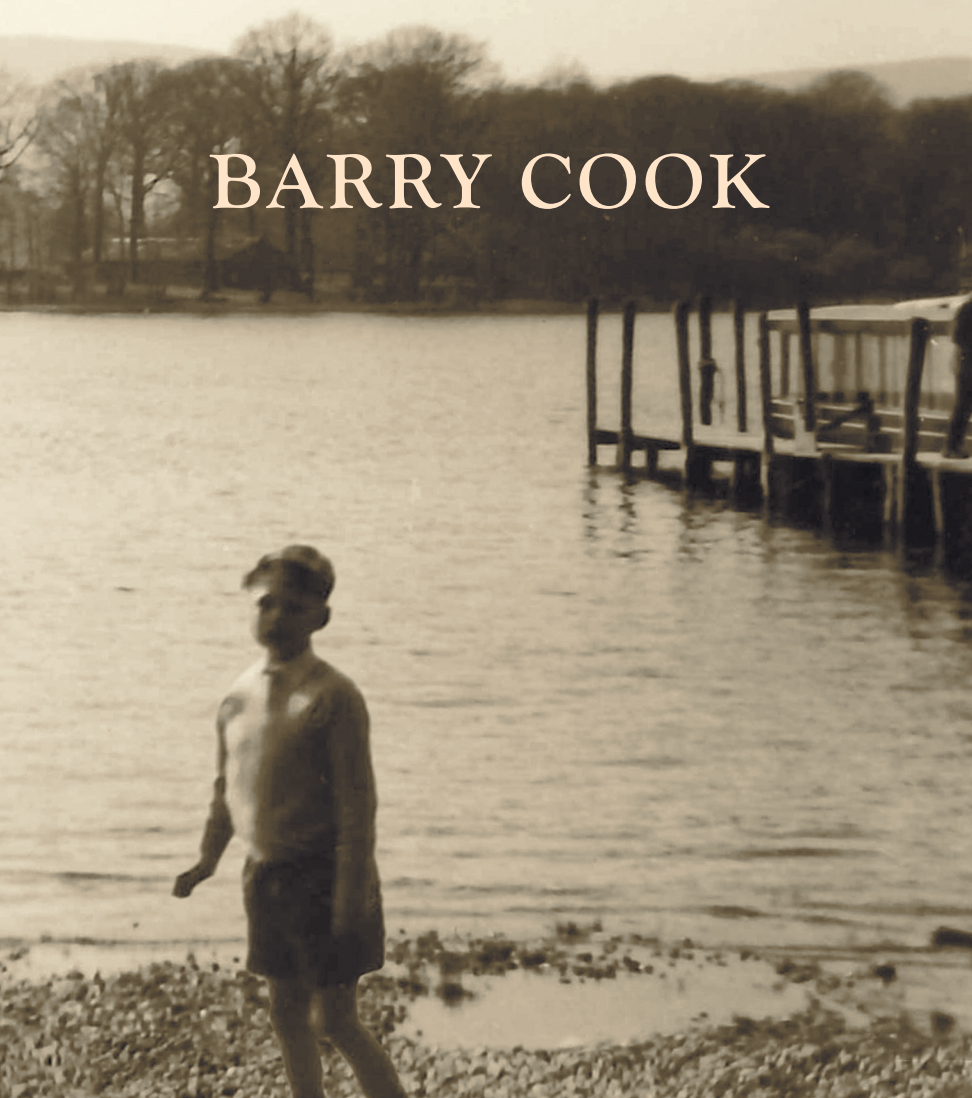


NINE DRAWINGS

BARRY COOK



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Contents

PART I: BACK DOWN SOUTH

The Homecoming	1
My First Day Back at School.....	5
My Drawings: Getting Ready	11
My Drawings: Getting Started.....	14

PART II: THE REMEMBERING

My Drawing of ULVERSTON CHURCH.....	17
Leaving Night.....	23
An Early Start	27
Our Late Taxi.....	29
At Euston Station.....	33
The Journey to Crewe	37
Lakeland Bound	43
A Snowbound Arrival	49
Northern Snow.....	54
My First Day at a New School	58
Snowballs and Slides in the Playground.....	65
Two Swans	68
Another Walk Along the Canal Towpath.....	73
My Drawing of THE COAST ULVERSTON	78
A Walk by The Leven Estuary.....	82
Swede for Dinner	87
The Railway Boys.....	90
My Drawing of the CANAL ULVERSTON	94
Our Day Out at Grange-over-Sands.....	100
A Picnic at Stickleback Stream	109
My Drawing of NEWLANDS STREAM ULVERSTON	117
The Times Table Path	122
Kestrel	126
Climbing the Pepper Pot.....	132
The Drowning of Teddy	139
Carting with the Back Alley Boys.....	145
After School at the Canal Head Boatyard.....	152
My Drawing of the CANAL HEAD ULVERSTON	157
Our Southern Lakes Excursion: The Journey to Coniston Water	163
Our Southern Lakes Excursion Continues: Coniston Lakeside.....	169

