

**CHRIS FLEMING
REMAINS**

Chris Fleming is a writer and translator. He is Associate Professor in Humanities at Western Sydney University and is the author or editor of ten books, including *René Girard: Violence and Mimesis* and *On Drugs*, a work of memoir.

THE FRUIT FLIES RAIDING THE ORANGES aren't obsessed but seem so. They resist other interpretations. I attribute pathologies to them: oral fixation, insanity, poor character. I flick them away and they return in epicycles, unaware or uncaring about my size. Compared to them, I possess planetary mass – but they cannot be dissuaded. I move the bowl; they disperse but soon return. I blow at them, swear, then shout. I light a match and move it into the swirl like some low-rent necromancer. They are unconcerned with their safety. In the absence of the fruit, they have no alternative engagements, no other interests. (They have but fifty days to live.) To the imaginary onlooker, however, it is me who is the mad one, increasingly fixated on them.

I can't use insecticide because that would contaminate the fruit, so I wave my hand to scatter them and then put the bowl in the fridge. Days later I return and take it out. A single fruit fly is roused from cryogenic sleep and slowly reanimates. Thawed, it flies off in a drunken corkscrew pattern. I wonder if the cold has destroyed its navigation system.

I *was* the mad one. I feel awful.

—

What gives obsession part of its character, and one source of its shame, is its mechanical nature: the addict returns to the drug, the broken-hearted returns to images of the beloved, the bore returns to his pet topic, the OCD sufferer returns to wash their hands – and all these in the way iron filings return to magnets, moths to flames, and flies to fruit. One cannot speak here of 'deliberation'. Behaviour that normally suggests conscious intent can be reduced to something alien to it – mere reflex, of sensory

input and motor function output, or as Henri Bergson put it, 'du mécanique plaqué sur du vivant' (something mechanical welded onto the living).

William James's *The Principles of Psychology* contains numerous accounts of 'dipsomania,' what we now call alcoholism:

Dr J. E. Turner tells of a man who, while under treatment for inebriety...secretly drank the alcohol from six jars containing morbid specimens. On asking him why he had committed this loathsome act, he replied: 'Sir, it is as impossible for me to control this diseased appetite as it is for me to control the pulsations of my heart.'

Here is a mode of obsession in which the human appears as a masochistic marionette. Despite their behaviour, fruit flies could never be described thus.

My feverish war against them was pure projection. But I do wonder where that battle fits – whether it had precedents.

—

I am in year five, walking eight hundred metres to the local surf club to receive first-aid instruction. The journey from our school to the beach is fraught. The friends I made at my old school are in other classes, at other schools, or have made other friends. I am alone, odd, and usually terrified. The docile nuns who'd sat me on their laps when I was 'unsettled' have been replaced by religious brothers and teachers who seek any pretext to hit us.

We are caned or strapped for talking when not asked to, for not talking when prompted, for doing homework badly, not doing

it, for getting it wrong, untidy hair, dirty fingernails, forgetting things, for farting, untucked shirts, making jokes, for laughing at them – and for anything else thought punishable, which, as far as we can tell, could be anything at all. I am conscious that my fear and disorientation are broadcast by my every movement and statement, by every involuntary expression on my rubbery face.

On top of this, and maybe because of it, I am also a target of other students, who see my skinniness, dread and curly blond hair as signs of weakness, ‘girlishness’, as provocation for assault. Matthew is particularly terrifying. His standard routine is to pretend to be my friend and then to attack in some way or another. He approaches and says, ‘We’re friends, right?’ and offers a hand to shake. I go to shake, he drops his hand and yells, ‘Don’t touch me, faggot!’; or he retracts his hand and slaps me in the face. I make matters worse by being a crier, despite all efforts to suppress tears.

Marched in double file down Coogee Bay Road I find myself next to a boy who looks safe, a fretful stick insect like me – a loser loner, ambling east in parallel-awkward. It is a gamble. I know if we become friends, I’ll not just be a loser; this loseriness will be stamped onto me, having inadvertently co-founded a loser group. (I’m ashamed to admit this.) And yet, alone, it is becoming difficult to survive.

