1

The internet is a tsunami. That's one way to imagine it. I think of it beginning, as a gigantic wave does, with a disruption. Started by an undersea volcano or earthquake, the tsunami's beginnings are distant from the bustle of society. So I think of the internet: begun by distant, obscure machinations. Tectonic plates slipping. Disruption. A release of energy, which then expands, unstoppable.

I think of a growing roar of a wave, as the internet expanded. Throughout my early life, in the 1990s and early two thousands, the expansion gained pace – as more and more information became available to us online – and the roar intensified. It took three decades, more or less – to now, 2020 – to say, ah yes, I understand what that ominous roar was. It was the roar of a tsunami. In 2020 this metaphor fits handily into an explanation of our current malaise. I can say – look, the tsunami has crested and broken, and we're drowning in information now.

This metaphor isn't quite right though, because the internet doesn't act exactly like a wave. It may feel as if we are drowning, but the energy of the internet has not dissipated around us. It keeps on expanding. A tsunami that can only grow bigger, and never crest? Unearthly. Not a good, workable metaphor. Scrap that. Start again.

2

Why am I searching for a metaphor for the internet?

A metaphor is a way of taming something. It is most effective when the object of the metaphor is too large to fully comprehend (for example, the world) and the metaphor is something familiar and limited (for example, a stage). The thing that we are sure of (we know a stage) gives us purchase on the great unknown. Some time back, the internet became unwieldy and unknowable. It outgrew human comprehension, and now we must live uneasily with this expanding, mysterious entity. I try out any metaphor that I encounter, to see if any will assuage my fear of the unknowable internet.

This is where my personal history comes in to play. I was born in 1985. An early kind of internet existed then, of course, but as a child, I was not interested in military communication technology, or experiments with node-to-node communication. The first web site, on Berners-Lee's World Wide Web, arrived in 1990, and in 1997 I went *online* for the first time. I am convinced that future historians will mark this time as a watershed – the end of the twentieth century, the end of the old world (pre internet) and the start of the twenty first century, the beginning of the new world (when the internet took off, expanded into society). A lot of people alive today have lived through this seismic moment, as an old world dies and a new one begins. Yet we hardly talk about this.

Why? It's too large, too immediate. We're fish who cannot see the water we swim in (another metaphor – an old one, a good workable one). Those of us who grew up in the old world have a sense that we are now on the other side of a colossal disruption, but we don't think about it, not in any deep way. We just tweet nostalgically about Blockbuster video stores, and how we used to wait for letters. We cannot think clearly about the internet because it is too big and we are too close to it. Our understanding lacks distance, and because of this, our understanding is stunted.

If we tame it, if we can make the internet seem smaller, more familiar, then we might begin to think and talk clearly about the situation that we are in.

3

In 2020, the consequences of climate change are beginning to unfold. As a species we have not faced this. We're all on Twitter, fighting. This is my experience of the new world.

James Bridle, in his 2018 book *New Dark Age: Technology and the End of the Future*, describes the uneasy reality of life with the internet: 'It is something we experience all the time without really understanding what it is or how it works. It is something we are training ourselves to rely upon with only the haziest of notions about what is being entrusted, and what is being entrusted to'.

This mysterious something is driving humankind mad. Bridle writes that reality is now 'riven by fundamentalist insistence on simplistic narratives, conspiracy theories and post-factual politics'. The internet, the very nature of it, has undermined old modes of human behaviour. Attention spans are depleted by the structures – the news feed, the infinite scroll – by which we access information. In Reddit forums and YouTube comments, rage flares, white-hot. Propaganda is a humdrum part of being online; the visual noise in the background of everyday life. Flat-earthers and anti-vaxxers appear to take themselves quite seriously, while unknown agents swing elections and referendums. People you went to school with are shilling leggings on Facebook. All news has an aura of hoax.

Ensconced in this virtual turbulence, we chatter and joke, we fight and scream.

In the offline world, a person can be assumed to have contradictory thoughts, nuanced feelings, and an ever-changing presence in the world. One day I might wake up with a sore back, or not. I might be in a good mood, or not. What I see online is a world in which the reality of individual human experience is intolerable. 'Cancel culture' has come into being. This is the pitiless mechanism by which a person can be extinguished from online life (they're cancelled, terminated: everyone agrees that nothing they do or say will matter anymore). People are cancelled for saying, or doing, something that the self-appointed arbiters of public opinion do not like. You might, for example, have posted a racist joke online when you were a teenager. Anyone can appoint themselves judge: all the judge needs is a presence on social media, a way with words, and a hankering to lead a public execution. In this culture, the idea that a person can change is heretical. Redemption is unachievable. A Saturday Night Live comedy sketch nailed it with a slogan, for a world in which social media branded itself accurately: 'Twitter: one mistake and we'll kill you!'