Our Southern Lakes Excursion Continues: Ambleside Café	174
Our Southern Lakes Excursion Continues: Bowness-on-Windermere.....	178
A Morning Walk to School	182
My Drawing of NEWBY BRIDGE	189
Our One-Day Lakeland Road Trip: Freddy and His Zephyr Six.....	192
Our One Day Lakeland Road Trip Continued: My Daydream at Newby Bridge..	197
Our One Day Lakeland Road Trip Continued: Driving over Kirkstone Pass	201
Our One Day Lakeland Road Trip Continued: The Christmas Tree Forest	209
The ORIANA	214
My Drawing of the BARROW SHIP-YARD	223
Grandma and Grandpa Climb the Hoad.....	227
The First Day of Spring: Our Return to Coniston Water	233
Pulling Oars on Lake Windermere	240
My Drawing of BOWNESS LAKE WINDERMERE.....	250
Our Last Walk to the Estuary.....	257
A Swan's Goodbye	264
Leaving School.....	269
In Kestrel's Dream	273
My Drawing of HOAD HILL ULVERSTON	280
Our Last Night Up North	283
Morning, Friday May 20th, 1960.....	288
Homeward Bound	293
To Carnforth and The South.....	297
At Lancaster Station Again.....	300
My Eighth Birthday Present	302
Our Fast Train Home	304
The End of Our Adventure.....	310

PART III: THE FORGETTING

Handing-In Day.....	313
An Evening in June 1960	316
Dad and the White Ermine Moth.....	320
A Sports Day Prizegiving.....	324
Expedition to Newt Pond	330
An August Afternoon	335
The Butterfly in the Woods	341
At the School Gates, Autumn Term 1960	346
An Autumn Day Out.....	350
The Lone Lions Firework Night	357
A Winter Sunday 1960.....	364
An Evening in May 1961	372

PART I

BACK DOWN SOUTH

The Homecoming

Dad's keen and opens his door as our driver brakes to a stop at the bottom of Woodcock. Me, Mum and Little Brother follow him out of the cab, stepping down onto the grass verge as the cabbie lifts our suitcases out of the boot and drops them onto the pavement like two sacks of spuds.

Mum's already through the front gate, pulling Little Brother along behind her. He follows, stumbling in small wobbly steps towards the front door, conked out after the long journey home. He's beyond tired, walking up the front path with half-closed eyes set in a face that's as pale as a ghost. I throw my duffel bag over my shoulder, lift the small suitcase off the pavement and follow Dad as he muscles the heavy cases up the concrete drive.

We're waiting by the front door as he pays the cabbie and walks back to the house, pulling the door keys out from his overcoat pocket as he strides up the path. He leans over the luggage and turns the key in the lock. He pushes and the door swings open. A sudden silence drifts past us through the open, half-lit doorway. A slow silence breathed out after a long winter sleep. Our old house woken by the sound of a key turned in a lock, stirred awake by the sudden breath of warm evening air.

Dad hefts the cases in through the front door. We follow him into the damp, still air of the hall, stood amongst its

Nine Drawings

quiet shadows breathing in the settled silence of a house that's not seen a fire lit in the grate since we went up north.

Mum closes the door behind us. The air is cold. Musty. While we've been away the winter has soaked itself deep into the walls and floors and turned the air heavy and solid in rooms that've been kept dark behind drawn curtains. I listen as our house breathes out, speaking to me in slow sleepy whispers, telling me how it's waited through short winter days and long, star-frosted nights, telling me how it has waited for us to come home and how it has passed its time. Slow time. Time spent sleeping, dreaming of the day when it would hear a key being turned in a lock and the sudden, tangled sounds of our return.

.....

It's early evening. The four of us are sat in the front room. A quietness has settled around me as I catch up with a day that has floated past like a dream. A day that doesn't seem real, as if our journey hasn't ended and I'm sat wordless, waiting for our homecoming to settle round me and snap me awake. For me to know that I'm finally home.

Dad sees that we've got the shivers. He's up and out of his chair.

'I'll get a fire going,' he says over his shoulder, already halfway to the coal bunker out the back. He comes in with a full scuttle and some faded newspaper from under the stairs. He pours coal onto the crumpled paper in the grate and flicks his heavy silver Ronson to a flame, holding it against the damp paper. Everyone's waiting for the fire to pick up, a warming fire to let our house know that we're back safe and ready to make our shared connection with the lives we left behind.

.....

The Homecoming

The fire's starting to take hold. The wet coal pops and crackles as it spits hot black sparks onto the hearth, sucking the damp and cold out of the room. I ease back into my armchair and let the warmth from the fire soak into my bones as I rest my tired eyes in its soft, flickering light.

Little Brother's finally conked out and passed into a dreamless sleep. Mum lifts him onto her hip like a boneless sack and carries him out of the room with his eyes glued shut and his head lolling across her shoulder.

.....

She arrives with the tea, flicking at the light switch with her elbow without missing a step as she steadies the flowered metal tray set with the big teapot and three cups and saucers. I pull the curtains tight across the windows as she leans forward to pour the steaming tea through the metal strainer.

The first sip tastes different to the tea we drank in Ulverston. Thinner. Without the tangy bite and deep orange colour. I ask him why. Dad looks up.

