



Some Days I am The Sea

by

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L. J. P.

For the past year, I've been working on this project that explores links between myself and my Great Grandad. When I tell people about it they assume I'm researching the life of someone I never knew, someone who died before I was born. In reality, Grandad Billy was alive until I was 16 and for a good chunk of that time, I saw him every week.

It will probably help you to understand things if I told you I come from one of those huge messy embroiled families where everyone is always coming round to talk over the top of each other. My childhood was littered with Grandparents and Great Grandparents and God Parents and Great Aunts and Uncles, an endless stream of benevolent elders would turn up at my Mum's house on a weekly basis to dish out sloppy head kisses and unearned praise to me and my older brothers.

Here is the earliest memory of any clarity I have of Grandad Billy. I am about 4 or 5 and I'm at my Great Grandparents house. My mum is talking to my Grandma Billy about well, something I'm not very interested in and my Grandad Billy is telling me a story about a lost kitten (ultimately found, sat on top of the door frame). I remember clearly because it was the first time I could understand what he was saying. He had a thick Geordie accent (He'd probably correct that to sand dancer) he didn't have any teeth and wouldn't wear false ones. he wasn't always easy to understand.

Here is one of the last memories I have of Grandad Billy. It's my brother's 18th birthday party so I must be a few months shy of 16. I'm sitting between my Great Grandparents on the sofa, they are both holding one of my hands. Grandad Billy is telling me stories of when he was in the Merchant Navy 'and sailed around half the world twice' and about his mother who had 'Hair so long she could sit on it'. Then because I had asked, the same story about the lost kitten sitting on the door frame.

In a minute when I try and explain to you who my Great Grandad was I'm going to try and do it using his stories. Before I do I have to offer you two warnings.

The first is this: my Grandad Billy was a whole complicated person who lived a whole complicated life before I was even born. I knew him mainly as a benevolent old man who snuck me wine gums and squeezed my hands and loved me fiercely. I've put off writing this for a long time because it's inevitable that I'm going to simplify him and smooth things out.

The second is this: While working on this project I've made absolutely 0 effort to verify any of the details of any of these stories. So when I say they are true, what I mean is they truly are my memories of his memories, and we both have a tendency to exaggerate.

The line between remembering and imagining is vanishingly small. It's possible there is no such thing as true stories anyway, only stories told well and stories told badly. Grandad Billy told an excellent story. I believed every single one.

It's a weighty thing, being the first writer in a long line of storytellers, I worry a lot about getting things wrong, there's always the feeling that the people who came before would have done a much better job of this given the same opportunity, and even though I know it's completely irrational, I can't help but worry they'd be disappointed by my efforts.

Then I remember these are the same people who responded to my 1998 one-woman Spice Girls tribute show with a literal standing ovation and I figure it's probably fine.

