I

On Anticipation

Places

Hammersmith, London

Barbados

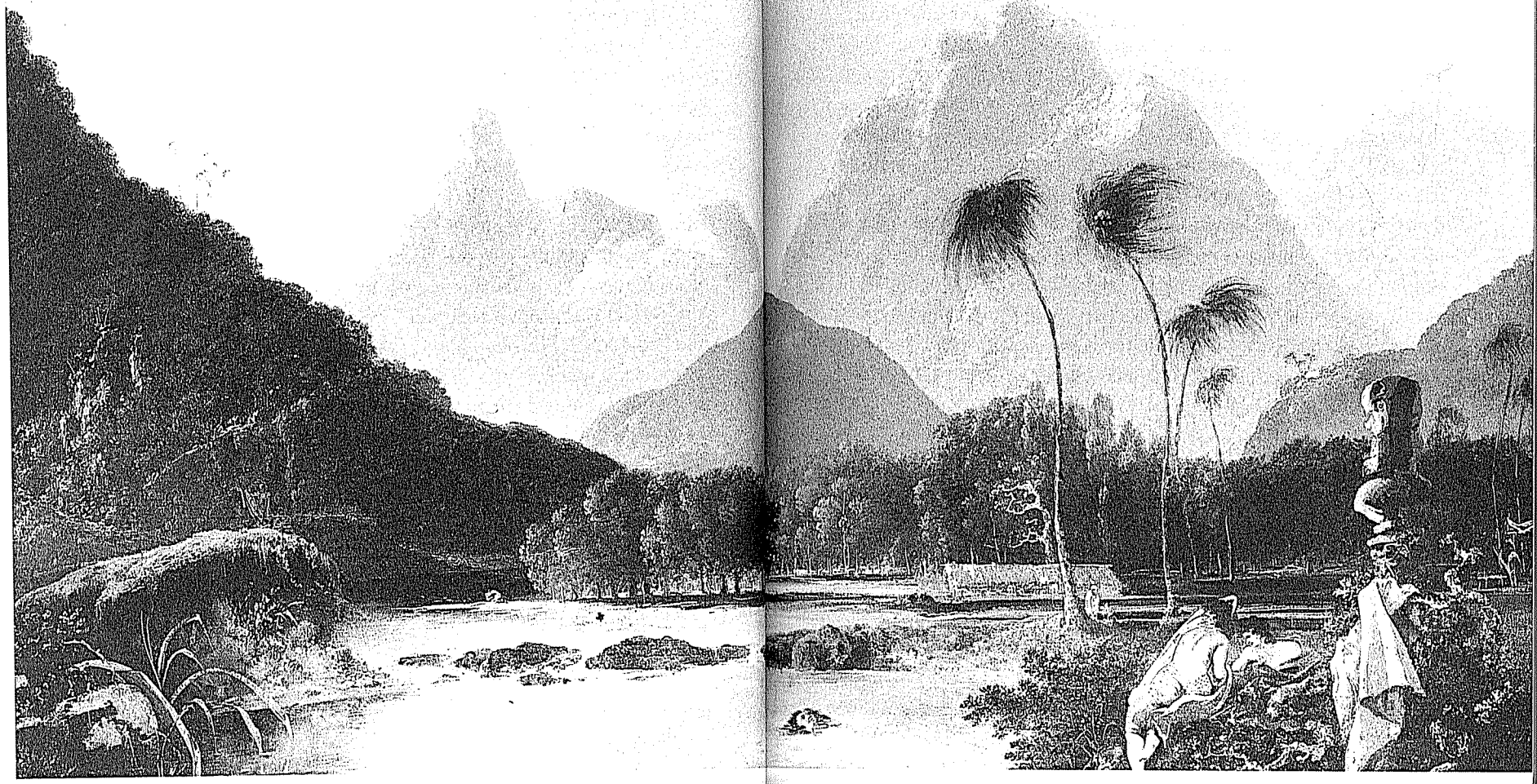
Guide

J. K. Huysmans

1.

It was hard to say when exactly winter arrived. The decline was gradual, like that of a person into old age, inconspicuous from day to day until the season became an established, relentless reality. First came a dip in evening temperatures, then days of continuous rain, confused gusts of Atlantic wind, dampness, the fall of leaves and the changing of the clocks—though there were still occasional moments of reprieve, mornings when one could leave the house without a coat and the sky was cloudless and bright. But they were like false signs of recovery in a patient upon whom death has already passed its sentence. By December the new season was entrenched, and the city was covered almost every day by an ominous steel-grey sky, like one in a painting by Mantegna or Veronese, the perfect backdrop to the crucifixion of Christ or to a day beneath the bedclothes. The neighbourhood park became a desolate spread of mud and water, lit up at night by rain-streaked street lamps. Passing it one evening during a downpour, I recalled how, in the intense heat of the previous summer, I had stretched out on the ground and let my bare feet slip out of my shoes to caress the grass, and how this direct contact with the earth had brought with it a sense of freedom and expansiveness, summer breaking down the usual boundaries between indoors and out and allowing me to feel as much at home in the world as in my own bedroom.

