

## “LINES OF SIGHT”

by Francisco Cantú

On either side of the train, the vast mudfields of East Anglia stretched out in every direction. For several minutes I stared out the windows with great confusion, trying to make sense of the metallic domes laid with geometric order across the passing landscape. Clustered around the domes were pink shapes—pigs, I finally realized, chewing mindlessly as they stared down at the ground or sprawled out in the dirt as if already preparing for death. The domes, I guessed, were there to offer shelter to the animals during the frequent rains, or perhaps were there merely to keep dry the endless supply of food meant to fatten them.

I exited the train at the Halesworth station and made my way to a nearby bus stop to wait for a bus that would take me within walking distance of Dunwich, on the Suffolk coast. When the bus finally came, long after I had hoped, I found not a single soul on board except for the driver, who seemed positively disappointed by my presence. When I exited the bus less than fifteen minutes later, I heard the man utter a distinct sigh of relief. As I made my way along the highway’s narrow shoulder, I could hear the screaming of pigs barely concealed from view behind the brush at the side of the road. I soon turned onto the small country road that led to Dunwich, which led away from the midfields and into the woods, where the only sounds to be heard were the crowing of pheasants and the far-off breaking of waves washing over a darkening shore.

Dunwich, once a thriving medieval port, has for centuries been crumbling into the sea. All that remains of the old town is a small collection of hilltop ruins, flanked by a new church and a handful of homes built far from the water's edge. Nowadays the town is served by a single pub and a few guesthouses catering principally to the slow stream melancholy travelers that have been drawn here since the 18th century to contemplate the slow dissolution of time.

I first learned of Dunwich, as any reader of this book might have suspected, through W.G. Sebald's *Rings of Saturn*. In it, Sebald describes how church towers and graveyards, well shafts and walled fortifications, were all washed stone by stone from the landscape. "All of it has gone under," Sebald wrote, "and is now below the sea, beneath alluvial sand and gravel." The slow collapse of a community whose endurance must have always seemed certain, even after its precarity had become undeniable, is emblematic of Sebald's obsessions. What is most intriguing about Dunwich, however, is not the allure of its decaying architecture, but rather the near total absence of any ruins at all. Signs of the town's former splendor have long been lost to the churning sea, leaving only an intangible sense of what once existed here hovering in the salty air, to be conjured only by imagination and history.



In *The Pleasure of Ruins*, Rose Macaulay's study of humankind's lust for physical vestiges of our past, she writes that "no circumstance so forcibly marks the desolation of a spot once inhabited, as the prevalence of Nature over it." Since human settlement almost always represents some form of domination over the landscape, there is perhaps a certain kind of solace to be had in a place like Dunwich, where nature has won out over man's will to ignore it. "If you look out from the cliff-top across the sea toward where the town must once have been," wrote Sebald, "you can sense the immense power of emptiness." I felt this myself as I walked along the cliffs of Dunwich the morning after my arrival. The sound of the waves that had seemed so distant in the adjacent forest the night before was finally close at hand, crushingly loud as I stood looking out over the beach, marveling at the smoothness of the water beyond the swells. I soon became unable to think because of the sound, and for some unknown reason, I became so overwhelmed by sadness that I was forced to turn my head from the sea to cry.

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I first began to read Sebald during the years I worked in the deserts of Arizona as an agent for the US Border Patrol. I was in my early twenties, living alone for the first time in my life in a two bedroom home built for mine workers in the former copper town of Ajo, Arizona. I read Sebald's books one after another in that hot, silent, overly-large house, encountering landscapes and histories that were foreign and distant to me but all the while haunting and somehow familiar. Sebald's voice reminded me, perhaps, of one that had been buried deep within my own subconscious, a voice that urged me to recognize the thinly veiled violence that surrounded me and its tangled roots reaching far back into time. Sebald's work, above all else, gave language to how violence had been made normal throughout history, how it had been embedded into our landscape, our cities, our culture, until it became something we breathe in and look upon each day without thinking. Despite writing from another continent and another decade, Sebald nevertheless seemed to be speaking about the precise moment I was living in, about the very nature of my own work as an agent of oppression, about the very violence that I myself was enacting, and that was being imprinted onto me each day as I rose to police the border.