Sept 19th first met Miss Mary Smith. Wednesday

Sept 20th met her again, had a short talk. Thursday

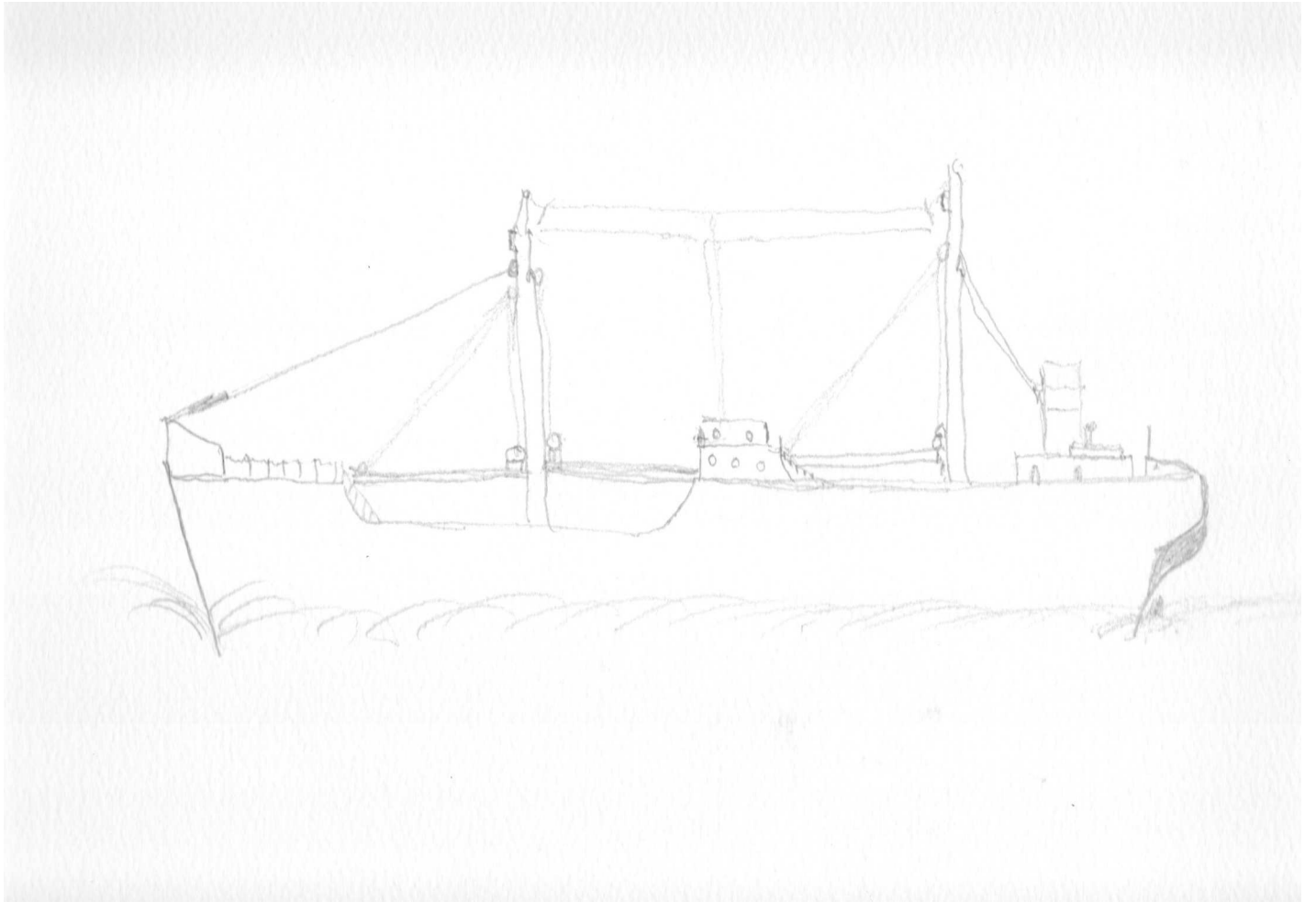
Sept 21st waited for her coming out of shop at 9 pm
had a short walk then took her home for first time
along distance. perhaps she is worth it. Saturday

Sunday Sept 22nd met her at Miss Laura Shipley's
home had fairly good time while there, took
Mary home about 10 pm left Shipley's about 9 pm

Monday Sept 23rd Met her again outside of shop
at tenet. don't know whether I am going to like
her or not, don't intend to go with her as I
~~was~~ said I wasn't going with any more girls
to court them.

Tuesday Sept 25th went to dance in afternoon
with her. (dancing no good).

Thursday Sept 26th met her mother who wasn't
very pleased with me, thinks all sailors of
no good. for that shall try and win
Mary's love from someone she has been going
whom is in Indian girls to show her mother
one called the



There are of course a whole lot of stories about my Great Grandad, more than I could possibly hope to tell you here, but for our current conversation, these are the ones that matter.

One. When my Great Grandad was young there was a drawing competition at school, he drew a picture of a tulip and won. He was offered a place at art school, but whether for reasons of finance or practicality he instead..