But now the park was foreign once more, the grass a forbidding arena in the incessant rain. Any sadness I might have felt, any suspicion that happiness or understanding was unattainable, seemed to find ready encouragement in the sodden dark-red brick buildings and low skies tinged orange by the city's streetlights.



William Hodges, *Tahiti Revisited*, 1776

Such climatic circumstances, together with a sequence of events that occurred at around this time (and seemed to confirm Chamfort's dictum that a man must swallow a toad every morning to be sure of not meeting with anything more revolting in the day ahead), conspired to render me intensely susceptible to the unsolicited arrival one late afternoon of a large, brightly illustrated brochure entitled 'Winter Sun'. Its cover displayed a row of palm trees, many of them growing at an angle, on a sandy beach fringed by a turquoise sea, set against a backdrop of hills where I imagined there to be waterfalls and relief from the heat in the shade of sweet-smelling fruit trees. The photographs reminded me of the paintings of Tahiti that William Hodges had brought back from his journey with Captain Cook, showing a tropical lagoon in soft evening light, where smiling local girls cavorted carefree (and barefoot) through luxuriant foliage—images that had provoked wonder and longing when Hodges had first exhibited them at the Royal Academy in London in the sharp winter of 1776, and that continued to provide a model for subsequent depictions of tropical idylls, including those in the pages of 'Winter Sun'.

Those responsible for the brochure had darkly intuited how easily their audience might be turned into prey by photographs whose power insulted the intelligence and contravened any notions of free will: overexposed photographs of palm trees, clear skies and white beaches. Readers who would have been capable of scepticism and prudence in other areas of their lives reverted, in contact with these elements, to a primordial innocence and optimism. The longing provoked by the brochure was an example, at once touching and bathetic, of how projects (and even whole lives) might be influenced by the simplest and most unexamined images of happiness; of how a lengthy and ruinously expensive journey might be set into motion

by nothing more than the sight of a photograph of a palm tree gently inclining in a tropical breeze.

I resolved to travel to the island of Barbados.

2.

If our lives are dominated by a search for happiness, then perhaps few activities reveal as much about the dynamics of this quest—in all its ardour and paradoxes—than our travels. They express, however inarticulately, an understanding of what life might be about, outside of the constraints of work and of the struggle for survival. Yet rarely are they considered to present philosophical problems—that is, issues requiring thought beyond the practical. We are inundated with advice on *where* to travel to, but we hear little of *why* and *how* we should go, even though the art of travel seems naturally to sustain a number of questions neither so simple nor so trivial, and whose study might in modest ways contribute to an understanding of what the Greek philosophers beautifully termed *eudaimonia,* or 'human flourishing'.

3.

One question revolves around the relationship between the anticipation of travel and its reality. I came upon a copy of J. K. Huysmans's novel *A Rebours,* published in 1884, whose effete and misanthropic hero, the aristocratic Duc des Esseintes, anticipated a journey to London and offered in the process an extravagantly pessimistic analysis of the difference between what we imagine about a place and what can occur when we reach it.

Huysmans recounts that the Duc des Esseintes lived alone in a vast villa on the outskirts of Paris. He rarely went anywhere to avoid what he took to be the ugliness and stupidity of others. One after-

noon in his youth, he had ventured into a nearby village for a few hours and had felt his detestation of people grow fierce. Since then he had chosen to spend his days alone in bed in his study, reading the classics of literature and moulding acerbic thoughts about humanity. Early one morning, however, the duc surprised himself by experiencing an intense wish to travel to London. The desire came upon him as he sat by the fire reading a volume of Dickens. The book evoked visions of English life, which he contemplated at length and grew increasingly keen to see. Unable to contain his excitement, he ordered his servants to pack his bags, dressed himself in a grey tweed suit, a pair of laced ankle boots, a little bowler hat and a flax-blue Inverness cape and took the next train to Paris. With some time to spare before the departure of the London train, he stopped in at Galignani's English Bookshop on the Rue de Rivoli and there bought a volume of Baedeker's *Guide to London.* He was thrown into delicious reveries by its terse descriptions of the city's attractions. Next he moved on to a nearby wine bar frequented by a largely English clientele. The atmosphere was out of Dickens: he thought of scenes in which Little Dorrit, Dora Copperfield and Tom Pinch's sister Ruth sat in similarly cosy, bright rooms. One patron had Mr Wickfield's white hair and ruddy complexion, combined with the sharp, expressionless features and unfeeling eyes of Mr Tulkinghorn.

