

Rooftop

by Andrew Kenneally

People crawling up out of the chimney, then onto the roof, then sliding down it and off over the edge disappearing from view. Followed by — a thud?

It would make sense, round things off nicely: over the edge, an interval, a thud - a succession of thuds rather, for there's a constant supply of these people sliding off and over. So a thud, a scream, a moan - perhaps, but no such sounds reach my ears, but then again my hearing's not great and on top of that the wind is howling, and howling the wrong way, not that there's a wrong way for the wind to howl, but the wind is carrying those sounds, if they exist, away from rather than towards me.

Is it the same people vanishing from view off over the edge making their way back up and crawling out again the chimney a little later? It could be, but I'm at too great a distance to make out. They look all too alike from here.

But if they're not the same, where could they all be coming from? It's not as if it's a particularly big house. Well maybe there's a queue, a great big stream of individuals coming up from down the street, all very ordered and mannerly, all in a precise order, dignified, mathematical . . .

Or why not in an imprecise order? - people changing places, jostling for position, to get to the front of the line the quicker, or maybe to get to the back of the line so as to get to the front of the line the slower, if at all.

So voluntary or involuntary, a queue perhaps, that's where they're all coming from, these hordes spilling out the chimney - not that I'm in a position to know. Why not in a position to know? Because my view is restricted. I inhabit a point of perspective, and that point is up here amongst the rooftops, nestled as I am next to a chimney of my own, whatever the hell I'm supposed to be doing up here . . .

observing I suppose. And unlike that distant chimney there's smoke spilling out of this one. It's nice and warm, despite all the cold and the wind. You can see why the likes of jackdaws are attracted to such spots.

What kind of chimney is it these people are crawling out of?

I see. Not why are they crawling up out of it and why sliding down off the roof, but 'What kind of chimney is it?' What a gift for the banal.

It's a chimney big enough to crawl out of, that's what kind of chimney it is, and other than that - ordinary. Maybe it's ordinary even including that - it's not the being able to crawl out of a chimney that's unusual but the actual crawling out bit.

That may all well be but it's vague — about the ordinariness or not of the chimney. What of the chimney besides which I am nestled: would one be able to crawl out of this chimney?

I won't answer that. Why not? Because I'm in no position to go inferring general conclusions about chimneys based on the solitary one I happen to be nestled up against — whatever it is I'm nestled up against it. And so, rather than invite what may be utterly false inferences about chimneys, it's better instead I just stay quiet.

'But what kind of research is this? You go on talking about chimneys while knowing nothing about them, and what's worse, the one you do know something about you refuse to talk about. You're not serious at all.'

Well that's just the way it is, and if it was research I was interested in why would I be up here amongst the rooftops? Admittedly I might be interested in researching chimneys and rooftops, but take it that I'm not. It's bad enough being on a rooftop — not that it's actually that bad — without being expected to do research.

But the stream of people so crawling out the chimney and sliding down off the roof — why?

We're back to that again. If you really are demanding a why, I suppose I could falsify proceedings. In truth all I am in relation to these crawling and falling people is an eye. I see them in the not-so-great distance, and all that unites me to them is this eye. Seeing is the beginning and end of my knowing, but still, I do possess a brain — I could hardly be writing this otherwise, and what kind of seeing would I be doing if my brain didn't register the seeing? - and so with this brain I could falsify proceedings; I could let on to be perfectly aware of all that's going on with all these goings-on.

Like so: look out your window and see a woman passing by on the street below — assume a window, a street below and a woman passing by. That woman is a perfect stranger but you know all about her; where she's going, why, when, all the details. But what if she doesn't even know herself? She may be only walking into town on a whim, even if a daily whim, has no set plans, doesn't know herself where she'll end up. But you know — in advance. You'll even provide a why, a why she couldn't.

And so similarly I could let on to know all about these people coming out the chimney — they're still coming by the way. I could falsify proceedings, provide an explanation . . . Not that this explanation need necessarily be false, it might coincide perfectly with the reality. I am very intelligent. Such an explanation shouldn't prove too difficult.

But if I'm so intelligent what am I doing up here on the rooftop? That could hardly be described as intelligent, could it? - It's not enough to look to provide a why for the people crawling out the chimney and sliding down off the roof, I have to provide one for myself too, do I?