In this stormy new world, we behave mulishly, childishly, and brutally. The chaos of the internet goes on expanding, and we are inside it, fighting and screaming. This, at a time when our planet requires a tremendous effort of lucidity and consensus, if we are to have any hope of salvaging a habitat for ourselves and our fellow living things.

This is our predicament: we are going mad at a time when collective human action is critical to survival.

4

If this is our new world, online, then the old world, pre-internet, is where metaphor comes from. I'm biased towards the old world: of course I am, it's where I grew up. I studied language at university, and of the few lectures that I can still remember, I remember the one about metaphors. The lecturer demonstrated that metaphors lived not only in poetry – that poetry, literature, art, were mere outcrops of the vast human work of thinking in metaphors. Every day, we lived amongst metaphors, and thought in metaphors. He reminded us: we are 'up in the world' if successful, 'down

and out' if not. So success is imagined as height. We are 'out of it' when we're concussed, 'with it' when we're alert. So focus is imagined as the centre of a space. We learned about the etymology of the word: from the Greek meta (over, across) and pherein (to carry, to bear). Metaphor is a transfer. We carry meaning over.

Metaphors are an ancient inheritance. They are a way for us to store complex ideas in small words. Metaphor is the work of maturity, a far outpost in our development as a species. For me, metaphors are everything that I love about the old world: they come from the deep human need to make meaning, and then to multiply those meanings, and use them to live, and create art. I see this world as a place of continuous, tireless creativity, which is both cerebral and divine, earthly and sacred. We built cathedrals on metaphors, creating flying buttresses to allow stone and glass to reach up so far that it entered the realm of the airy, the immaterial. We built religions, and societies, upon metaphors. I think of my childhood puzzlement over the Christian story of the loaves and fishes: my suspicion that there was a meaning contained in those foodstuffs (in my Illustrated Children's Bible Stories, the bread was fat and warm, the fish gleaming, while a docile Jesus, in plain clothes, sat warm and gleaming amongst the sated crowd). It somehow linked to the wafers and wine, if only I could unlock the code. This is metaphor at work, lightly carrying large burdens of meaning and belief.

If metaphor, as a piece of the old world, can be utilised to tame the new world, then this would mean that a piece of the old world would be transferred to the new. It would be a transfer of thought – a preservation of a way of thinking about the world – a preservation and a carrying forward.

The search is always on: I hunt out metaphors in articles, books, lectures and podcasts. I search to ease my fear. It's the fear of someone living in uncertainty, between one world and another.

5

The first metaphor that I try is: *the internet is light.*

In *New Dark Age*, Bridle mentions an old, established metaphor. The metaphor is: knowledge is light. We've lived with this idea for a long time. It gave its name to a previous disruption, the Enlightenment. Bridle applies this metaphor to the internet. 'The internet, in its youth, was often referred to as an 'information superhighway', a conduit of knowledge that, in the flickering light of fibre-optic cables, enlightens the world', Bridle writes. He argues that the sheer quantity of information on the internet has blinded us. 'That which was intended to enlighten the world in practise darkens it', he says, and cites our failure to maintain a consensus reality in the face of an ever-expanding web of information.

Information, knowledge – which once flooded light in to European society – has shone too brightly, too quickly, and everywhere. Bridle takes the title of his book from a scarily prescient concept from H.P. Lovecraft, writing in 1926: 'someday the piecing together of disassociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightening position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age'.

Deadly light. Is this a good way of understanding the internet? At first, I clung to this metaphor reverently. The confusion embedded in our experience of being online – the need to constantly block out visual clatter on the periphery; ignore click-bait; skip past the dumpster fires of political

arguments on social media – does fit with the idea of darkness. We can't see the wood from the trees. We are overwhelmed.

Yet it's a dead end of a metaphor, because it offers no future. It works, *right now*. The internet has created a state of blindness, in which we are strangers to one another, and events are never what they seem; but I don't believe that this is to be our permanent state. The internet as deadly light tells us that things will always be this way – that we will always be blind and incoherent. There is no hope in this metaphor.