We are mostly silent but as we approach the water, he looks at me and says, apropos of nothing, ‘I bet the whiting are biting.’ He smiles. It is an unusually confident remark and I believe him, despite neither seeing what he sees nor comprehending what he says. But in the brief period it takes to get to the surf club from where we are, he fills my head with talk of fish and lines and

lures – of hooks, sinkers, swivels and reels. I am mesmerised. For the next two hours we force mouth-to-mouth and CPR on beleaguered latex torsos, but I am elsewhere. Perhaps I *am* someone else – someone with rod and reel in hand, a tackle box nearby, who'll volunteer to someone 'the whiting are biting' unprompted. I want to say exactly that, to anyone, this afternoon.

And just like that, history is cut in half. Fishing, the engine of my new friend's self-possession, the cradle of his dumb smile, is my fate also. I start theoretically, with *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Vol. IV (Excom–Hermosil), and then search my house for all things angling. I locate two old hand lines with single sinkers and rusty hooks, interred under other recreational rejects – warped racquets, dead balls, a prehistoric cricket bat now merged with a snorkel whose deformed rubber has started to swallow things. I clear a cupboard and relocate the reels to my room. Neglected, unclaimed, they are now mine. *I am a fisherman.*

I visit newsagencies and discover *Fishing News*. I purchase a copy and then await every new issue. I am only interested in accompanying family members on car trips if it involves the possibility of visiting those parts of department stores that hold sporting goods. Soon, even these are of little interest, as their products aren't specialised enough; they are for amateurs. I search bookstores for fishing books and order things that appear in the pages of magazines. I ask fish shops if they have any fish-related classification images I can take. (I settle for a poster of octopi.)

I issue tyrannical demands. All birthday and Christmas presents will be fishing related. I do a weekly paper run and all proceeds are devoted to tackle. I find new magazines. Someone

takes a photo of me with a great aunt and uncle, a sister, and my mum and dad. I am holding up a Bunyanesque tome which just says *FISHING* on it. It's more than a matter of not being able to put the book down; it is about declaring *who I am*.

It is recommended in one magazine that casting techniques are imperative. For beach fishing, this means a good, long cast, sixty metres at minimum. I find secluded parks and attach a size eight ball sinker to the line and drill my casting to the edge of my curfew. The index finger that holds the line becomes blistered and raw, holy stigma of my dedication. A ruddy man with a toddler chides me for nearly killing his child with a spectacular cast.

My tackle boxes increase in size, with tackle divided up into sections: sinkers (ball, star, bean, wire, helmet, barrel), hooks (treble, siwash, aberdeen, circle), floats (wagglers, poles, sliders), spare lines of different gauges, knives, a scaler, bait tray and one-off impedimenta – like red wire insulation to sit above the hook, specifically for whiting.

My head is glutted with huge volumes of taxonomically organised data. I am no longer simply an authority on Australian eastern-coast beach fishing, but rock fishing, inland fishing, freshwater fishing, open sea fishing, big game marlin fishing, shark fishing, droplining, handlining, even 'hard water fishing' – hollowing out ice and dropping a line, as one might do in Sweden, North Dakota, or Lake Abashiri in Hokkaido, Japan. But for all my obsessiveness, I am – it's now apparent – fundamentally not so much a fisherman but a fishing *theorist*.

I am for a time the youngest member – by decades, it seems – of the Bondi Fishing Club, and I privately chide members for being so local in their references. Why no talk at our club of

the salmon and grayling of the Lainio River in the deep north of Swedish Lapland or the crimson-fleshed Lough Corrib trout of Connemara, Ireland? And have *any* of you ventured to the famous Tusket River in Nova Scotia, buried in the Tobetic Wilderness in ‘the heart of the deep unknown, where the trout and the wild moose are. Where the fire burns bright, and the tents gleam white, under the northern star’? – or so might have asked Albert Bigelow Paine, Mark Twain’s biographer, as he begins his famous 1908 expeditionary tale, *The Tent Dwellers*.