In the town where I grew up in central Arizona, located more than four hours north of Mexico, the border was far from an everyday consideration. Neither, however, was it something entirely abstract as it is in most of America. Before my family came to Arizona, we had lived even closer to the border, in the wide-open deserts of West Texas where my mother worked as a ranger in one of the country's least visited National Parks. Like so many in the borderlands, we crossed intermittently between two nations and were surrounded by people who moved through them absolute fluidly, holding within them a sense of culture, landscape, and identity

that was at once bifurcated and whole. In the Arizona town that would become our home, however, the border was understood primarily as a line that was to be crossed over, a remote area that had to be passed through on the way to the interior. Undocumented friends understood it principally as an obstacle that had been overcome, a place defined by hostile terrain and hostile enforcers.

As an adolescent I began to understand that the border was also a place that coursed through my own family history, and I could sense, like watching rain clouds gather in the distance, that part of myself had been buried there and would one day come for me. I knew, even though I could not begin to understand what it meant, that my grandfather's family had left all they had ever known to cross the border during the Mexican Revolution when he and his siblings were mere children. They settled eventually in San Diego, and it was there that they remade their lives, like newcomers to America have always done, with an evermore tenuous thread connecting them an old country, an old set of ways.

My mother, when she was still barely old enough to speak, was removed by divorce from her father's influence, severed from the stories and traditions of her Mexican ancestors. But even as she grew up far away from them, she carried with her an everyday reminder of her father's lineage through the simple fact of her Spanish surname, a name that marked her mutedly as "other," but one that she would nevertheless refuse to change through multiple marriages and eventually pass on to me, her only son.

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Ahead of me on the bridalway I watched a black shape move playfully around a single point in the dirt. As I walked closer I was surprised to see that it was a wandering house cat, miles away

any homes or structures. The cat dashed into the forest at my approach and when I reached the place where it had been standing I found a small dead bird. The cat had not yet begun to consume its body, but had instead been dragging it through the dirt like a toy. Leaving the forest behind me, I was afforded a view over the Reedland and Dingle marshes, stretching all the way to the slate-colored sea. Sebald had described these marshlands as a place of “grey water, mudflats, and emptiness,” and as I made my way across the sedge, I thought it somehow fitting when I came upon another corpse—this time a dead fox slowly being absorbed into the earth, laid across the grass like a future archeological specimen.

My original plan had been to walk this path in the opposite direction, as Sebald had, from Southwold to Dunwich. But since yesterday’s missteps and delays had prevented my early arrival in Southwold, and since I had booked my accommodations in Dunwich in advance, I resigned myself to walking my first leg of Sebald’s journey in reverse. I carried *The Rings of Saturn* zipped tightly inside my jacket, close to my chest, and pulled it out each time I recognized something from its pages—at times even finding myself inspired to reach for the camera on my phone to attempt to recreate Sebald’s in situ photographs.



After capturing the selfsame mooring posts decaying in the waters of the River Alde, I fumbled with my phone as I attempted to put it away, accidentally opening an auto-generated slideshow in my photo app entitled “On This Day.” As various images from years past appeared on my screen, I was surprised to see an snapshot of me from 2015 with an old friend named Christophe, who I had gone to visit at his home in Cherbourg, Normandy after he was diagnosed with cancer of the stomach. Christophe had already grown weak by the time of my visit, but he nevertheless mustered the strength to drive me along the coast one afternoon, past the ocean cliffs and and beaches where he used to drink with his friends as a teenager, dancing around bonfires and

blasting punk rock from boom boxes and car stereos. This was the last time I would see Christophe before his death less than a year later, and as I recalled our final visit, my body became paralyzed with sadness. I stood stupidly on the trail as I remembered Christophe sprawled painfully on his parent's couch as he described how he was forced to receive care from them as if he were once again their helpless child, and how he had come to hate them altogether and now hoped, quite plainly, to die rather than go on living his prime years in the grip of an incurable sickness.