Perhaps Bridle is right. I continue, though, to hunt for a metaphor that won't deaden the future. Hope is one thing I wish to preserve, in the way that I think about the internet.

6

The next metaphor I try is: *the internet is poverty*.

In 2018, artist and critic Jenny Odell published her book, *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy*. A beautiful treatise on 'restoring habitats for human thought' in the new world of the internet, Odell gets great traction from metaphors of place. She writes of resisting the addictive structures of much of the internet as a way that we might 'hold open that place in the sun'. Real life, offline, is a place in sunlight.

Odell writes of sitting in a rose garden, amongst the smell of jasmine and blackberries: 'I look down at my phone and wonder if it isn't its own kind of sensory deprivation chamber. That tiny, glowing world of metrics cannot compare to this one, which speaks to me instead of breezes, light and shadow, and the unruly, indescribably detail of the real'. I consider the metaphor that she is proposing. There are obvious similarities with Bridle's view: sensory deprivation and blindness overlap.

Odell writes of the vertiginous experience of watching the 2016 US presidential election unfold online: 'What was missing from that surreal and terrifying torrent of information and virtuality was any regard for place, for the human animal […] I am not an avatar, a set of preferences, or some smooth cognitive force; I'm lumpy and porous, I'm an animal, I hurt sometimes, and I'm different one day to the next'.

Despite its apparently limitless cope, there's no room for 'the detail of the real' on the internet. There's a deep reservoir of sadness in this metaphor, a kind of mourning, for all that is missing from our online world. The internet is a place in which we are deprived and depleted. This new world is a world of less. It offers addictive vistas of information and ideas, and all the while, it diminishes us, profoundly, as humans, as animals, as a species existing in physical space.

I turned this metaphor over in my head for days. Is the internet, despite its appearance and its promise, a barren place? In some ways, yes – in all the ways that Odell describes. The experience of the internet in 2020 can often be one of melancholy and deprivation.

And yet. There must be another metaphor. I'm looking for one that will be able to hold a raft of ideas. The internet is a place of confusion and blindness, and a place of hardship, of sadness. We miss the old world. And yet – the internet is also a wellspring of laughter. We put heroic levels of effort into making each other laugh online. The internet offers avenues of respite: gentle spaces where people listen to each other. It contains kindness. Occasionally, the internet reveals itself as a carrier of wisdom.

I'm certain there will be a metaphor that can contain everything the internet offers, and all of its potential. A metaphor that will tell of the human urge to create something more, something we like better, from what we already have.

7

A new metaphor appears. I encounter it in three places. In Rebecca Solnit's essay *The Ideology of Isolation*, from 2016, she writes: 'we are nodes on intricate systems, synapses snapping on a great collective brain', and I am reminded of *node to node communication*, the internet's earliest manifestation.

Shortly after I read that, I came across Patricia Lockwood's intricate description of life online, *The Communal Mind*, delivered as one of the London Review of Book's winter lectures in 2019. Lockhart looks at the way confusion, a central feature of any time spent online, has come to be welcomed, even celebrated. In the world of memes, confusion is embraced and enhanced. Memes which express surreal and meaningless messages proliferate wildly. Considering a man who gains a windfall of 'likes' by posting pictures of himself titled Cow Boy, Lockhart thinks: 'he was one of the secret architects of the new shared sense of humour'. One hugely popular meme is a collection of fast-food chain names, altered to be a bit silly (McNaldos, Bubger Kirg, Donkin' Dunnts'). In this new mode of communication, the intrinsic weirdness of the online experience – the aura of hoax that clings to everything – is fully realised. This humour is a glue between people. Consensus, on what makes a weird meme funny, is reached rapidly, and upon unspoken criteria. Lockhart puzzles over the makers of these viral messages; but once a meme gains momentum, it has its own life, which dwarfs that of its human creator.

Elsewhere, Lockhart watches as the internet, with one mind, assigns new meanings to words: 'The word *toxic* has been anointed and now could not go back to being a regular word. It was like a person becoming famous'. The process by which new understands are reached is inexorable and commonplace – and without ownership. Nobody is in charge, and this is part of the delight of it all. The communal mind is at work. Ideas mutate. Those ideas that particularly please this mind are rewarded with likes, upvotes, a fleeting prominence.

During this lecture, Lockhart mentions memes and online trends in slight terms, so that the listener fills in the blanks – and in doing so, finds that they are a functioning part of the internet she's describing. She refers to 'Absolute Unit'. She doesn't say so, but I know this phrase gained celebrity in 2018 when the Museum of English Rural Life tweeted a picture of a very large sheep with the comment, 'look at this absolute unit'. I know this, and Lockhart knows this, because we're both part of one larger mind, while, in another forum, in a video of a lecture which I've accessed online, she speaks about it, and I listen.