I know parts of Paine’s book off by heart. I am primed for wild fishing adventures, even if limited somewhat by the fact that my dad gives me a lift to Bondi most weeks and club members take it in turns to drive me home. Yet, as a fishing theorist, someone who identifies as a fisherman, I am hard to equal. I want above all to *talk* fishing. Do I have to actually fish? Not necessarily. It isn’t a matter of what I do; it is who I am, in my blood. Catching fish is quite beside the point. Paine again:

Now, I confess there is something about a book of trout flies, even at the year’s end, when all the brooks are flint and gorged with white, when all the north country hides under seamless raiment that stretches even to the Pole itself – even at such a time, I say, there is something about those bits of gimp, and gut, and feathers, and steel, that prick up the red blood of any man – or of any woman, for that matter – who has ever flung one of those gaudy things into a swirl of dark water, and felt the swift, savage tug on the line and heard the music of the singing reel.

In 1916, the New South Wales Department of Education published the first edition of a free magazine for public school children

aptly titled *The School Magazine*. It is a dull, typewritten affair, filled with ‘zany’ forgettable stories and wet attempts to make science or maths ‘cool’.

I am used to leafing through it, mostly to carry out spot checks to confirm that it still contains nothing of interest. But our school has also mysteriously come into possession of a parallel Canadian publication. The contrast couldn’t be clearer. Although real, what fills these pages appears closer to science fiction: a place of huge mountains crowded with bears, where it snows, and – importantly – where children have friends who don’t beat them up. They hold hands, go camping, roast marshmallows, sing songs together. And, in the snow, they wear clothing that covers up their bodies, so nobody can tell how skinny their legs are.

It is through the Canadian magazine I discover fly fishing, the mode of fishing which sanctions the most gear, elicits mythopoetic travelogues from the temperamentally laconic. (There even appears to be *hats* for it.) Fly fishing is a tackle-laden martial art. It is to fishing as calligraphy is to writing, as jujitsu is to brawling, as *haute horlogerie* is to the sundial. I know this because I have read this. I have read it in Norman MacLean’s *A River Runs Through It* and Arthur Ransome’s *Rod & Line*. They, like I, are mythologists of fishing. We are few but not alone.

—

As Melville’s Ishmael makes clear, Ahab was no mere fisherman, either. The Captain was also a mythologist, an unlettered cetologist, an encyclopedist of the ocean. *Moby-Dick-as-symbol*

isn't simply a conceit concocted to torment school students. It begins with Ahab himself. But his obsession, unlike mine, was lifelong. Moby Dick remained the Captain's magnetic north, a cause worth dying for – although clearly not worth living for.

I no longer fish, and never did with any regularity – at least relative to my obsession. Fishing for me was, first of all, a fantasy space, one damaged at the very moment of doing it. Fishing itself often resulted in seasickness, cut fingers, in melancholic overidentification with dying fish. It appeared that my love of fishing was sustainable only to the extent that I didn't do it.

One of the unsung advantages of alienation is to be denied a desired object, thereby maintaining – even strengthening – our desire for it. To be a fisherman both allowed to fish and competent to fish was oddly at variance with my identity as a fisherman. The obsession passed after a couple of years. And sometimes what we call 'obsessions' pass even faster than this, faster than a headache.

Like many boys of my generation, I am obsessed with war and armies. I have toy soldiers, which I spend hours setting up. When I am satisfied with their positioning, I zoom my head around muttering orders ('*Advance!*'), interrogatives ('*You want me to do what?!?*'), and interjections ('*Aaaargh!*'). My skull doubles as both field marshal and movie camera.

My dad, a veteran of the war in the Pacific in the 1940s, goes for walks along the beach. I accompany him, put on his old army shirt and dive around the dunes, evading phantom enemy fire. He, contrarily, never seems much interested in war and attends Anzac Day services rarely. Being a veteran isn't a significant part of his identity and never the basis of reverie. I, on the other hand, am consumed with ideas of combat. As I guess many children of veterans did, I hit him with the Ultimate Question: 'Did you kill anyone?'

'I don't know,' he says.

'How can't you know?'