I began to shake my memories of Normandy as I approached the beach near Southwold and encountered more and more signs of civilization. Soon I was walking among families, joggers, and old couples out for their morning stroll. Writing in the mid-90's, Sebald had described "next to no traffic" along this part of the trail, but times had clearly changed—the place was teeming with locals and visitors alike. In Southwold, however, I found Sebald's beloved Sailor's Reading Room just as he had described it—a quiet and empty space that nevertheless remained profoundly lived-in and well used. I was struck by the high ceilings and the opaque light that filtered through the windows, filling the room. For over an hour I perused the collection of photographs and model ships, the paintings of sailors and captains, the logbooks and carved figureheads. The room's contemplative air was disturbed only during brief moments in which passing visitors entered from the sidewalk to quickly peruse its curiosities and chat loudly about who must look after the place—forgetting, perhaps, that it was meant to be a place conducive to reading.

Back on the streets of Southwold I walked up to Gun Hill, where cannons were still positioned facing the North Sea, beckoning visitors to gaze out and imagine, as Sebald did, the



flaming ships and billowing smoke the Battle of Sole Bay, fought between the Dutch and English fleet in 1672. From his bench on Gun Hill, Sebald stared into the darkening sea and pondered the slow turning of the earth, recalling a dream in which he walked along the entire length of a strange and unfamiliar mountain range, and marveling at the fact that just one year earlier he had been standing across the water on the beaches of Scheveningen on the Dutch coast, gazing out toward the opposing shore of England, as if somehow looking backward and forward in time upon himself.

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Sebald was born in 1944, at the close of World War II, in a remote village on the northern outskirts of the Alps. In interviews, he described his home region as “an idyllic place,” one untouched by the violence and destruction that raging so brutally across most of the continent the year of his birth. “At the end of the war,” Sebald wrote, “I was just one year old, so I can hardly have any impressions of that period of destruction based on personal experience. Yet to this day, when I see photographs or documentary films dating from the war I feel as if I were its child, so to speak, as if those horrors I did not experience cast a shadow over me, and one from which I shall never entirely emerge.” Sebald was thus fixated, in his life and in his work, with considering how the bloodshed of World War II and the dark void of the Holocaust could be only be understood as part of one long, unbroken arc of human calamity.

Despite Sebald’s distinctive blend of memoir, travel writing, history, criticism, and biography, his major works are generally regarded as fiction. But not withstanding occasional fabrications, we know that Sebald’s literature adhered closely to his own life, experience, and travels. The narrator of Sebald’s books, in short, is a thinly veiled version of himself. *The Rings*

*of Saturn*, more so than any of his other books, recounts a journey through a terrain he knew quite intimately, a place he came to time and again for recreation and escape. In the book's opening pages, we meet a man who has turned to landscape in search of solace:

In August 1992, when the dog days were drawing to an end, I set off to walk the county of Suffolk, in the hope of dispelling the emptiness that takes hold of me whenever I have completed a long stint of work. And in fact my hope was realized, up to a point; for I have seldom felt so carefree as I did then, walking for hours in the day through the thinly populated countryside, which stretches inland from the coast.

The sense of escape Sebald is seeking, however, eludes him. "I became preoccupied not only with the unaccustomed sense of freedom," he writes in subsequent sentences, "but also with the paralyzing horror that had come over me at various times when confronted with the traces of destruction, reaching far back into the past, that were evident even in that remote place." As desperately as he wished to regard the Suffolk coast as a place of beauty and respite, his understanding of it had become too deeply marred by the horrors he knows have rippled over it throughout history, horrors which now reside in the terrain in permanent and immeasurable ways.