Hungry, des Esseintes went next to an English tavern in the Rue d'Amsterdam, near the Gare Saint Lazare. It was dark and smoky inside, with a line of beer pulls along a counter spread with hams as brown as violins and lobsters the colour of red lead. Seated at small wooden tables were robust Englishwomen with boyish faces, teeth as big as palette knives, cheeks as red as apples and long hands and feet. Des Esseintes found a table and ordered some oxtail soup, a

smoked haddock, a helping of roast beef and potatoes, a couple of pints of ale and a chunk of Stilton.

But as the moment to board his train approached, along with the chance to turn his dreams of London into reality, des Esseintes was abruptly overcome with lassitude. He thought how wearing it would be actually to make the journey—how he would have to run to the station, fight for a porter, board the train, endure an unfamiliar bed, stand in lines, feel cold and move his fragile frame around the sights that Baedeker had so tersely described—and thus soil his dreams: 'What was the good of moving when a person could travel so wonderfully sitting in a chair? Wasn't he already in London, whose smells, weather, citizens, food, and even cutlery were all about him? What could he expect to find over there except fresh disappointments?' Still seated at his table, he reflected, 'I must have been suffering from some mental aberration to have rejected the visions of my obedient imagination and to have believed like any old ninny that it was necessary, interesting and useful to travel abroad.'

So des Esseintes paid the bill, left the tavern and took the first train back to his villa, along with his trunks, his packages, his portmanteaux, his rugs, his umbrellas and his sticks—and never left home again.

4.

We are familiar with the notion that the reality of travel is not what we anticipate. The pessimistic school, of which des Esseintes might be an honorary patron, therefore argues that reality must always be disappointing. It may be truer and more rewarding to suggest that it is primarily *different.*

After two months of anticipation, on a cloudless February mid-afternoon, I touched down, along with my travelling companion, M.,

at Barbados's Grantley Adams Airport. It was a short walk from the plane to the low airport buildings, but long enough to register a revolution in the climate. In only a few hours, I had travelled to a heat and a humidity that at home I would not have felt for another five months, and that even in midsummer there never achieved such intensity.

Nothing was as I had imagined it, which is surprising only if one considers *what* I had imagined. In the preceding weeks, my thoughts of the island had circled exclusively around three immobile mental images, assembled during the reading of a brochure and an airline timetable. The first image was of a beach with a palm tree against the setting sun. The second was of a hotel bungalow with a view through French doors into a room decorated with wooden floors and white bedlinen. And the third was of an azure sky.

If pressed, I would naturally have recognised that the island had to include other elements, but I had not needed them in order to build an impression of it. My behaviour was like that of a theatregoer who imagines without difficulty that the actions on stage are unfolding in Sherwood Forest or ancient Rome because the backdrop has been painted with a single branch of an oak or one Doric pillar.

But on my actual arrival, a range of things insisted that they, too, deserved to be included within the fold of the word *Barbados*. For example, a large petrol storage facility, decorated with the yellow and green logo of British Petroleum, and a small plywood box where an immigration official sat in an immaculate brown suit and gazed with an air of curiosity and unhurried wonder (like a scholar scanning the pages of a manuscript in the stacks of a library) at the passports of a line of tourists that began to stretch out of the terminal and onto the edge of the airfield. There was an advertisement for

rum above the baggage carousel, a picture of the prime minister in the customs corridor, a *bureau de change* in the arrivals hall and a confusion of taxi drivers and tour guides outside the terminal building. And if there was a problem with this profusion of images, it was that they made it strangely harder for me to *see* the Barbados I had come to find.

In my anticipation, there had simply been a vacuum between the airport and my hotel. Nothing had existed in my mind between the last line on the itinerary (the beautifully rhythmic 'Arrival BA 2155 at 15.35') and the hotel room. I had not envisioned, and now protested inwardly the appearance of, a luggage carousel with a frayed rubber mat; two flies dancing above an overflowing ashtray; a giant fan turning inside the arrivals hall; a white taxi with a dashboard covered in fake leopard skin; a stray dog in a stretch of waste ground beyond the airport; an advertisement for 'luxury condos' at a roundabout; a factory called Bardak Electronics; a row of buildings with red and green tin roofs; a rubber strap on the central pillar of the car, upon which was written in very small print 'Volkswagen, Wolfsburg'; a brightly coloured bush whose name I didn't know; a hotel reception area that showed the time in six different locations and a card pinned on the wall nearby that read, with two months' delay, 'Merry Christmas'. Only several hours after my arrival did I find myself united with my imagined room, though I had had no prior mental image of its vast air-conditioning unit or, welcome though it might be in the event, its bathroom, which was made of Formica panels and had a notice sternly advising residents not to waste water.