On the bus home from work one day I was listening to the journalist and author Caitlin Moran speaking on The Adam Buxton podcast, in an episode from November 2015. This was when the metaphor of the mind appeared for the third time. Discussing Twitter, Moran called upon the question, posed by Carl Jung amongst others, of whether there is such a thing as a global consciousness. 'With the internet', she said, 'we've got that. The world, if you looked at it now, would look like a gigantic brain'. She added, 'but that brain is in its infancy'.

Ideas swirl around my mind. The metaphor snaps into place. It is the best metaphor that I have found: *the internet is our infant brain.*

Moran describes social media as if it is a child: 'It gets into massive tantrums and rages, but it can also be really easily distracted by a picture of a cat, and quite a lot of the time it really radiates the vibe of just wanting to be picked up by its mum and given a hug'.

The internet as our infant brain is a metaphor that fits. It explains the curiously unskilled, incapable state of online discourse: the tantrums on Twitter, the rages on Reddit forums, the unthinking, brutal innocence of cancel culture.

The idea that the internet is a mind in its infancy reminded me of a description of the mores of medieval Europeans, in Steven Pinker's 2011 book, *The Better Angels of Our Nature.* This may seem a strange connection, but the parallels are enticing: Pinker describes the medieval mind as infantile and violent, and contrast this with modern norms of civility and self-control. The idea of the internet as an infant brain implies that we have the potential to mature.

Pinker's belief is that violence has declined over the centuries, such that we may now be living in the most peaceful time in human history (though it may not feel that way, as we are flooded daily with news and images of violence). To prove this, he takes the reader back to the bad old days. He paints a grotesque picture of the behaviour of people in medieval Europe. Mutilation was a commonplace punishment, cutting off a person's nose being a particular favourite, for cases of treason, adultery, or just petty vengeance. Animal torture was work-a-day entertainment in villages and towns. Alongside this brutality was the unavoidable stench. Pinker calls upon etiquette manuals for evidence. *On Civility in Boys*, written by Desiderius Erasmus in 1530, gives an idea of what went on: 'don't relieve yourself in front of ladies', Erasmus advises. 'Don't blow your nose on to the tablecloth'.

Pinker points out the childishness of these people, our forebears: their obscene, ecstatic displays of violence, their fascination with bodily functions, and their apparent lack of self-control. 'By our lights', he writes, they seem 'impetuous, uninhibited'. Pinker quotes the historian Barbara Tuchman, on the 'childishness noticeable in medieval behaviour, with its marked inability to restrain any kind of impulse'.

Self-control and consideration, Pinker writes, which 'are second nature to us, had to be acquired', over the long course of modern history.

Can we imagine, then, that the internet in 2020 has a long path to civility ahead of it? We have not yet learned how to be flexible and resilient in our online behaviour. Given time, though, our communal mind may mature. Then the dark age of the internet, the time of confusion and blindness, will belong to the past.

Pinker writes of the cultural disruptions that forced society forward, and pushed brutes to develop empathy and self-restraint, not least of which was the invention of the printing press, which led to the creation of the novel. The novel taught us to consider the lives of others, their hope, their pain. This leap forward in our communal creative work – the appearance of works of fiction, which explored the human experience – pressed human society to develop, as a whole, into something a little bit better.

I believe the internet is our collective consciousness, and it is, right now, in its raggedy, unruly infancy. Those of us alive now are condemned to experience this shared brain at its infant stage.

From here (I imagine a distant future that I, individually, will never reach) we will begin to create such complex, divine playthings as the old world's metaphors. Like metaphors, but of the new world: these will be new ways of seeing. Like a creature of a medieval village in Europe, who could not fathom the concept of a novel, I can only wonder blindly at what discoveries lie ahead.

Moran says of the infant brain, 'it will grow up and it will learn, and we'll find a way to talk to each other, but this is a new skill that we're learning as a species'.

In this there is hope. The trauma of the climate crisis may be what forces us beyond this infant stage. If we can make the developmental jump, to a collective mind that can think and act clearly, then we will have a chance of survival. One day in the future, humankind will perhaps look back at 2020, and the eerie, barbaric, child-like online culture of the early twenty-first century, and together, we will marvel and shudder.