Two. Became an apprentice butcher. He was a good apprentice butcher. The fastest at doing something. Dressing a chicken I think. The details are fuzzy. Anyway, the point is he was doing well and he liked it, making it all the more mysterious that..

Three. He came home the night before his 17th birthday to find his mother had packed him a suitcase. "You're going to sea in the morning with your uncle Matt," she said. And he did.

Four. From then on Grandad Billy was a sailor in the Merchant Navy. Here is where a few stories clump together. Would you like to hear about the tea set he bought in India? The mystical suitcases of oranges he brought home in the middle of wartime rationing? The extra warm coat he stole from the officer's store when he worked the Arctic convoys? Sorry, they'll have to wait. The only things you need to know right now are..

Five. He sailed a regular route that went (I'm not sure the exact order) Hamburg, London, Newcastle, Oslo, Bergen. Picking up and dropping off different things in every port. I don't know all the details, I know for sure they took coal from Newcastle and brought timber back from Norway. He was somewhere on that route at the outbreak of World War Two. By all accounts, he had a hairy time getting back.

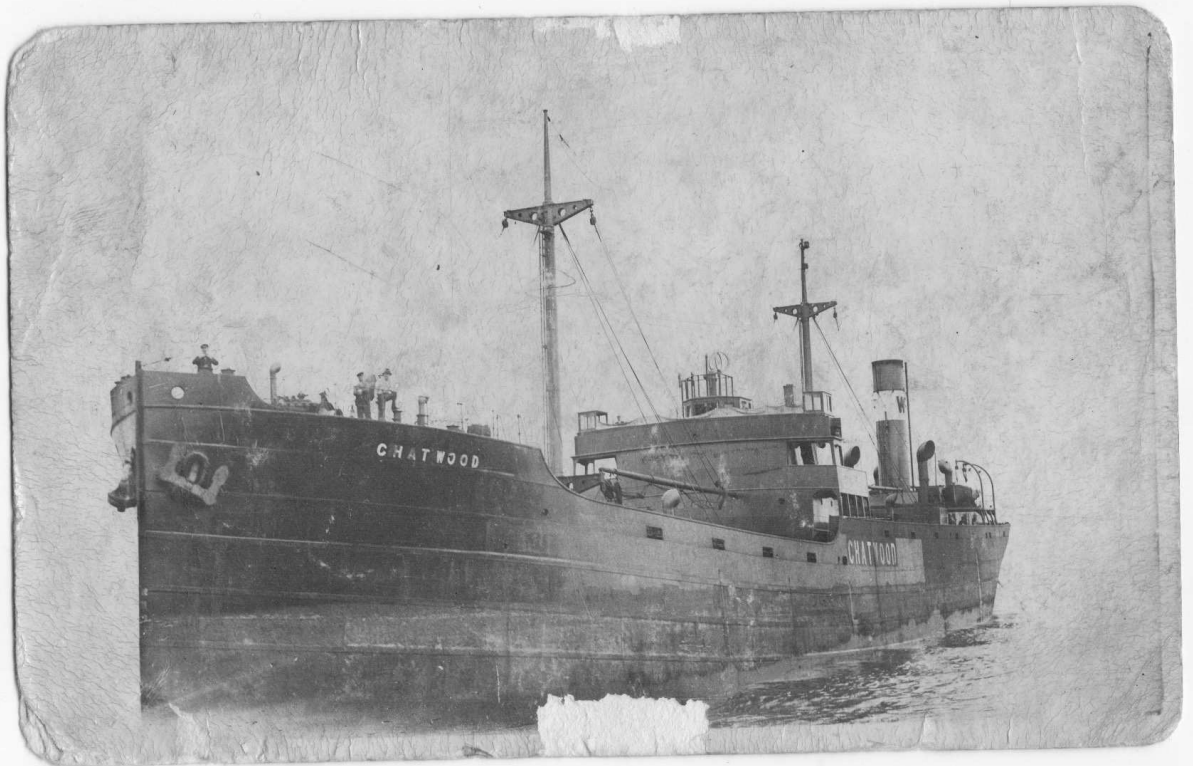
Six. I don't know a lot about what he did in the war. I know he sailed to bitterly cold places on ships with names that are redacted in his records. I know he kept passing increasingly intense sounding weapons courses. At some point during the war, he bumped into his cousin in London who was also a sailor and also called Billy. Other Billy had been offered a job onboard a barge taking something from London to Newcastle, there were jobs for both Billies if they wanted them. Don't take this job, one Billy advised the other, this boat isn't seaworthy. Cousin Billy ignored the warning, the barge fell behind its convoy and was torpedoed. All hands lost. (I'll come back to this later, but it's worth noting that this story is the first place I ever came across the word seaworthy.)