If we are inclined to forget how much there is in the world besides that which we anticipate, then works of art are perhaps a little to blame, for in them we find at work the same process of simplification or selection as in the imagination. Artistic accounts involve

severe abbreviations of what reality will force upon us. A travel book may tell us, for example, that the narrator journeyed through the afternoon to reach the hill town of X and after a night in its medieval monastery awoke to a misty dawn. But we never simply 'journey through an afternoon'. We sit in a train. Lunch digests awkwardly within us. The seat cloth is grey. We look out the window at a field. We look back inside. A drum of anxieties revolves in our consciousness. We notice a luggage label affixed to a suitcase in a rack above the seats opposite. We tap a finger on the window ledge. A broken nail on an index finger catches a thread. It starts to rain. A drop wends a muddy path down the dust-coated window. We wonder where our ticket might be. We look back out at the field. It continues to rain. At last the train starts to move. It passes an iron bridge, after which it inexplicably stops. A fly lands on the window. And still we may have reached the end only of the first minute of a comprehensive account of the events lurking within the deceptive sentence 'He journeyed through the afternoon'.

A storyteller who provided us with such a profusion of details would rapidly grow maddening. Unfortunately, life itself often subscribes to this mode of storytelling, wearing us out with repetitions, misleading emphases and inconsequential plot lines. It insists on showing us Bardak Electronics, the safety handle in the car, a stray dog, a Christmas card and a fly that lands first on the rim and then in the centre of a laden ashtray.

Which explains the curious phenomenon whereby valuable elements may be easier to experience in art and in anticipation than in reality. The anticipatory and artistic imaginations omit and compress; they cut away the periods of boredom and direct our attention to critical moments, and thus, without either lying or embellishing,

they lend to life a vividness and a coherence that it may lack in the distracting woolliness of the present.

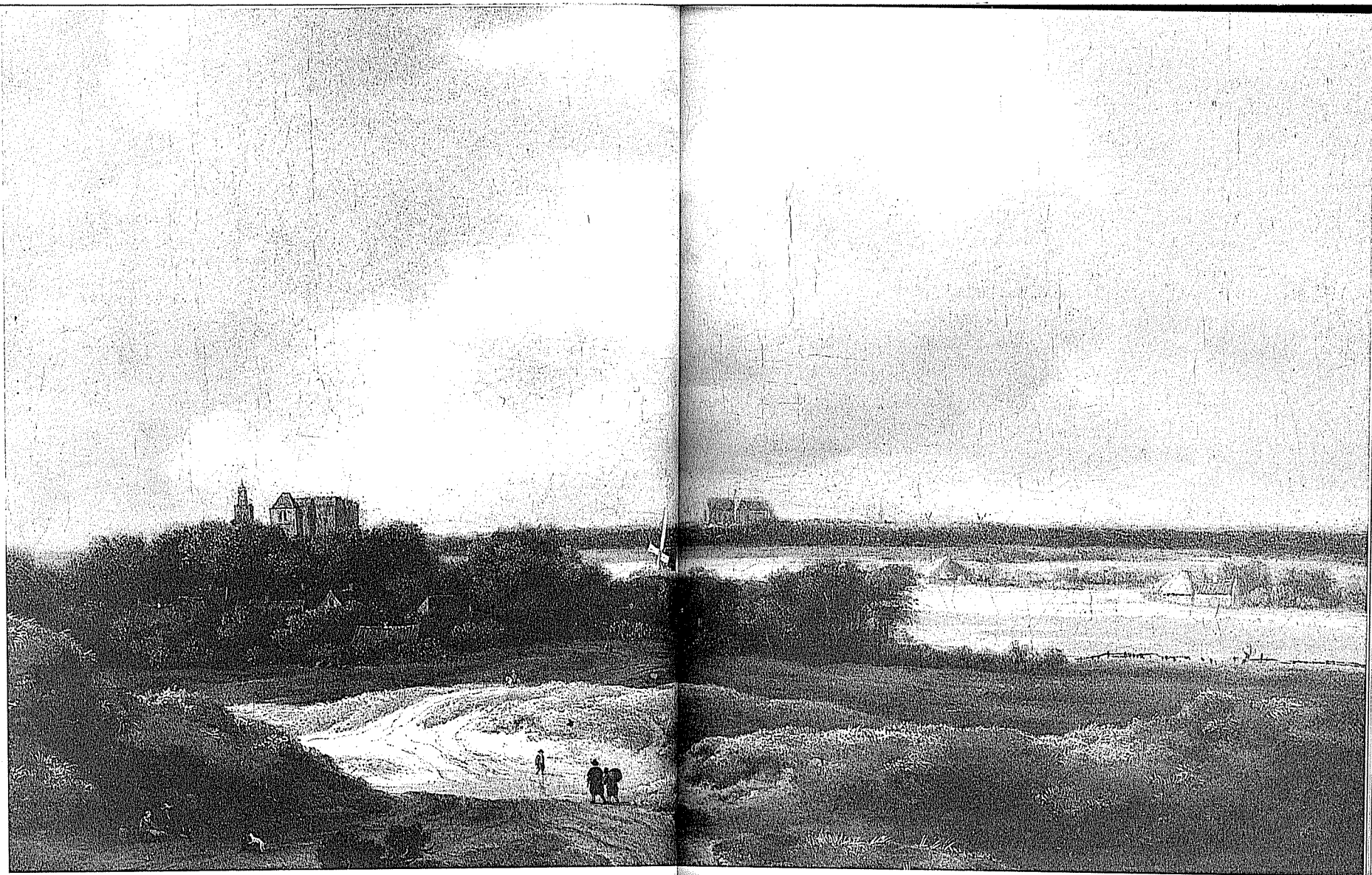
As I lay awake in bed on my first Caribbean night, thinking back over my journey (there were crickets and shufflings in the bushes outside), already the confusion of the present moment was receding, and certain events had begun to assume prominence, for memory is in this respect similar to anticipation: an instrument of simplification and selection.

