father, a dolphin rests its head on the dinghy, trying to win an easy feed. Winton shoos the dolphin away. They take the dinghy out and anchor it to begin fishing.

The fact that Winton helps his father into the boat demonstrates the love and respect he has for him as a fully grown adult is as strong as it was when they drove along a dark road together decades ago.

Winton's father asks him how many fish they're allowed to catch. When Winton tells his father 30 is the limit, his father is a bit disgruntled; years ago, a limit wasn't imposed. In an hours' time, the men will have caught enough fish to feed two households. Tim's familiar with the coastal landscape, having grown up next to the shore. Though his family wasn't wealthy, he felt that they lived well, doing every day what families in other parts of the world would only do on their holidays, snorkeling and diving off the jetty. The bounty of the sea, like squid and crayfish, was a constant part of the family's diet. The **ocean** served them generously.

Winton's father is annoyed by the limit imposed on the number of fish they're allowed to catch, but the fact that they'll still catch enough fish for two households suggests that it's not the number that bothers him—it's the idea *of a limit itself. Winton's father, it seems, remembers a freer and less restricted life. Winton shares in this memory of freedom, basking in and taking from the ocean without ever doubting its continued offerings.*

Last summer, Winton took his granddaughter into the ocean for the first time and was thrilled by the opportunity to pass down his love for the coastal life. But he knows that his granddaughter's relationship with the **ocean** is far from certain, because the complex underwater ecosystems are under great threat. Reefs are in peril and fish populations have been decimated. Winton grew up assuming that the bounty of the sea was endless, and it took him a long time to realize that it was more fragile than he could've imagined, and that he—a frequent fisher—was part of the problem.

Winton realizes that his idea of freedom as a child was predicated on decimating the natural world that made him feel free. That is, in feeling so free, and taking so abundantly from the ocean, he was part of a generation that mindlessly endangered the thing they loved. His self-indictment here is one of many such moments in the essay collection; it's clear that one of the purposes of these essays is for Winton to consider, and hold himself accountable for, his actions.

Tim's understanding of the threatened oceanic world was mild and distant until a catastrophic oil spill occurred near the Western Australia coast. The huge threat this posed to his own backyard spurred him to become an activist, first serving in the Australian Marine Conservation Society, then helping to lead the Save **Ningaloo** campaign. After Ningaloo, Tim's found himself unable to disappear from public campaigning—he's properly involved for the foreseeable future.

Despite his discomfort at the center of unified groups, and his distaste for public life, Winton's passion for protecting Australia's natural environments is something he prioritizes over personal comfort. Also, he seems to have grown up from the boy who sought out danger: these days, he seeks out ways to improve the world around him instead.

Though there's some resistance to the building momentum of both governmental and non-governmental organizations to preserve and protect parts of Australia's coastal wildlife, Winton thinks that in a few decades, those voices will be less common. Most of those who fish for recreation understand the need for protected habitats where fishing is prohibited. Winton knows it's important that the fishing operations affected by preservation are bought out with dignity; this will be a necessary struggle for the government, as will disrupting the gas, oil, and coal industries that threaten these underwater ecosystems. The natural world Winton's grandchildren and their children inherit will be based on the decisions of the current government.

Winton's prediction that attitudes will change towards habitat preservation over the next generations is already supported by this essay's description of the differences between his father's and his own attitudes to the fishing quota. Having already demonstrated that he's unimpressed with apathy, it's not surprising that Winton feels positively about the big changes the government will need to make in order to preserve Australia's sea life, and perhaps his status as a grandparent contributes to the strength of his conviction that policy must change.

When Winton begins to despair at the incremental changes humans make to protect the natural world, he thinks of a nuclear bomb crater where he once swam north of **Ningaloo Reef**. When he swam there, there was only sand and strange white worms, but now it's a place of huge natural diversity. He marvels at the force necessary to transform a place from a bomb site to a natural wonder. It brings him hope for the changes that might be on the horizon.

Though Winton can be overwhelmed by the negative aspects of Australian society and the perils facing natural habitats, the beauty of the ocean remains something that buoys and reinvigorates him.