Seven. This isn't important but it is delightful, the ship he worked on had a cat who lived on board. I mention it because his daughter, my Grandmother, visited the ship as a small child and stood in the cat's bowl of milk. She'll read this eventually and won't be happy if I miss this part out.

Eight. In 1944 Grandad Billy was involved in a nasty accident where his hands were crushed in the tightening coils of a rope. Both hands were badly injured, he lost two fingers. When he first got out of hospital they tucked his train ticket home in the folds of his bandages. He has a series of operations on his hands over the next year and officially left the Merchant Navy in 1945.

Nine. As part of his rehabilitation, at some point in the three years after the accident when he was out of work he taught himself to knit and made slippers for the whole family.

Obviously more stuff happened after 1945. He moved to Keighley to work in a mill. He had an allotment. He had countless Grandchildren and Great Grandchildren. Like I said, I'm smoothing down and simplifying, a whole person squeezed into an almost too-tight grip on your hand. But that doesn't matter, because like everything else in the universe this story is really about me. I think there's just one more thing you need to know.





Ten: He kept sketching and painting as a hobby for the rest of his life. He could really draw a ship, he could really draw, better than I can to be honest. But then that was my constant feedback at art school, your drawing has a lot of room for improvement. When I was about 14 and he was 94 He gave me all his art stuff that was still useable. All these watercolour books and pens and paintbrushes. I mostly just used them, but I've had a tube of ultramarine paint he gave me in a box frame on my studio wall for the last seven years.

Okay, so me, I'm an artist and a writer and I maybe should have done this bit like a thousand words back, but whatever, we're here now, sometimes things aren't perfect but you have to keep going with it anyway. Let's forge ahead. I have MS or multiple sclerosis, which, in case you don't know is a chronic illness where your immune system gets confused and starts attacking your brain and spinal cord instead of like I don't know, whatever it is it's supposed to attack. The brand of MS I have, relapse remitting, has a range of treatment options but there is no cure.

Back in 2015, I was working on a fairly major printing project for my MA and I was spending a lot of time on the train going to Mirfield in Yorkshire where there are open-access print studios. The train line I took went past this scrapyard that had this row of three massive anchors in it. I was pretty new into my life with MS at this point in time, I was still figuring out what it meant for who I was as a person and still getting my head around what the long term ramifications of what this illness might be. I used to look at those anchors and think, 'One day, that might be me.'

I started to feel attached to those anchors, and sort of defensive on their behalf. I had this fantasy of somehow raising funds to buy them, and doing what with them I don't know, cramming them into my bedroom at my parents' house along with everything else I owned. I guess I was thinking I'd make them into art. I left Art school as a person whose drawing skills 'had a lot of room for improvement' but I attach meaning to abandoned objects better than anyone I know.

How do the parts of a ship end up in a scrapyard in West Yorkshire anyway? This was the question I kept asking myself, but of course, once I really thought about it I knew the answer. Ships get scrapped because they aren't Seaworthy, like the one my Great Grandad wouldn't sail on that killed the other Billy.