The present might be compared to a long-winded film from which memory and anticipation select photographic highlights. Of my nine-and-a-half-hour flight to the island, active memory retained only six or seven static images. Just one survives today: the appearance of the in-flight tray. Of my experience at the airport, only an image of the passport line remained accessible. My layers of experience had settled into a compact and well-defined narrative: I became a man who had flown in from London and checked into his hotel.

I fell asleep early and the next morning awoke to my first Caribbean dawn—though there was, inevitably, a lot more beneath these brisk words than that.

5.

There was one other country that, many years before his intended trip to England, des Esseintes had wanted to see: Holland. He had imagined the place to resemble the paintings of Teniers and Jan Steen, Rembrandt and Ostade; he had anticipated patriarchal simplicity and riotous joviality, quiet small brick courtyards and pale-faced maids pouring milk. And so he had journeyed to Haarlem and Amsterdam—and was greatly disappointed. The problem was not



Jacob Isaacksz van Ruisdael, *View of Alkmaar, c.* 1670–75

that the paintings themselves lied—the place did offer some simplicity and joviality, some nice brick courtyards and a few serving women pouring milk—but rather that the promised gems were blended in a stew of ordinary images (restaurants, offices, uniform houses and featureless fields) that the Dutch artists had never painted, and that made the experience of travelling in the country seem strangely diluted compared with an afternoon spent in the Dutch galleries of the Louvre, where the essence of Dutch beauty found itself collected in just a few rooms.

Des Esseintes thus ended up in the paradoxical position of feeling more *in* Holland—that is, more intensely in contact with the elements he loved in Dutch culture—when looking at selected images of Holland in a museum than when travelling with sixteen pieces of luggage and two servants through the country itself.