BAREFOOT IN THE TEMPLE OF ART

Winton watches children reach into the wall of water that falls in the entryway of the National Gallery of Victoria. It's a surprising feature of a building that, from the outside, is as imposing as a fortress. Watching the children sends Winton back to his own childhood discovery of this place in 1969.

The contrast between the gallery's imposing outer structure and its beautiful, soft water feature suggests that there's something mystical about what the gallery contains, and what it represents for Winton.

Winton and his family travel from isolated Perth to metropolitan Melbourne in 1969. The journey is harrowing—bumpy, dusty, hot, and long—but they're sure it'll be worth it when they discover what the "other side" of Australia is like. When they arrive after more than a week of driving, their itinerary is full of disappointments. Melbourne isn't as glamorous as they expected it to be. Visiting the Melbourne Cricket Ground when empty is a hollow experience.

Winton is apparently not the only member of his family driven by curiosity—his family is so excited to discover another side of Australia that they're willing to traverse a horrendously bumpy road in order to reach it. But, just like the moon landing, the reality of a long-anticipated visit is disappointing compared to Winton's expectation.

Winton and his siblings look forward to the National Gallery, not for the art it holds but for the promised waterfall within its walls. When they arrive, they dunk their sore feet in the fountain and splash around before being shooed from the water. Apparently, their behavior is disrespectful—the fountain is art, and it shouldn't be touched. But when they finally try to enter the museum to see the art inside, they're told that going barefoot is not allowed. Only his dad telling the attendant that they're from Queensland gains them enough pity to be let through.

It's a foreign concept to Winton and his siblings that something as joyous and alive as the gallery's water feature is only for looking, not touching or being immersed in. Winton's curiosity and joy about this water feature stems from his earlier experiences of diving underwater or riding a wave, so this distanced approach to art is difficult to digest.

Embarrassed and out of place, Winton spends a long time staring at the same statue, reluctant to explore anything else. But after seeming to gain comfort, or perhaps even inspiration, from the statue, he sets off to see what else he can find. Winton feels like he could look at each piece forever, trying to work out its story or meaning. He keeps exploring and looking for a long time before finally yielding to his waiting family, exhausted at the entrance.

The fact that just staring at the statue gives Winton enough energy and bravery to explore further into the gallery is a reminder that, for Winton, creative expression is an almost literal form of nourishment. His mood and actions are as influenced by exposure to art as they are by access to food, water, or sleep.

Though Winton doesn't see himself as a genius, he knows that he wants to do what the artists whose work he's just experienced have done—to see past the normal everyday and into the world of the imagination. By the time a year has passed, he's excited by the prospect of life as a writer.

For Winton, making art isn't dependent on being a particularly outstanding individual or possessing extraordinary talents, but about endless curiosity and excitement.

In the present day, Tim's delighted to return to the National Gallery and see it full of visitors. The water feature is now embraced as an interactive installation. Though the stained-glass ceiling seems a little outdated, Winton admires the changes that have allowed for more lively interaction with the art—places for children to run and opportunities for them to respond to the art they see. One of the most striking developments is the increased representation of Asian art which echoes Australia's social changes in the years since Tim's first visit. He remembers the feeling he had as a child who, though initially ashamed, exited the building "like a man in boots."

Though Tim has already had a significant career as a novelist and must, by now, be used to environments like this gallery, his happiness at seeing interactive exhibits implies that he hasn't ventured far from the tactile joys of his childhood. The opportunity to be able to touch and play with the art pleases him, because he remembers his own desire to do so. He recalls feeling, upon his first visit, that although he was ashamed of his barefoot appearance, the experience of seeing so much vibrant, invigorating, confusing art renewed his confidence and pride.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

van Waardenberg, Sophie. "*The Boy Behind the Curtain*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 20 Jan 2023. Web. 20 Jan 2023.

CHICAGO MANUAL

van Waardenberg, Sophie. "*The Boy Behind the Curtain*." LitCharts LLC, January 20, 2023. Retrieved January 20, 2023. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-boy-behind-the-curtain.

To cite any of the quotes from *The Boy Behind the Curtain* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Winton, Tim. The Boy Behind the Curtain. Pan Macmillan. 2018.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Winton, Tim. The Boy Behind the Curtain. London: Pan Macmillan. 2018.