I knew nothing about the proper maritime law that governs whether a ship is seaworthy or not. I knew nothing about how a person could look at a ship and see either a voyage ready vessel or a death trap. In my mind, though there was a clear line, some kind of test that a ship could pass or fail, and that if you applied that test to people, me and my messed up immune system would be a collection of parts in a scrapyard miles and miles away from the sea.

You have to remember that I also knew there was a test that decided if people were fit to work on ships, one that you could clearly fail, or at least you could in 1945 because Grandad Billy failed it didn't he, they gave him an actual certificate, it's in my desk drawer. Even though I knew he lived a happy life after that, he must have missed the sea, he spent the rest of his life drawing ships (his drawings have no room for improvement, they are objectively lovely.) When the idea of people being tested for seaworthiness first came to me I was always going back and forth as to whether I would pass.

It's important that you understand nobody in my family ever applied any pressure to me on this topic. My relations as a general rule of thumb were cheerleaders, not critics. Still, I sometimes feel overwhelmed by the knowledge that I'm getting the privilege of putting on an exhibition or writing this book, not because I'm smarter or more talented than anyone who came before me, but because I'm luckier, because I had the good fortune to live in easier times.

I'm not seaworthy.

C.R.S. 8.
(Revised 10/42)

MERCHANT NAVY RESERVE POOL

Certificate of Discharge from Merchant Navy Service

This is to Certify that (full name) AIRD William E.

born on 15.6.1911 at SOUTH SHIELDS Dis. A. No. R.105251

Rank or Rating A.B. is discharged from service in the Merchant Navy.

His National Service Acts Registration No. is MMD/11/108270 (to be completed in all appropriate cases).

The reason for his discharge is that he is "Physically unfit for sea service."

Signature of Seaman
W. E. Aird

THIS FORM MUST BE CAREFULLY PRESERVED BY THE OFFICER OR RATING TO WHOM IT IS ISSUED. IT MUST NOT BE TRANSFERRED TO ANY OTHER PERSON.



The above has surrendered his British Seaman's Identity Card (Serial No. TA 92450) and forms C.R.S. 56 and 76 have been issued.

[Signature]
Superintendent and National Service Officer.

4.10.45.

To be prepared in triplicate.
Top copy to Seaman. Carbons to R. G. S. & S. and Reserve Pool Office concerned.



A few years passed, I went through a really rough patch with my MS then I wrote a funding bid for a project called Seaworthy Vessel that would see me travelling to Norway too, and writing an essay and making a whole lot of origami boats as a means to explore the connection between myself and Granddad Billy. I got the money. Am I Seaworthy? Maybe I am Seaworthy? In my head, there was still a question mark.

One of the major things I wanted the funding for was a research trip to Oslo so I could see for myself the place where my Granddad Billy, well, you already know about that part don't you, that's what we just spent the last 2,000 words talking about. I applied for funding for my project because it would be impossible for me to go to Norway without some benevolent outside force footing the bill (thanks funders) and I thought it would be impossible to write whatever this is without going to Norway (hope you like it funders, thanks again). The truth is though I also applied for funding because I thought that if I got the funding I would feel legitimate, I would feel like a real artist/writer. I would feel like I passed whatever test I needed to pass and be declared fit to sail in the artistic navy. This was a huge miscalculation on my part. Instead, I was haunted by a growing conviction that I had swindled three lovely art charities out of a large sum of money.

One time I found a stone on a beach in Northumberland that I'm pretty sure is the head from an ancient arrow. It would probably be easy to find out for certain either way. The beach I found it on in Bamburgh is one of those time layering places, real kings and saints and Vikings have stood on this beach. I like imagining my 'pretty sure' arrowhead into these stories, I like thinking I've got a little piece of history on my bedroom drawers. I bet I'm only one Google search away from a forum filled with friendly experts who could confirm or deny it. I'd rather spend the rest of my life pretty sure I found an ancient arrowhead than run the risk of discovering all I found is an arrow-shaped stone.