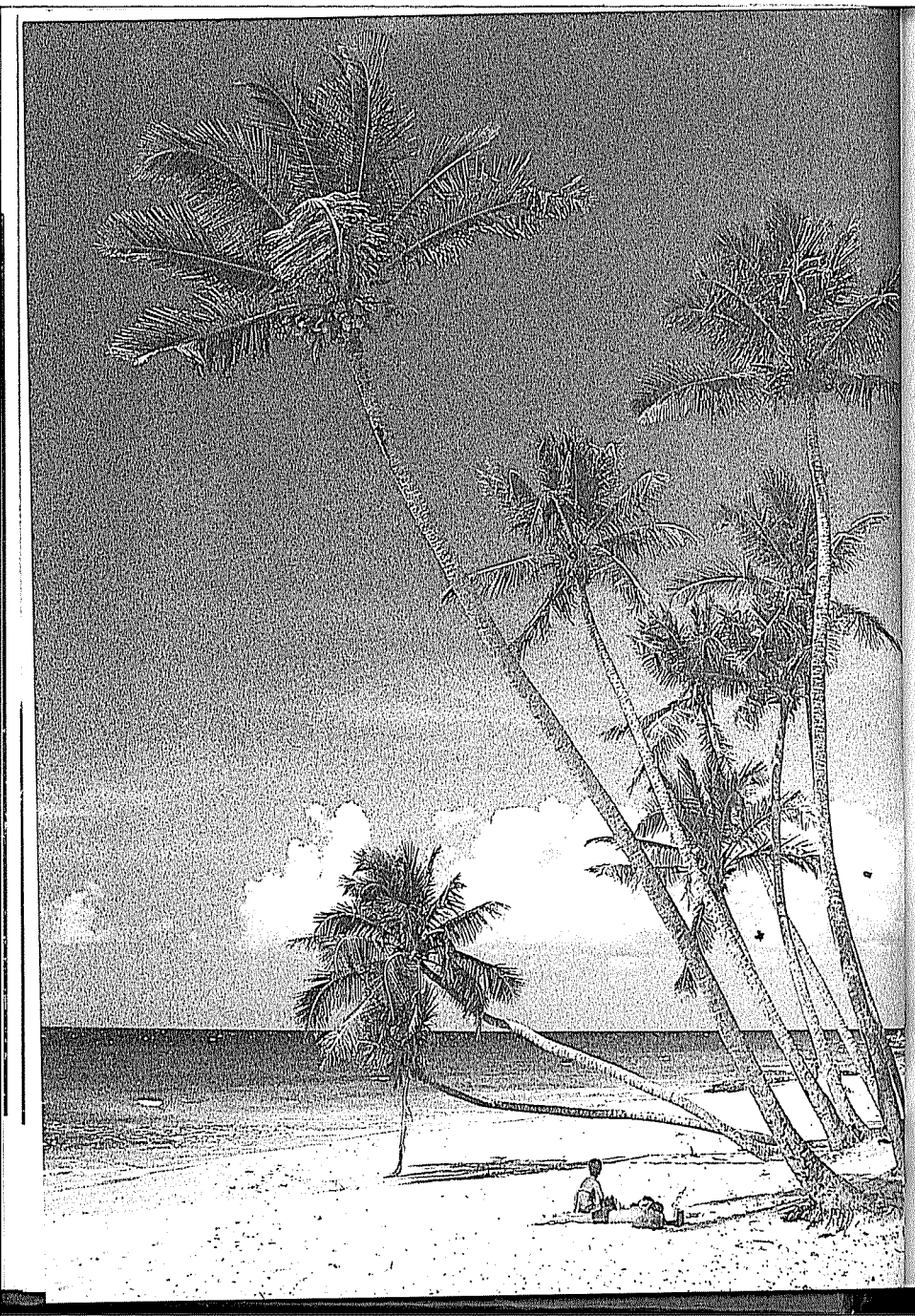
6.

Awakening early that first morning, I slipped on a dressing gown provided by the hotel and went out onto the veranda. In the dawn light, the sky was a pale grey-blue, and after the rustlings of the night before, all the creatures and even the wind seemed in deep sleep. It was as quiet as a library. Beyond the hotel room stretched a wide beach whose fringe of coconut trees soon gave way to an unhindered sandy slope towards the sea. I climbed over the veranda's low railing and walked across the sand. Nature was at her most benevolent. It was as if, in creating this small horseshoe bay, she had chosen to atone for her ill temper in other regions and decided for once to display only her munificence. The coconut trees provided shade and milk, the floor of the sea was lined with shells, the sand was powdery and the colour of sun-ripened wheat, and the air—even in the shade—had an enveloping, profound warmth to it so unlike the fragility of northern European heat, always prone to cede, even in midsummer, to a more assertive, proprietary chill.

I found a deck chair at the edge of the sea. I could hear small lapping sounds beside me, as if a kindly monster were taking discreet sips of water from a large goblet. A few birds were waking up and beginning to career through the air in matinal excitement. Behind me, the raffia roofs of the hotel bungalows were visible through gaps in the trees. Before me was a view that I recognised from the brochure: the beach stretching away in a gentle curve towards the tip of the bay, with jungle-covered hills behind, and the first row of coconut trees inclining irregularly towards the turquoise sea, as though some of them were craning their necks to catch a better angle of the sun.

Yet this description only imperfectly reflects what occurred within me that morning, for my attention was in truth far more fractured and confused than the foregoing paragraphs suggest. I may have noticed a few birds careering through the air in matinal excitement, but my awareness of them was weakened by a number of other, incongruous and unrelated elements, among them a sore throat I had developed during the flight, worry over not having informed a colleague that I would be away, a pressure across both temples and a rising need to visit the bathroom. A momentous but until then overlooked fact was making itself apparent: I had inadvertently brought myself with me to the island.