And so why - not my why but their why. An account of the facts, and what matter as long as it's an account, somehow plausible. What is desired is certainty. One can proceed forward with certainty from certainty. One can't proceed with certainty from uncertainty. There

is some gaping void which we've been encircling and re-encircling with much anguish, asking only that we could close in this void, this absence, render it an absence no more, so we can step over it with confidence - with such confidence as to be altogether unconscious of this confidence, so certain are we that the ground beneath won't give way with us disappearing unhappily into the void below.

Some brave souls, so they told us, crawled towards the edge of one such void, peered into it, crawled back again, stood up, felt dizzy, got back down again, crawled a bit further, dizziness subsided and away they rushed to tell us what they saw. "I crawled up to the edge, nearly, and I saw . . . nothing! It was extraordinary! I fled in terror."

And so rather than such a void, an account of the facts. Why the crawling out the chimney, sliding down, falling off, disappearing, perhaps coming back again?

A why - is that the essence of the matter? Of any matter? This happened. Okay, of mild interest, but why did it happen? The crux of the issue. A why, or if not a why, a how. Provide one of the two and a void no more, the matter closed. If one wished one might put up some kind of plaque to commemorate the occasion: "On such-and-such a date, such-and-such a void was filled in. So-and-so did the filling in. This is what so-and-so did the filling in with" — the how or the why.

So the essence of all matter it seems is words, ideas. In the beginning was the word. Matter was behaving in such and such a manner because it was conforming to an idea which was the truth of the matter. But what is an idea but words in someone's head and words in someone's head is a very recent phenomenon, so in whose head were these words to which matter was conforming before there were any words? A mystery.

So anyway, men and women crawling out of that chimney on that

rooftop over there, sliding down off it and disappearing from view.
Why?

Why the disappearing? - because of the lines of vision open to myself up here by a different chimney, whatever it is I'm supposed to be doing up here. We can probably assume this is as far as disappearing went. Now for why the crawling out the chimney and sliding down off the roof bit. Not so mysterious as disappearing, if disappearing it was, but in all probability disappearing it wasn't. The disappearing has been satisfactorily explained: lines and nature of vision. So the rest of it.

But isn't it a good thing, before we get onto the rest of it bit, that they were sliding off the roof. Imagine if they weren't. The roof would be soon so crowded that they'd have to start sliding down off it anyway, willingly or unwillingly. Pushing and pulling, screeching and screaming, it wouldn't be pretty.

Would the roof be able to take all that human weight?

One thing I can't claim to be is an expert on the weight-bearing capacities of a distant roof in relation to ridiculous numbers of people perched atop itself. But anyway, we can with good reason divert ourselves from pondering the implications for this roof if they weren't sliding down off it since they were and are sliding down off it, even now in the fading light.

They're sliding down off it . . . with pleasure, in fear, trepidation, from a sense of duty, the fulfilling of some arcane purpose, a ritual, a blind urge, a desire not to be different, to follow the one in front, to display one's community spirit, one's lack of cowardice, one's fearlessness with regard to heights, through some mass hypnosis . . . It could have been any of these, a mix of a few of them, many of them, all of them, none of them, something else altogether.

But I'm supposed to be offering a why, a rigid and specific why, not a

whole host of possible whys, some perhaps more accurate than others. I claimed, I think, a while back, I could offer such a why, or a how or both, and how: by falsifying proceedings, by pretending to the possession of unpossessed knowledge. But I now see I can't. Only the most flimsy why could I furnish, despite all the impressiveness of the foregoing. "Why the people crawling out the chimney and sliding down off the roof? Oh that. It's an experiment. What kind of experiment? Oh emm . . . logistics." I'd be a laughing stock. So no, I'd better return to the truth, the known truth.

With all this the extent of my knowing is limited to my seeing. I see them carrying on now as before, their visible forms dissolving in the ever more fading light. The wind is still howling. If they're making any noise as they make their descent I still don't hear it. It's getting colder. I'm thankful for my warm chimney. Whether they'll stop when the darkness has altogether conquered the light, I have no idea.

But then again only a fool infers a night has to equal impenetrable inky blackness. Maybe they'll wait to see and assess the darkness as it happens:

"Not so dark, we'll keep going."

"Too dark, we'll stop."

"No such thing as too dark, we won't stop."

I'll have to wait and see too — depending that is on the depth of darkness and my ability to see within it. If it's too dark I won't see regardless.

And what about my willingness to see? I might just have enough of being up here and come down myself.