The parable of the maybe arrowhead pretty nicely sums up most of the anxieties I have about my creative work. I am terrified that one day someone is going to look up my credentials and find a forum full of friendly experts who'll gladly tell the enquirer what they thought was an artist is, in fact, an arrow-shaped stone.

People kept asking me what it was like in Norway and I couldn't tell them. Everything I felt there was too big for words. I couldn't explain how I felt there, how calm and how happy but also at other times how panicked, how insignificant. So instead of talking about what it was like to stand on the edge of the Oslo fjord and feel all those big unnameable feelings. I told people about the sign at the airport warning you not to litter in case you attract wild boars. I told people about the pretty white houses and about beating my brother who was travelling with me on a simulated shooting game. I talked about how expensive the wine is and how good the public transport is. I tried to get across how beautiful it is in Norway, but I'm not sure I did a very good job. It's obviously the most beautiful place, maybe in the entire world, the sort of place you might want to go back to after your through sailing round half the world twice.

Here's one thing it was like. While I was staying in my lovely Airbnb someone sent me a really friendly supportive email, saying they couldn't wait to see what I would make after my research trip. But because friendly supportive emails are the worst and only sick bastards hoping to see you fail send them, I had the kind of soul-deep, existential crisis that could only be helped by dragging my brother out into the just above freezing temperatures to watch shipping containers get loaded onto cargo ships just across the docks from where we were staying. The whole swanky redevelopment we were standing on used to be the main commercial docks that my Great Grandad undoubtedly sailed in and out of in his sailing days. Before that, just up from the exact spot I was standing on, Edvard Munch had the existential crisis that inspired the painting of The Scream. A new museum is opening on the site anytime now to commemorate the occasion (of his freak-out not mine, although give it 200 years and we'll see).





Edvard Munch's sister was an inmate in an asylum not far away, my brother was buying us hot chocolates to walk home with. Before it was the docks Edvard Munch walked on after visiting his sister, it was one of the oldest parts of the city, until it got destroyed by a fire. Before that real-life Vikings with longships and drinking horns and bigger problems than well-meaning emails had launched their ships there. I watched a swan swim lazy circles in the lido at the end of our block and thought 'I am the least important person in all of human history.' It made me feel so much better.

Here's another thing Norway was like: There's this feeling I get when I stand next to the sea, I say the sea, but I also had it on the edge of the Oslo fjord, and I've had it looking out at the river Mersey. Really, any inconceivably large body of water will do. It's a good feeling, but one that's difficult to put into words. It's like I am the sea, or at least I'm made of the same stuff as the sea. Like I have this huge untameable soul that expands out of me and I am everything, the whole horizon, the sound of the wind and the cold chill of the air. I am as vast as the universe and capable of anything.

Some days I am the sea and some days I am the ship and some days I am the dried out flotsam left behind onshore.

I mainly looked at boats in Oslo. I went to the Viking Ships Museum. And the Fram, described as the strongest wooden ship ever built, the Fram was used by Roald Amundsen for his polar exhibitions. I kept thinking how the building of ships is an essentially hopeful endeavour, but a ridiculous human one too. The idea that you would ever look at the vastness of the sea and think 'Yeah, I could cobble something together that would get me to the other side of that'. What on earth made us study the odds on a fight between us and the sea and bet in favour of ourselves? It's the same kind of ridiculousness that makes a person look at the vastness of a bookshop and think 'Yeah, I could write something that belongs inside that.'

I was very taken with the Viking ships as you can imagine. They have such a presence, and they are so stupidly old. Among the grave goods that were discovered with one of the ships is an ultramarine glass made by the Romans, already at least 100 years old when it was buried with the boat in 834.

