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AN HANSEN’s *The Naked Fish* takes its title from the very early Christian practice of using a stylised drawing as a coded emblem for Christ. As Hansen remarks on the last page of his frank and touching book:

I have to return to the Ichthus, that fish symbol of two simple curved lines, one concave, one convex. One of those lines for me (this is the naked fish, with no decorations or accretions) represents God Leading, leading me out of whatever country would have choked me and into a Promised Land of limitless vistas. The other line represents God Coming, coming in the personhood of Jesus and in the guise of other people of grace, coming continually circumstance to circumstance.

In a sense, the paragraph scans the trajectory of the book as a whole, in that it both recurs to the primal and the archaic — as if the fish had been borrowed from one of Leonard French’s paintings of elemental life — and keeps an agenda of aspiration on its mind. This ‘autobiography of belief’ signals, as much autobiography does, life’s originalities and its outcomes, and the tensions between them. Augustine, most famous of workers in this genre, conceived of God as a beauty ever old and ever new: Hansen’s God is more shadowy than Augustine’s, but shadows a similar shape.

Born in 1929 to a Baptist minister and his wife, for whom religion was appropriately central, Hansen contracted polio at the age of nine, with consequent debility and disability. In 1940 his mother died, a fact reported in a chapter entitled ‘Of all this I never heard a word from my father.’ Such taciturnities are far from unusual, of course: but it is a mark of *The Naked Fish* that Hansen should instinctively be aware of the difference between the striking and the sayable.

Hansen’s book has the same ethos: it keeps coming back to incidents which induced perplexity, some of which persists to the book’s end. Near that end, there is the throwaway question, ‘My father (will I never escape his shadow?)’, which is no surprise considering what has preceded it, but also flags a more general attitude. It is as if the book, while offering many reports on events, is most concerned to be taking soundings of their significance.

The events range from the formalities of one Christian tradition and the unfinished business implied by them — ‘As for the other words, like atonement and redemption, I had no real idea what they meant, except that they were part of my world, like isosceles and sonnet’ — through revealing teenage moments — ‘I poked my head out and could see that the grassy meadow where we’d camped was gleaming silver with frost, and a squatting rabbit, five paces off, was staring at me. It was a moment of revelation, of still and breathless beauty. The sacred had broken in’ — to a recurring motif:

The world isn’t fair. I didn’t need polio to tell me that, but it was an early indicator to me that that’s how things were going to be. That in itself was a good thing. I’ve never said my experience as a father was unfair. However, I found that my childhood polio experience had a negative influence on the way I came to see the world and the people in it. That is, I was inclined to be too accepting of what happened to me, which sometimes spilled over into a kind of fatalism.

Given life’s pluriform character, any autobiography is inevitably selective: but this ‘autobiography of belief’ is more open to the variety of experience than many other writings of the self. The domestic plays a great part in it, and Hansen’s immediate family are major players, sometimes in a most painful way. Indeed, even though the book’s last words, like many before them, are sanguine, it is clearly written out of pain, a pain which cannot be willed away. He quotes the famous inscription over the doorway of Carl Jung’s house, *Vocatus atque non vocatus, Deus aderit*, which might be translated as, ‘Called or not, God will be present’. For Hansen, this is essentially good news: but more revealingly still, he cites Luther’s repeated *trotz*, ‘nevertheless’ — as in ‘Nevertheless, God is with me; nevertheless, God is my refuge. Nevertheless, the ultimate will of God will prevail. I love that word trotz. It’s my faith.’ It is an index of the book’s patient, resolute honesty that neither expression looks unearned when it occurs here. The Augustine of the ‘great riddle’ would have things to learn from reading it.