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The warmth of the sun that emerged on my afternoon walk to Orford was such that, for the first time on my journey, I was made to take off my scarf and hat. Taking advantage of the fine weather were a good number of walkers, all positively glad to be outside. The trees that lined the path, which had looked so skeletal under the cloud cover, I now realized were budding with Spring flowers. It had become, by any measure, a glorious afternoon, but even under the blue skies I couldn't help but feel a certain melancholy in my surroundings, although it was hard to

know if this impression stemmed from some internalized reading of Sebald or from the landscape itself.



Near the River Alde, the walking path took me along the edge of a vast pig field where I was finally able to marvel, up close, at the sheer size of the ubiquitous creatures, their skin glinting with pearly shine in the sunlight. An adjacent field was strangely devoid of animals and its domes had all been overturned as if ransacked by a group of wandering marauders. In the distance two gunshots rang out, and I hurried away from the farmland into a forest of Scots pine.

When I finally arrived in the village of Orford I found a place breathing with evening life. Parents walked alongside children in tricycles, men washed cars in their driveways, and neighbors greeted each other on the street. At the Jolly Sailor Inn I checked in and was led to a tiny room above the pub. After showering, I stood transfixed by a mural on the wall depicting three ships afloat in blue water that was somehow undifferentiated from the blue sky above it. I

began to notice weblike cracks in the plaster and moved closer and closer to the wall until I was jolted back to reality by the knock of the Inn's clerk on my door, informing me that the pub's chef was leaving early and if I wanted dinner I best hurry down.

The dining area was already emptying out when I arrived, with just one old man sitting along at the bar and a young family of three preparing to pay their bill. The same woman who had checked me in and knocked on my door was also working as bartender and server. I asked her, after she brought my food, if she knew the best way to get Orford Ness, the shingle spit peninsula that once housed a nuclear testing site whose ruins Sebald likened to "the remains of our own civilization after its extinction." The woman had only been there once, she said, to see one of the concerts that were sometimes organized there for locals. It's kind of scary, she confessed—not exactly a nice place to visit. But if I wanted to go, she told me, perhaps the harbor master would take me in the morning. He should arrive at 9, she guessed, or even as early as 8. She walked away and I quietly ate my dinner, watching as the old man at the bar finished his beer, and the chef, after throwing down his apron, left hurriedly through the back door.

The next morning I awoke early and went to a nearby corner market to grab something to eat before heading to the harbor. I pointed at an enticing stuffed pastry and asked the cashier what was in it. It's a Cornish Pasty, she said, matter-of-factly. Oh. But what's in it? I asked. The woman stared at me and blinked several times as if I were an idiot. Several minutes later I took a seat at the empty docks with my food, still not entirely sure what it was. By the time I finished eating, a slow trickle of men had begun to arrive—gathering, eventually, into a small group. From the other side of the river a motor boat pulled up to the dock and I hurriedly queued up with the other men to get on, hoping no one would ask my business. It wasn't long before one of

them looked at me with a furled brow. Are you with... the man trailed off, waiting for me to respond. I'm just a tourist, I said. Hm, the man replied, I'm afraid we're closed. I explained that I was just hoping to walk around the Ness for an hour or so, adding that I had come all the way from America. He shook his head. Only on Saturdays, I'm afraid. I pleaded with him a bit more, trying to suss out whether or not he actually wielded any authority. He dismissed me a few more times, uttering "I'm afraid" this and "I'm afraid" that until I was finally forced to walk away in resignation. I sat down on a bench, defeated, and gazed out at the pagoda-like structures on the other side of the water—ruined test labs shimmering benignly in the morning light, built with the sole purpose of containing atomic blasts strong enough to level entire cities and extinguish millions of lives in a single instant.

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In my early childhood, my understanding of the world took shape almost entirely outdoors. My mother was, at the time, a ranger for the National Park Service, and the ethos of her job also became the framework through which I saw the world. Her duties were not only to help protect and preserve the natural beauty of the places where she worked, but to interpret their landscape to visitors through stories. These stories were not just told at work—they were the same stories she told at home during my most formative years, the years in which I began to form my first memories. We lived, in those days, far from the distractions of the city and from other children my age, and so my primary connections were formed with the natural world that surrounded me—plants, animals, mountains, and wind.