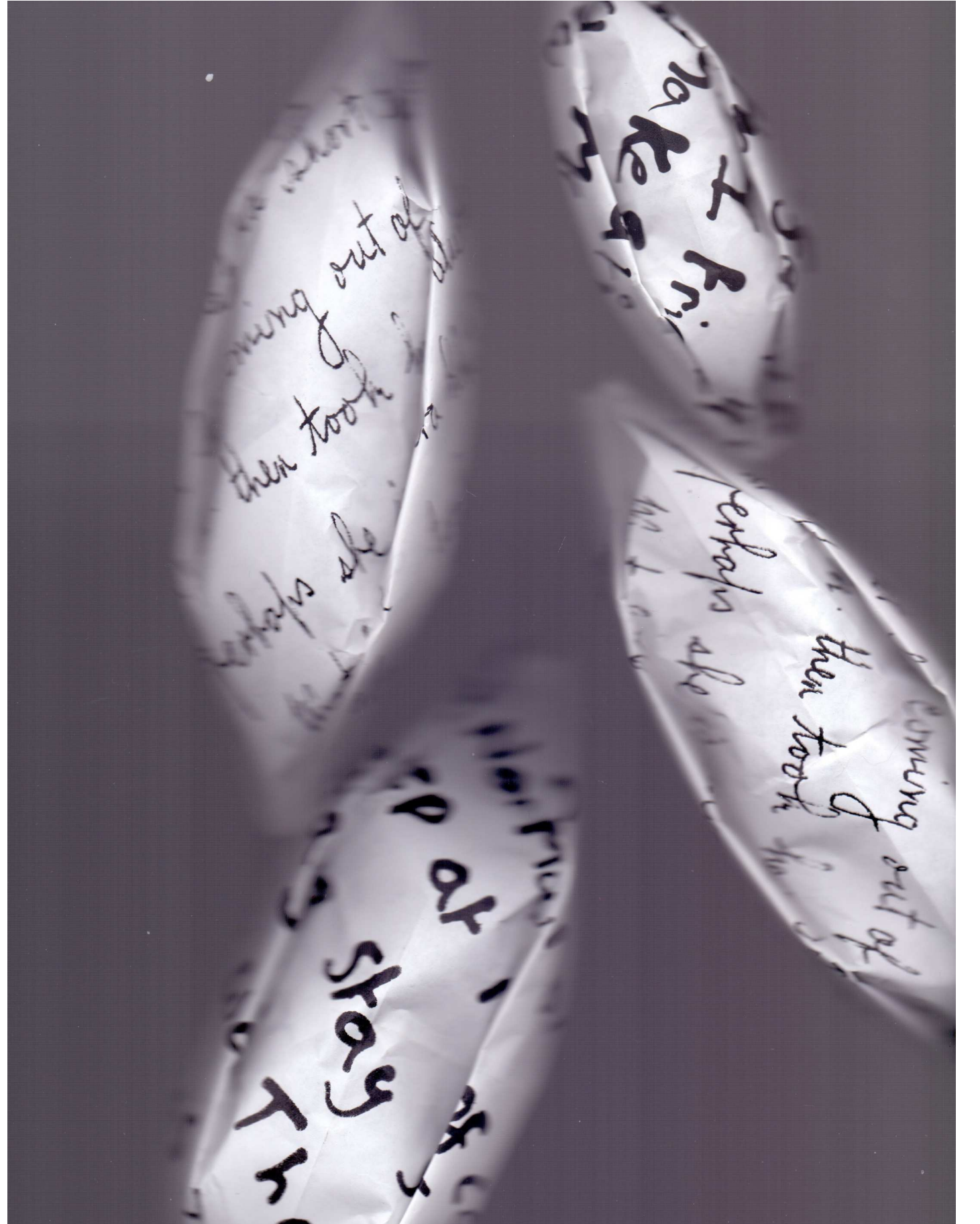
I know I am projecting. But I felt very defensive on behalf of the Vikings when I read something that said, 'Early Vikings may have believed this glass held mystical powers'. I believe that the glass holds mystical powers, it's a glass, I break about seven glasses a week and yet here it is, existing for centuries and still so brilliantly blue.