'Well...jungle warfare's a mare's nest. It's hard to see. You fight blind. The first you might know about the enemy is the sound of mortar fire or bullets hitting trees, and so you fire back in that direction.'

His answer stuns me into horrified silence. This isn't the war of my imagination, of cartoon BLAMS!, risible bon mots, the widening whites of enemy eyes recorded by a stereoscopic head. It conjures in my mind a deadly, blind mess. It has the quality of a nightmare. And true to that assessment, a couple of nights later I dream I am in jungle combat, and the horror of it, the mad panic, makes it the most terrifying dream of my life. And just like that, I fear war, my war books, my plastic armies. The interest, let alone the obsession, falls away.

As an academic a large part of my research will come to centre on questions of collective violence, on scapegoating, ethno-nationalism, sacrifice and genocide. But for now, this part of the human experience overwhelms me; that war even exists – and exists as it does – is something I cannot face head-on. My imagination has betrayed me. Some obsessions, revealing

themselves as pure projection, are amenable to such correction, even cure.

—

Although usually a pejorative, what we call ‘betrayal’ can be ethically admirable; equally, ‘fidelity’ can fuel evils. A fascist loyal to fascism is even more a fascist. And those of us who have met forty-year-old men who still collect and play with soldiers don’t naturally think of them as having a species of integrity or dignity the rest of us have lost, rare human ballast in a capricious world. Fidelity is only ever as valuable as what it is faithful *to*. One cannot be faithful to a shirt that no longer fits. And to continue to live idiotically in fealty to idiotic ideas is doubly idiotic. As Vladimir Jankélévitch argues in *Traité des vertus*, faithfulness to one’s own stupidity is a bolstered stupidity: ‘La fidélité à une bêtise est une bêtise de plus.’

Yet what about fidelity not to a bad cause, but a lost one? What of fidelity to an absent love, a dead spouse, a doomed friendship? Despite its terrors and tantrums, there are agonies which childhood does not and cannot know. Those of heartbreak are among these, and the pain of first occurrence can be so alien and so deep that nothing can prepare us for it.

We have our hearts broken and then are forced to endure the shallow assurances of well-meaning witnesses. The post-breakup consolation ‘there are plenty of fish in the sea’ will be taken as like telling parents who’ve lost a child that they ‘can always have another’. Such platitudes will offer little consolation, even if the sentiment behind them often turns out to be true, that the apparent singularity of the love lost may

prove just that – only apparent.

Just as shocking as the force of heartbreak can be the fact of its passing. We come to find one day that we no longer are paralysed by loss. As Walter Benjamin asks, ‘Is not perhaps all ecstasy in one world humiliating sobriety in that complementary to it?’ After a certain time has passed, we realise after the fact, that we have been thinking about something else; soon, great aircraft hangars of space open in the psyche. Our romantic obsession may even appear strange to us. We can recall it, recite its facts, recall the tears, tissues and texts, but it will make no further claim on us. It may even be a cause for embarrassment, and would be, were it not for the fact it is nearly everyone’s fate.

—

Some heartbreaks can be cured by finding other hearts which might break ours, or even other bodies to press up against. But not all. Some loves, romantic or otherwise, leave us with an unfillable gap, one which will offer us a lesson in the distance between obsession and love. Where obsession takes the form of a mad, relentless fidelity to a particular object, a screen onto which we project dreams of ourselves, love is more variable, less amenable to being enlisted in the project of confirming us in our fantasies of radical self-sufficiency, in our conceit of being *self-made*.

In ways analogous to the enduring effects of the child’s acquisition of a native tongue, some relationships shape us in ways which endure. People can enter our lives at crucial moments in which *being* becomes a mutual act, an intimate dance. We are known and loved, but the *we* the beloved came to know is

in part one they've elicited – not so much created *ex nihilo* but summoned *ex post facto*. Certain absences are internalised and made part of the personality itself; they remain and live on in us as presences.

Living on without such 'other halves' tempts us always to compensate for our imbalance, our gait impacted by the absent presence of a phantom limb. And to be without them risks us being indefinitely suspended between a desire for more aliveness and less – to be united again or else capable of voluntary amnesia. If only it were possible that phantom limbs could be removed.