The overarching idea of national parks in America has always been rooted in the notion of solace. In the 19th century, Frederick Law Olmsted, the designer of New York's Central Park and

America's most celebrated landscape architect at the time, became one of the foundational advocates for a nascent nationwide system of parks. At the close of the Civil War, a conflict that claimed more Americans lives than any other before or since, Olmsted was named among the first overseers of what would later become Yosemite National Park, and began to develop the philosophical underpinnings for administering parks across the country. Setting aside and preserving wild spaces, he thought, could provide an antidote to the profound violence and madness of the modern world, a place to calm one's spirit: "We want, especially, the greatest possible contrast with the restraining and confining conditions of the town, those conditions which compel us to walk circumspectly, wastefully, jealously, which compel us to look closely upon others without sympathy." Above all else, Olmsted wrote, "What we want to gain is tranquility and rest to the mind."

Olmsted's ideas about public lands continued to define American discourse and policy well into the next century. Wallace Stegner, America's "Dean of Western Writers," wrote nearly half a century after the establishment of America's National Parks that the country's protected lands had come to form "a geography of hope." This notion came to define the way my parents's generation thought and spoke about the outdoors. My father, I remember, on a drive through the backcountry, once gestured at the scenery around us and described the mountains as his church—a place for reflection and clarity, a literal site of worship.

At the age of 23, on my first day of fieldwork as a newly trained Border Patrol agent, I found myself in the Organ Pipe National Monument—working, like my mother, on land safeguarded by the Park Service. Any similarities with the work my mother had done, however, I would soon find to be nonexistent. On a remote dirt road my colleagues and I were made to pile

out of our vehicles to track a group of marijuana smugglers across a desert glowing pink in the sunset. As we walked for miles following footprints, I began to grasp how differently I was being asked to see the landscape—not as storyteller or a steward of nature but as an enforcer charged with learning the lay of the land only in order to interdict people that sought to cross it. I had become part of an agency whose policies had transformed the landscape into a weapon of deterrence, funneling prospective crossers into the most dangerous and remote corners of the desert, places of natural beauty remade into deadly, hostile terrain.

After several miles of walking with my fellow trainees, we eventually found several bales of marijuana and a few backpacks abandoned at the base of a rocky chain of mountains. Encouraged by our supervisor, my coworkers pillaged the leftover belongings, carried, most likely, by men who had been coerced into smuggling by the promise of a reduced fees for their own passage into America. My coworkers strewed their clothes atop trees and cacti, crushed their food, pocketed their cigarettes, and one agent even pissed on the their bags, giggling to himself like a deviant child. I knew then—even though we were within the boundaries of a national park, even though policy forbade it—that this trash would be left in the desert without the slightest hesitation, and that no effort would be made to capture the men who had fled or to prevent their becoming lost or disoriented in vast expanse of the desert, a place entirely foreign to most of them. Nevertheless, I did nothing to stop or speak out against this chain of events, resigned to the fact that most of my new colleagues had successfully been made to look upon the desert and the people seeking to cross it with utter ambivalence and disregard. From that day on, any solace I might have found in the desert became forever marred by the knowledge that I, too,

despite a lifetime of being taught to revere the landscape, had become complicit in a system of violence that would forever reshape it.

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As I set out toward Rendlesham Forest, I once again heard the sound of gunshots in the distance. The path took me past an oyster farm on a dirt road whose potholes, I soon realized, had quite fittingly been filled in with oyster shells. As I approached the Butley River, I began to grow nervous at the emptiness of the countryside and started to doubt my map, which assured me of the presence of nearby ferry crossing. As my path met the river, I noticed a tall willowy creature in the middle distance, bounding back and forth along the water's edge with great panic. Its eyes, I saw as I grew closer, were lit with terror. The animal didn't exactly look like any I had ever seen, so when I came upon a lone traveler walking in the opposite direction I asked him if he knew what it was. It's a young deer, he said, of what sort exactly I'm not sure. It must be trapped, he added—It's been running along since way up there. The man gestured down the river and then shrugged, continuing on his way.

