How the story came to be told

It wasn't until Barney fell out of the sky and was told he wouldn't walk again that flying and walking started to float together in my mind. We had both been tracing tracks across the world – he in the sky, me on earth. Neither of us really understood why we'd been doing it. I kept notes about my own walking, brief jottings in small notebooks, but I didn't know anything about my brother's journeys.

I asked Barney would he mind if I asked him a few questions about flying. This was a while after his accident, and after all that he'd been through I thought he might not want things stirred up. I don't really get that – I'm all for stirring things up – but I accept it's not the same for everyone. But he said yes, he was happy to talk about it. We started exchanging emails and phone calls and an occasional meeting when either one of us travelled north or south. It felt strange at first.

'So why did you want to fly? When did you get the idea? What was it like the first time?' We were back at the Fountain cafe, mid-summer I think. I had seen him a couple of times in Byron Bay when I was working, but it seemed risky

to ask such questions so close to where it had all happened.

'The moment my feet left the ground and I was lifted into the air on my first high glide, it was exactly how it felt in my flying dreams when I was a kid,' my brother said.

'What were your dreams like?' I'd had flying dreams as a child too.

He explained that he ran one or two steps and lifted off easily and flew upwards as if he were swimming up from the bottom of a pool, almost stroking through the air. He could see the farm from above, ploughed paddocks, the roof of the shearing shed, sheep and cows at the dam. In one dream he taught our older brother, Peter, and younger brother, Tim, to fly from the top of the woodheap. In another he was standing at the fence at Granny Miller's house in Wellington, our nearest town, talking with the kids next door, when he calmly lifted off and swooped about as he pleased. He said he sometimes lost confidence and fell towards the ground, but he always regained his self-belief just before he hit the ground and was able to soar upwards again.

'Not like life,' he said wryly.

'Are you okay?'

'Yeah. I'm good,' he said. He shifted in his chair. This was way before he began admitting to being in constant pain. Saying things out loud can undo you.

'Can I backtrack for a sec. Where was it, your first flight?'

'A place called Possum's Shoot, it's a launch site a few kilometres from the Byron Bay turn-off. It was only for about five minutes. I flew into some lift straight away and it took me up along a ridge.'

'So how was it like your dreams? The first time, I mean. Can you remember?'

'I'll never forget it. The sensation was just the same as when I was a kid. Not the position or anything, the feeling. I can remember the feeling in the dreams and it was the same. I soared upwards, and I swooped and turned into the wind and hovered like a hawk. To move to the left I just leaned my body and off I flew. And then when I pulled my hands down, it was as if my wings were curving downwards and I slowed down like a bird landing. I had never felt anything as exhilarating. I couldn't stop smiling; my whole body wanted to laugh with joy.'

Again that feeling in me – what was it? Envy? Perhaps. But it was also like the awe and fear you feel in seeing a newborn. A being freshly revealed – you almost don't want to look because you know what can happen to anything unprotected.

And I felt left out. My flying dreams didn't make me yearn to fly. In my dreams, I had to run fast before I could take off and my flying position was upright with my legs tucked up, almost to a squat. I can still remember what fences looked like from a few metres up and the feel of cool, dark air on my face. I was convinced that it was real, not a dream, even though most of the flying was at night. Since talking to Barney, I've asked all my other brothers – Peter, Tim, Kevin and Terry – and both my sisters – Mary and Kathy – who have all told me that they flew in their dreams too. Some of us are sensible and practical, some of us dreamy, but somehow, all of us growing up on Wiradjuri land became bird-children in the night and our mother and father never even suspected.

But Barney had attempted to fly in waking life as a child as well. He built wooden wings, nailing boards together in a rectangle, like aeroplane wings rather than a bird's, which clearly didn't work. He made a parachute from a blanket and binder

twine, which also didn't work. It didn't stop his Icarus yearnings or his Daedalus constructions. He made dozens of balsa wood model aeroplanes and paper kites, and designed and made one powered model aeroplane, which he never flew because he didn't have the money to buy fuel. After he mentioned them, I did recall the parachute and the balsa wood planes and the kites, but I had no idea of the longing behind them.

We didn't share a childhood after all. We were each in a series of our own moments that we stitched together to create our own story. Deep in the neural pathways, neurones fire in intricate patterns, then the hippocampus joins endless nanoseconds together, creating reality. If we sew neatly, edit judiciously, no-one will see the gaps, the shimmer of the void beneath. It will appear to be one whole story, to make sense.

It makes me inclined to simply trace the pieces, the walks and flights, one by one, onto a shared map to see what happens. They happened in different times, are not chronological, but they might form a shape that I'm not yet aware of. Perhaps they will remain distinct. Stories are unpredictable, like walking and flying. As you walk or fly you depend on the weather, on air currents, on the body, on other people. You cannot control all the elements, and if you could, perhaps they each would be robbed of their essence, of their random ability to dissolve what has been certain.

I've decided to start unfolding the map and look at our journeys. The map is made of paper in my mind – I like the paper ones better than slithery phone maps – I enjoy the careful unfolding and then the refolding that is never quite right, and I like that they bear all the scars of my travels, the rips and stains and unreadable smudges. Smooth it out on the table. It's

unmarked for now, but it already has the shadows of memory on it, and the blanks of unrecorded and forgotten observation.

Before I walk I always pore over an actual map – it's always the first thing I acquire, months earlier than I need it. A map lets you see what is possible. You can mark where you have been before and then the place-names on it inspire the next direction. It's like a story spread out into all its possible parts, before the elements have been selected and arranged in order, before a path appears. Walking begins with images in the mind, a place on a map.