—

I am nine years old and have killed a sister's plant through amputation, by 'pruning it'. I talk it over in tears with my father, who consoles me that the plant was old and 'maybe didn't have long to go anyway'. I am not consoled, now devastated to discover that plants have lifespans. I've assumed that a tree will live until it is murdered – by being chopped down, eaten, poisoned or through terminal dehydration. Before this? Plants were forever. Knowledge of their mortality unnerves me, makes them too much like grandparents and cats, and so I search for more robust forms of material permanence.

My father tells me about plastics – but adds these are dreadful *because* of their intransience. In any case, plastics possess an ugly, undead immortality – a brief youth followed by an endless decrepitude. Old plastics fade, flake and eventually split. Their practical use vanishes; they settle for bare existence. I turn to metals, the material *du jour* of memory (statues,

medals, plaques), the armed forces (guns, tanks, knives), and transportation. An inspiration: excavated in 1897, the statues of Pharaoh Pepi I date from the twenty-third century BCE and survive in a condition such that one could study them and then stand a chance of identifying the king in a park.

A keen but impatient reader of encyclopedias, I hold that metals don't decompose or degrade. Instead, they face only one enemy: rust. Rust appears inert but I'm wise to its imperial wishes; unmonitored, it will spread like cancer. Evidence is all around me – on guttering, bicycles, and old tools, on the nails, screws and bolts charged with holding our world together. Metal is a superhero, an accomplice of human greatness; rust is its kryptonite.

I obsess over rust and how it might be stopped. I come across the Rocket Chemical Company's WD-40, which markets itself as a 'water displacer' and (more radically), a 'rust remover'. This information is sufficient. I spray it indiscriminately on metals around the house, inside and out, with the idea that it will attack and destroy rust invisible to the human eye. I believe that rust can be beaten if we stay ahead of it. One source of rust, I reason, is the apathy of grown-ups. They prefer casual efforts and tetanus shots. But rust never sleeps.

Periodically I find parts of the house I've never inspected. Pure boredom obliges me to look under mats, behind doors, and in cupboards in the hope that something interesting may be found. One afternoon I locate a small hammer at the bottom of an old chest that stores retired linen. It appears to be one hundred per cent rust, possessed of no discernible unoxidised metal at all – a tough case ∴ an ideal specimen. I take possession of it, deciding that, if I can salvage it, it will – *post hoc* – be *my*

hammer, that, unowned (or at least unclaimed), I can earn it through effort, by healing it. I take as self-evident, based on nothing whatsoever, that it is over a hundred years old, probably owned and used by a convict ancestor.

I wrap it in a rag and return daily to spray it. Some days I cannot remember if I've sprayed it, and so return to spray it again. Other days I am sure I've already sprayed it, but spray it again anyway, in case the liquid hasn't reached every crevice, filled every pore where rust has been feeding. Sometimes I know in one part of my mind that I've already sprayed it, and in another part of my mind, I realise that I can't be *certain* of this.

One of the symptoms most troubling to clinicians treating OCD is what's called the obsessive's sense of 'incompleteness' – that whatever task is being undertaken (cleaning an object, checking locks, arranging a drawer, spraying a hammer) it is never felt as complete, as *done*. It parallels the logic – and the sorts of doubts – many modern philosophers have had about the existence of the external world, which they feign to doubt. The world may exist, they say; yet one cannot really be *certain* of this. It is possible, after all, that it doesn't.

What 'certainty' turns out to refer to here isn't some rigorous standard, but a kind of linguistic tic – that it's conceivable, even after checking the door is locked, that the statement 'after checking, the door remains unlocked' makes sense. *Anything* the contrary of which still makes sense is 'possible'. It is not possible for a triangle to add up to 370 degrees or a man to be a married bachelor – but that a door might still be unlocked

is thought *possible* by the philosopher, even though we have checked one hundred times, merely because the statement ‘the door remains unlocked’ is logically coherent.