I finally reached the tiny Butley ferry and found a sign informing me of the historic nature of the river crossing, which had been in operation since at least the end in the 16th Century. It was now run by a volunteers of The Alde & Ore Association, the sign went on, who only staffed the post during the summer months. Defeated, I walked back to the shell-strewn dirt road and hitched a ride from an oyster delivery truck. I struggled to comprehend the driver's accent, but understood that he had been born in Lowestoft and had been driving delivery trucks across Suffolk for more than 30 years. I told him I was on a walking tour and named the places I had been. When I mentioned Dunwich, he said he'd been there earlier this morning to deliver fish to



the town pub. I laughed and told him I had eaten fish and chips there two nights prior. You probably delivered it, I told him. Aye, he said, I probably did—and if it wasn't me, it was me mate.

The driver dropped me at the edge of Rendlesham Forest and told me, before driving off, that the wood that built Nelson's armada was felled there. I entered the forest knowing this leg of the walk would be my last, and was gripped with a sense of sadness that my trip of communion was drawing to a end. Nearing the center of the wood, the trail led into a large clearing of downed trees and past a vast complex of fenced-in buildings—warehouses, towers, domes, barracks, and a long tarmac—all part of some nameless installation guarded on all sides by a razor wire strung from concrete posts. My sudden entry into this militarized space reminded me, quite pointedly, of the heavily surveilled border back home in Arizona, and of the walls and fences I had spent countless hours of my own life patrolling. Half a mile up the path, I was heartened to discover a pile of collapsed pillars and concrete detritus that clearly represented past iterations of the compound's barrier, slowly being returned, like the ruins of Dunwich, to the earth.



Sebald, in his own trip through Rendlesham Forest, saw no such glimmers of hope among the denuded forest and crumbling military debris. He was, instead, beset by a dust storm amid a vast expanse of bulldozed trees. “This,” he imagined, “is what will be left after the earth has ground itself down.” I imagined Sebald’s horror at beholding the ruined forest and I felt, for a moment, somehow close to him. Buried in the brief sensation of proximity, however, I also felt the profound depth of his absence, and I wished with my whole body that he was still among us, just as I wished of my own dearly departed friends and family, wondering what more they might have made of this world.

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As a child living with my mother in the Guadalupe Mountains National Park in West Texas, the nearest grocery store was an hour and a half away. On our weekly drives to El Paso, the highway

across the desert plains was so empty that we often saw more jackrabbits than passing cars. On these long drives, I would beg my mother to tell me stories to pass the time, and as soon as she would finish one, I would quickly plead for another. It wasn't long before my mother implemented a new rule, refusing to tell me a new story until I told her one in turn. At first I bemoaned the new requirement, insisting that I didn't know any stories. My mother would draw my attention beyond the windows of the truck, asking me what I could see. Even at that young age, I had learned to narrate the features of the terrain with confidence: I see peaks and clouds, I told her, rocks and sand, birds and rabbits. Well, my mother would say, make a story about them. This is how, ever since I can remember, I was made to look to the landscape for inspiration. In those early days, I perceived no shadows darkening the ground as we drove toward the border and I was unable to imagine, even for a moment, that such a place might ever be made to hold anything other than beauty.

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A year to the day after I began my tour of Suffolk, I returned to East Anglia to attend the opening of an exhibition featuring unseen work by Sebald. In addition to the multitude of photographs included in this collection, the exhibition gathered much of the actual ephemera around which Sebald constructed *The Rings of Saturn*, including television newscasts that he watched from his hotel rooms, the paintings around which he centered long tangential musings, and other related curiosities such as a cast of Sir Thomas Browne's skull and the pattern books of Norwich silk weavers.