I felt like everyone was getting a bit judgy about the Vikings. Look at them, the primitive Vikings, making talisman's out of an old glass, like they are so different from me, with my maybe arrowhead by my bed, and the seashell in my coat pocket and my tube of ultramarine paint on my studio wall.

Maybe we could back off the Vikings a bit. Maybe the Vikings are finding everyone sending them emails saying kind encouraging things to be a tad overwhelming, maybe no one ever gave the Vikings money to work on a project of this size before and the Vikings are feeling like a bit of a fraud? Maybe the Vikings are a bit worried they've forgotten how to put words together in ways that are good sounding and they need to have a coffee and watch some shipping containers put on the back of a boat.

I was walking in the harbour, by some fluke I was in Norway days before an around the world sailing race was starting from Oslo, so every day more and more sailing ships were appearing in the harbour, quite a few of them had these information boards that told you the history of the ship. I stumbled across one, completely by chance that sort of changed everything.





take a
perhaps she

coming out of
then took
perhaps she

perhaps she
then took
coming out of

stay
or

So, this ship started life in 1915 as a fishing vessel with sails, in 1917 it disappeared while sailing in the English channel. In 1925 the same ship is found abandoned in the Congo river and is taken to the Netherlands. In 1928 it has an engine installed and until 1940 is used as a trading ship until the Second World War when, get this, the ship is used to ferry arms for the resistance in the Netherlands. In 1944 the ship goes missing for the second time. Then there's no trace of the ship until 1947 when it turns up in Newfoundland. From then the ship is used as a trading vessel until 1995. Now it's been re-converted into a sailing boat and you can hire it out to cruise in the Oslo Fjord while a string quartet plays on deck. It's called the Adventure Ship these days, because, of course it is.

All this time I had been thinking of ships as one thing, that live one life, but of course, they aren't. Maybe they don't all get to go fishing in one century and give pleasure cruises in the next. Didn't the Vikings have ships that lived a multitude of lives, warships then burial ships then whatever it is they are now, cultural ambassadors, treasurers, props in some artist's quest for meaning?

Before I went to Norway I thought Seaworthiness was a line you could only cross once, that once a ship was unseaworthy its story ended with a torpedo or a scrapyard. It seems ridiculous now that it never occurred to me that an unseaworthy ship can be fixed. It can be something else. That's true for people too isn't it? We can't be condemned, we can never permanently fail. When we are damaged we can be fixed. If we are unseaworthy there is always the potential to be brought back up to code. Sailors who are declared unfit for service by the Merchant Navy can find new lives with new jobs and lovely allotments. Artists who lose faith in their work can find it again (maybe it's worth checking in Newfoundland.) Humans are buoyant, whatever the circumstances we continue to float.

A note on dates:

As I mentioned at the start of the essay I've been more interested in stories for this project than facts, but a few dates I have made an effort to verify. Any specific dates about events in Grandad Billy's life I checked in the meticulous notebook of dates kept by his wife/my Great Grandma, which notes down days, months, and years for all the most important events in her life like '8th April 1944 Billy accident at sea' and '10th April 1977 Kim the dog's 10th birthday'

The dates relating to the Viking ships I wrote down in my notebook at the museum along with the quotes. It is possible I got some details wrong. I tried to find some details about the glass online but as you can imagine it's hard to find info on one small object in a large museum collection. I am not as good at keeping records as Grandma Billy so don't base any academic papers on anything I've said here.

The Adventure Ship story dates are taken from the photo I took of the sign on the ship itself in Oslo harbour.

A note on images:

All the images used in this book are either by me or are taken from Grandad Billy's albums which were kindly lent to me for use in this project. The boat on page 6 is clearly his drawing. This last one is clearly mine.



This Project was supported by an
Emergence Bursary from a-n The Artists
Information Company, Disability Arts
Online and Shape Arts

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