As both someone with OCD and a philosopher I can say that the sufferer of OCD is the most rigorous kind of philosopher and someone who can resist charges of dogmatism or delusion because of their hypothetical mode of thought. Where the dogmatist or deluded would insist that the door *is* or *is not* locked (and that a dragon *does* or *does not* sit behind it), the obsessive lock-checker is a paragon of open-mindedness; for them, it is merely *possible* that the door remains unlocked. That the door is locked is never truly established. But, obliged variously to live in the world, the OCD sufferer must simply abandon the task of verification on non-philosophical grounds – like having to lock the door and go to work to deliver a lecture.

—

Within a few days the whole hammer glistens, soaked through with the moisture retardant. I realise this weakens it momentarily but believe it a short-term cost for long-term gain. I am simply witnessing the hammer’s convalescence. As I wrap it in the rag and leave it each day, I imagine the WD-40 doing battle with the rust while I go about other things: while I play, go to school, while I sleep.

After several weeks I take the hammer and test it by gently tapping it on the side of the chest. The head inflexes in slow motion and then falls like a sniper target off some cliff, hitting the carpet with a wet thud, leaving an oleaginous splat in the shagpile, CSI residue of the tool’s demise and the supposedly

healthful poison I've inadvertently used to destroy it.

I take the pieces, wrap them again in the rag, and put the lot in the rubbish out the front.

I do not mention this episode to anyone, until now.

The hammer and its rust strike me as a peculiarly childish obsession, or such is my conceit. Parallel obsessions persist into adulthood, even if belief in their magical properties drift away. When I was a child, I thought counting my steps would protect me; as an adult I 'know' it doesn't, but I feel obliged to count anyway. As a child I believed I was the only person who thought and acted like this; as an adult I know I am unexceptional. Adult OCD is neither a delusion nor an anxiety disorder, but an odd halfway point between the two. It is the oddest of superstitions – a delusion simultaneously seen through *and* believed.

But OCD isn't identical to what we call 'obsession', despite the links. Children are nearly all natural obsessives; from one angle, tantrums are the expressions of damage wrought by an *idée fixe* neither consummated nor mourned. And yet children recover quickly. Adults tend to neither break down completely nor let things go. Further, adults often feel loyal to their obsessions. A child can like music one week and cricket the next and nobody will accuse them of betrayal. But a sense of betrayal *will* emerge for the child at some point; and often this starts with their toys.

I am ten and have planned what I'll need to do with my toys to keep them. It is obvious to me that adults claim to have left them

behind and I'll be expected to do the same. I check my theory, searching cupboards and peering through keyholes to see if my parents and older siblings have *truly* stopped playing. I discover no toys, but instead come across baffling objects which convince me that adults are more perplexing than I'd thought.

But aside from their strange massagers and compendia of naked people, adults are all socks, wallets and newspaper clippings. There is nothing to detain me there. I devise a plan to keep my toys, so I'll be able to play with them in secret forever. I begin to bury them in the backyard, starting with those I play with less – marbles, Matchbox cars, plastic dinosaurs.

As I proceed over a period of weeks, I come to realise that I no longer want to play with the toys I've buried. This representational theatre of small cars and extinct animals fails to draw its rapt audience. There is no pain; the attachment falls away like dead skin. My collection is no longer comprised of distinct objects, just a mass of coloured plastic and metal. I still like looking at certain toys for a while, picking them up one at a time and holding them close to my face. But the enjoyment here is different, one parallel to the delight felt by the child who has outgrown Santa Claus telling marginally younger children about him – proof of having finally grown up. The spell is broken. The anxious fixation on my future without them fades like some texta tattoo.

I am visiting my parents the day before my twenty-fifth birthday and make my way into the backyard to pat our ancient beagle. It has been raining for days and as I bend to scratch the dog's belly, I spy a dirty green figure poking through the soil; it's a plastic grenadier, rising like some bonsai zombie.

I pull him out to take a closer look. The grenadier is firing a rifle, but his extended interment has given the gun a parabolic bend such that it now looks like he's landing a fish. It's hard to explain my sense of joy in seeing him again, this plastic condensation of former fevers, fossilised remains of previous versions of myself.