It is easy for us to forget ourselves when we contemplate pictorial and verbal descriptions of places. At home, as my eyes had panned over photographs of Barbados, there were no reminders that those eyes were intimately tied to a body and mind that would travel with me wherever I went and that might, over time, assert their presence in ways that would threaten or even negate the purpose of what the



eyes had come there to see. At home I could concentrate on pictures of a hotel room, a beach or a sky and ignore the complex creature in which this observation was taking place and for whom it was only a small part of a larger, more multifaceted task of living.

My body and mind were to prove temperamental accomplices in the mission of appreciating my destination. The body found it hard to sleep and complained of heat, flies and difficulties digesting hotel meals. The mind meanwhile revealed a commitment to anxiety, boredom, free-floating sadness and financial alarm.

It seems that unlike the continuous, enduring contentment that we anticipate, our actual happiness with, and in, a place must be a brief and, at least to the conscious mind, apparently haphazard phenomenon: an interval in which we achieve receptivity to the world around us, in which positive thoughts of past and future coagulate and anxieties are allayed. The condition rarely endures for longer than ten minutes. New patterns of anxiety inevitably form on the horizon of consciousness, like the weather fronts that mass themselves every few days off the western coasts of Ireland. The past victory ceases to seem so impressive, the future acquires complications and the beautiful view becomes as invisible as anything which is always around.

I was to discover an unexpected continuity between the melancholic self I had been at home and the person I was to be on the island, a continuity quite at odds with the radical discontinuity in the landscape and climate, where the very air seemed to be made of a different and sweeter substance.

At midmorning on that first day, M. and I sat on deck chairs outside our beach hut. A single cloud hung shyly above the bay. M. put on her headphones and began annotating Emile Durkheim's *On Suicide*. I looked around me. It would have seemed to observers that I

was where I lay. But 'I'—that is, the conscious part of my self—had in truth abandoned the physical envelope in which it dwelt in order to worry about the future, or more specifically about the issue of whether lunches would be included in the price of the room. Two hours later, seated at a corner table in the hotel restaurant with a papaya (lunch and local taxes included), the I that had left my body on the deck chair now made another migration, quitting the island altogether to visit a troubling project scheduled for the following year.

It was as if a vital evolutionary advantage had been bestowed centuries ago on those members of the species who lived in a state of concern about what was to happen next. These ancestors might have failed to savour their experiences appropriately, but they had at least survived and shaped the character of their descendants, while their more focused siblings, at one with the moment and with the place where they stood, had met violent ends on the horns of unforeseen bison.

It is unfortunately hard to recall our quasi-permanent concern with the future, for on our return from a place, perhaps the first thing to disappear from memory is just how much of the past we spent dwelling on what was to come—how much of it, that is, we spent somewhere other than where we were. There is a purity both in the remembered and in the anticipated visions of a place: in each instance it is the place itself that is allowed to stand out.

If fidelity to a place had seemed possible from home, it was perhaps because I had never tried to stare at a picture of Barbados for any length of time. Had I laid one on a table and forced myself to look at it exclusively for twenty-five minutes, my mind and body would naturally have migrated towards a range of extrinsic concerns, and I might thereby have gained a more accurate sense of how

little the place in which I stood had the power to influence what travelled through my mind.

In another paradox that des Esseintes would have appreciated, it seems we may best be able to inhabit a place when we are not faced with the additional challenge of having to be there.

7.

A few days before the end of our stay, M. and I decided to explore the island. We rented a Mini Moke and headed north to an area of rugged hills called Scotland, to which Oliver Cromwell had exiled English Catholics in the seventeenth century. At Barbados's northernmost tip, we visited Animal Flower Cave, a series of caverns hollowed out of the rock face by the pounding of the waves. Giant sea anemones grew along the pitted walls there, looking like yellow and green flowers when they opened their tendrils.

At midday we headed south towards the parish of Saint John and there, on a tree-covered hill, found a restaurant in one wing of an old colonial mansion. In the garden were a cannonball tree and an African tulip tree, the latter with flowers in the shape of upside-down trumpets. A leaflet informed us that the house and gardens had been built by the administrator Sir Anthony Hutchison in 1745 and had cost the apparently enormous trade of a hundred thousand pounds of sugar. Ten tables were set out along a gallery, with a view of the gardens and the sea. We took our place at the far end, beside an efflorescent bougainvillea bush. M. ordered jumbo shrimp in sweet pepper sauce, and I had a kingfish with onions and herbs in red wine. We talked about the colonial system and the curious ineffectiveness of even the most powerful sunblocks. For dessert, we ordered two crèmes caramel.