Walking comes first. By nature we can walk, flying comes from human invention, which makes it seems logical to start with walking rather than flying. I look at my notebooks and few photographs. The notebooks are battered and stained from being squashed into my backpack and then pulled out each evening in a bar or cafe or hostel. They are written in cheap biro and contain lists, arrows, directions, observations. It's a scrappy record, not more than a few images noted each day.

The first image is thousands of bluebells, green forest paths, empty moors, soft meadows, larks singing and wild wuthering crags littered over the low hills of Wiradjuri country in central western New South Wales, a bewildering illusory layering over the drought-stricken land of my childhood. While Barney was trying to make wings and jump off the veranda roof, I dreamed of meadows and streams, the landscape of my reading. Real life was inside books; the rosy atmosphere in those mostly English worlds was the air I breathed. I inhaled it so deeply that illusion became more sustaining for me than actuality.

Still, even then, as a child I walked. I had to walk to school at first. From the age of five, I walked each morning with my

brothers and a sister to the farm gate a kilometre away. There we climbed onto the back of the teacher's ute and were driven a few kilometres to the one-room school-house. In the afternoon, we were dropped off at the farm gate and walked back through the paddocks to the house. The first year of walking there were two brothers, Barney and Tim, and the next year another brother, Kevin, then a sister, Mary. The older two, Kathy and Peter, were in high school, riding their bikes to the bus stop at the end of the lane, and the youngest, Terry, was still a baby at home. There was no solitary walking.

In the morning we dawdled out the house-gate, unclipped the house-paddock gate near the kurrajong tree, and walked up the rise between the sheep yards and the creek then through the wire gate and along the track through the wheat paddock. The track undulated along the fence line, sandy and smooth, although occasionally muddy. In winter, the wheat was frosty, the frost starting to melt on each blade, leaving millions of glittering diamonds of dew. In summer, it was ripe yellow, heavy-headed; or already harvested, dry and spiky. After harvest, sheep were let in to nibble any leftovers and to graze on the lucerne planted between the wheat, making their own tracks across the paddock, narrow trails which they trotted along, one after the other. Sometimes we followed the sheep trails because they made a clear pathway through spiky burrs, an easy zigzag along the side of the hill.

Morning walking was cold, unwilling, red-nosed; afternoon walking was warm, with flies, sweat, skinned knees. In the winter there were icy puddles to break; in summer Barney ran past brushing the colony of flies off my back to make them buzz around my face.

In high school I rode my bike up the lane to catch the bus on the main road instead of walking, but I still roamed across the farm and across fences into other farms on the weekends. I walked in the winter when everyone else was sitting around the fire – a romantic pride in being out in the cold and wind when everyone else was snug. I walked over stubbly paddocks, looking down in case there was an Aboriginal axe, or a kangaroo bone. I climbed over the boundary fence, and walked across the neighbour's farm, heading towards a hill scattered with trees and rocks and covered in kangaroo grass and paddymelons; it was too steep to plough so it had been left untouched. It could reveal something hidden in the rough grass.

The map of bluebells – that's the right name for it – was unfolded, not the symbolic map of memory, but an actual paper map on the table in my kitchen. I had booked my ticket and was going to the United Kingdom to walk. Lower Slaughter, Pucklechurch, Tolpuddle, Dunblane, Zennor. Days were lost in the romance of names. The bubble of childhood reading expanded around my head making me feel as if I were floating in an overcrowded room. An idealised, never existing Enid Blyton world fogged everything. No precise path emerged. I didn't want to decide where to walk because that would mean ruling everywhere else out. Not every inch of earth can be walked.

I talked about it with Anthony, who walks with me. When I am walking, he is often there, even when I don't mention him for long periods. We have acquired the art of being alone together, each in our own walk, so perhaps the singular pronoun is just as accurate. Before and after walking is another matter.

Then we are together, reading and planning the next path.

He listened to the confusion about the multiplying nature of the map, then added a few complications. What about the weather? How far each day? I became practical. Given that it was autumn, it would make more sense to start in the north and walk south at that time of year in that hemisphere. And it had to be finished by a certain date. I had a writing class to teach in Paris at the end of it. There wasn't enough time to walk from John O'Groats to Land's End, but a series of walks from Scotland to Cornwall looked possible. The facts started to make a neat little wall against the vastness.

I found a walking site online that described paths all over Britain. A list of day walks appeared: the Cairngorm Highlands in central Scotland, Hadrian's Wall, the Lakes district, the Yorkshire Dales, the coast of Cornwall, the Cotswolds, and finally, part of the Ridgeway, one of the oldest walking paths in the country. I printed them out and located them on the map, and felt the relief of making limits: it gathers in sprawling infinity and defines what is possible. The walks had been followed by others many times, tracks worn into the earth, at times metres deep. The Cairngorms were first, the Lairig Ghru loop. It's time to trace the first lines on the map, to start the first walking story.

It flows out of childhood, but this walk isn't the beginning of my story with Barney. Our stories don't follow from one another, they run alongside each other and at times bend and cross over. He is not in my story for long periods, and I am not in his – although I am there, watching and listening, as he recounts them. We are not in the same geography for most of the time, and the chronology is staggered, in different time frames and measured in different units, his in moments, mine in years.

I don't know that connecting places or time is what matters in our stories; it's more to do with what we each found, Barney and I, on our separate journeys, me on the earth, him in the sky.