The exhibition's opening ceremony took place inside the atrium of the 900-year-old Norwich Castle, with a hundred or more people in attendance. Several prominent community

figures gave welcome speeches from a staircase, one of which was interrupted when a woman in the crowd fainted, causing a brief commotion and casting a curious hush over the room. After the reception concluded, I followed the crowd into the gallery. The first thing I noticed was the booming baritone of Sebald's voice speaking in a television interview that was playing on loop in the center of the room. The author's photos, printed in full color and organized according to place, served as uncanny extensions of the world he created in *The Rings of Saturn*, revealing a more human, uncanonized side of his wanderings. As I made my way deeper into the gallery, the museum-goers grew increasingly quiet and drawn in by the ephemera. The materials gathered in the exhibition, lifted as they were from the page, offered the rare and brief sensation of actually inhabiting Sebald's mind, encouraging visitors to trace for themselves his threads of thought in a way that was almost tangible. I sensed briefly, as I had in Rendlesham Forest, the closeness of the author himself, an opening into a physical space filled in almost every way by his presence.

The next day the exhibition's curator invited me to his office, which had been inherited from Sebald's university colleague and printmaker, Michael Brandon James. Strewn about the office, the curator had assembled a temporary collection of items on loan from the author's estate and the University archives. Among the materials were posters of Robert Walser, Walter Benjamin, and Thomas Bernhard—images that once decorated the walls of Sebald's office like bedroom posters of a teen's favorite rock bands or sports stars. The curator showed me several of Sebald's old books and pointed out his habit of highlighting text with markers that matched the color of the book's cover. In one book—an encyclopedia of German writers—Sebald had inserted a moody mugshot of himself next to his own entry, as if wishing it to replace the smiling portrait printed in the book with one that better reflected his grave self-image.

The curator soon ushered me through his office's backdoor into a darkroom—the same place where Brandon James made the prints for nearly all the images included in Sebald's books. In the room were a multitude of filing boxes filled with photo sleeves of the kind familiar to anyone who ever developed film before the advent of digital photography. Gazing at these unordered, uncontextualized snapshots, I was struck by their utter sense of casual familiarity. There were pictures of street dogs and horses, awkward candids of people dancing at pubs and sleeping in airports, images of museum exhibitions and cities seen from airplane windows, photos of old doors and windowpanes, hiking trails and highways, distant clouds and mountainsides. There were also images meant to serve as reminders, as a form of note-taking: pictures of newspaper headlines, of signs and placards, of license plates and company names. The collection seemed, above all else, like an relatively ordinary one, made by an ordinary traveler on their ordinary journeys across Europe.

The curator, having spent countless hours looking through Sebald's uncatalogued photographs, shared with me his observation that Sebald almost never appears in any of his photos, and neither does he ever seem to be accompanied by traveling companions or loved ones. This gives the appearance that Sebald's journeys were almost exclusively solitary ones, organized, in no small part, around the documentation of distinct places, themes, and histories, the purpose of which, in the absence of any accompanying writing, can feel like a grand mystery. In one sleeve of photos taken shortly before the publication of *Austerlitz* and not long before Sebald's untimely death, the curator showed me a series of images taken in a lush, overgrown graveyard. The pictures, he had concluded, were part of an unfinished project Sebald had been working on about World War I. Scrawled on the side of the photo boxes were difficult to discern

labels with abbreviations like “H’WLERKOPF,” “O’BURG,” or “F’HOF.” Mercifully, some locations were spelled out quite clearly, like “PICARDIE” and “ST. PIERRE.” As we rifled through images taken in the north of France, the curator asked me if I had ever visited the region. I paused for a second, thinking. I’ve been to Normandy, I finally told him, to Cherbourg.

In that moment, Christophe’s absence from the world once again took hold of my thoughts, and I felt a brief surge of connection across time and space pulling me to make sense of the tangled threads that linked Christophe and Sebald, Normandy and East Anglia. All that occurred to me was that somewhere, buried deep within my own uncatalogued collection of photographs, was a photo of my friend long before his body had been overtaken with sickness, long before he had been filled with hate and resentment, sitting quietly on a desert hillside bathed in the warm light of an Arizona sunset, smiling as he looked out upon the perfect landscape.