When the crèmes arrived, M. was given a large but messy portion

that looked as if it had fallen over in the kitchen, and I a tiny but perfectly formed one. As soon as the waiter had stepped out of eyeshot, M. reached over and swapped my plate for hers.

'Don't steal my dessert,' I said, incensed.

'I thought you wanted the bigger one,' she replied, no less affronted.

'You're just trying to get the better one.'

'I'm not; I'm trying to be nice to you. Stop being suspicious.'

'I will if you give me back my portion.'

In only a few moments, we had plunged into a shameful interlude where beneath infantile rounds of bickering there stirred mutual terrors of incompatibility and infidelity.

M. handed back my plate grimly, took a few spoons from hers and pushed the dessert to one side. We said nothing. We paid and drove back to the hotel, the sound of the engine disguising the intensity of our sulks. The room had been cleaned in our absence. The bed had fresh linen. There were flowers on the chest of drawers and new beach towels in the bathroom. I tore one from the pile and went to sit on the veranda, closing the French doors violently behind me. The coconut trees were throwing a gentle shade, the crisscross patterns of their palms occasionally rearranging themselves in the afternoon breeze. But there was no pleasure for me in such beauty. I had enjoyed nothing aesthetic or material since the struggle over the crèmes caramel several hours before. It had become irrelevant that there were soft towels, flowers and attractive views. My mood refused to be lifted by any external prop; it even felt insulted by the perfection of the weather and the prospect of the beachside barbecue scheduled for that evening.

Our misery that afternoon, in which the smell of tears mixed with the scents of sun cream and air conditioning, was a reminder of the

rigid, unforgiving logic to which human moods appear to be subject, a logic that we ignore at our peril when we encounter a picture of a beautiful land and imagine that happiness must naturally accompany such magnificence. Our capacity to draw happiness from aesthetic objects or material goods in fact seems critically dependent on our first satisfying a more important range of emotional or psychological needs, among them the need for understanding, for love, expression and respect. Thus we will not enjoy—we are not *able* to enjoy—sumptuous tropical gardens and attractive wooden beach huts when a relationship to which we are committed abruptly reveals itself to be suffused with incomprehension and resentment.

If we are surprised by the power of one sulk to destroy the beneficial effects of an entire hotel, it is because we misunderstand what holds up our moods. We are sad at home and blame the weather and the ugliness of the buildings, but on the tropical island we learn (after an argument in a raffia bungalow under an azure sky) that the state of the skies and the appearance of our dwellings can never on their own either underwrite our joy or condemn us to misery.

There is a contrast between the vast projects we set in motion, the construction of hotels and the dredging of bays, and the basic psychological knots that undermine them. How quickly may the advantages of civilisation be wiped out by a tantrum. The intractability of the mental knots points to the austere, wry wisdom of those ancient philosophers who walked away from prosperity and sophistication and argued, from within a barrel or a mud hut, that the key ingredients of happiness could not be material or aesthetic but must always be stubbornly psychological—a lesson that never seemed truer than when M. and I made up at nightfall, in the shadow of a beachside barbecue whose luxury had become a humbling irrelevance.

8.

After Holland and his abortive visit to England, des Esseintes did not attempt another journey abroad. He remained in his villa and surrounded himself with a series of objects that facilitated the finest aspect of travel: its anticipation. He had coloured prints hung on his walls, like those in travel agents' windows, showing foreign cities, museums, hotels and steamers bound for Valparaiso or the River Plate. He had the itineraries of the major shipping companies framed, and lined his bedroom with them. He filled an aquarium with seaweed, bought a sail, some rigging and a pot of tar, and with their help was able to experience the most pleasant aspects of a long sea voyage without any of its inconveniences. Des Esseintes concluded, in Huysmans's words, that 'the imagination could provide a more-than-adequate substitute for the vulgar reality of actual experience'. Actual experience where what we have come to see is always diluted in what we could see anywhere, where we are drawn away from the present by an anxious future and where our appreciation of aesthetic elements lies at the mercy of perplexing physical and psychological demands.

I travelled in spite of des Esseintes. And yet there were times when I, too, felt that there might be no finer journeys than those provoked in the imagination by remaining at home slowly turning the Bible-paper pages of the British Airways Worldwide Timetable.

II

On Travelling Places

Places	 *The service station*	 *The airport*	 *The plane*	 *The train*
Guides	*Charles Baudelaire* 	*Edward Hopper*