'Well, it's probably the tap water they've got up in the Lake District,' he says, 'with the rain coming down off the mountains, soft water that's filtered through the rock and the peat into the lakes, soaking up the special taste of the mountains on its way down.'

He sips his tea and settles back into his chair. Getting wordy.

'But round here it's just heavy London clay and as there's no mountains for the rain to run off, the water's got less taste after it's been cleaned in the water works. It's probably got chemicals added into it as well.' He's hitting his stride as I drift off into a dream, half listening to his voice fading away as he natters on about the Welsh Harp and reservoirs and sewage. I feel my eyes start to close. Mum sees I'm ready for Nod.

Nine Drawings

‘I reckon it’s time for bed, birthday boy,’ she says.

.....

Upstairs, my bed’s made up ready. The sheets and blankets are fresh from the cupboard and smell cold and musty. Laid in bed with the covers pulled up tight under my chin, I’m dreamless and off to Nod in a blink.

My First Day Back at School

Mum's stood in the doorway waving me and Little Brother off to school. We're nattering ten to the dozen as we walk past the houses on Woodcock. Our first day back. The air's clear and fresh – early May-morning air warming slowly under a rising sun.

We walk past the small tidy front gardens with their trimmed privet hedges and lawns mown short and edged as straight as a school ruler. Everything's the same as I remember. The houses and garages and driveways look the same as they always have but this morning something's different. Something's changed. A different world that's hidden behind the world that looks the same. Real but not real. An invisible world seen out of the corners of my eyes.

I'm drifting into a dream, seeing the usual houses and streets and trees in a new way. Seeing them from a different angle. Walking through a strange, half-recognised world. A memory that's twisted itself off-centre as if I'm seeing through new eyes that I've brought back from Lakeland and used today for the first time. Seeing the world through eyes that have forgotten my usual walk to school...eyes that have lost their memory, eyes still waiting for our journey home to come to an end. Still wrapped inside it. Distant. Flipped sideways.

We're getting closer to the school gate. My guts start to twist and turn as I remember what I've come back home to. Back to the teachers shouting and hitting. Back to keeping schtum in class when I'm halfway to the answer. Back home.

Little Brother turns to wave as he runs through the gate. Happy. Without a care. Keen to see his friends. I raise my hand without thinking. Half-hearted. Automatic. Stood in front of the gate, watching him run up the path to the school

as I remember my last night up north seeing myself laid in bed in a night-filled room feeling the nerviness scratching at the back of my mind, a shadow that's settled in the darkness. Biding its time. Waiting to show itself. A part of me that I pushed away, unwanted but always there, forgotten for the four months we spent in Ulverston, a shadow pushed deeper down and covered over with the newness of living amongst the mountains and the lakes.

And now it's starting up again. My first day back at school and the worry that I'd forgotten about has come back the same as it was before I went away. Only bigger. A hidden shadow that's crawled out of the darkness settled behind my thoughts, that's crept into the morning light. A shadow that's woken up and is ready to show itself.

I try to get myself centred. To pull my thoughts together and quieten my guts. I push forward through the shadow in my mind, putting one step in front of the other till I'm through the gate, staring straight ahead as I walk slowly up the wide, paved path. I can hear the tangled din of children shouting and whooping in the playground, noisy echoes that bounce between the empty classrooms and the dinner hall.

In the playground my friends are stood around me asking me about the other school up north. I want to tell them about how the teachers didn't do any hitting or whacking and that there was no follow up when they got wordy and shouted at us. How they let us learn in our own way. I want to tell them about the Back-Alley Boys and our cart races in the lane behind the terrace and the snowball fights and the ice slides we made in the playground, about long winter walks by the canal and the sea winds along the bleak estuary marshes, about the Pepper Pot and Hoad Hill, about the high northern fells and the silver lakes that lie sleeping amongst their ancient, grey-stone crags. About the endless

My First Day Back at School

winter skies and deep mountain silences.

But most of all I want to tell them that the time spent up north wasn't long enough for me to make friends as good as the ones that're stood around me right now. The Lone Lions. Phil, Don, Ian and Keith. Boys I've known as far back as I can remember. I'm ready to start my tell when the playground teacher blows her whistle and I'm pulled back into the minute.

We follow our teacher into the school in silence, walking down the ramp from the playground and through the double doors in single file. There's not a word spoken as she leads us along the corridor and up the stairs to our classroom.

I'm sat at my old desk with the same inked-in scratches that I remember. Four blooming months and it's like I've never been away. The classroom smells the same – the familiar smell of stale store cupboards and old textbooks that've been shut away in desk drawers. The smell of wax crayons and Indian ink, of chalk dust and floor polish, of dry coloured drawing paper, of powder paint and sticky glue bottles.

.....

Downstairs in the assembly hall the Headmaster is still the same shouty bloke he always was. The same angry voice I remember as if it was yesterday. A voice that rises and falls across the hall. A voice that takes charge. Whether I'm stood up to sing a hymn or whispering the Lord's Prayer or sitting cross-legged saying a silent prayer to myself, the one that wishes me to be far away. Somewhere else.

After assembly our class gets sent along the corridor to see the school nurse in her cold, high-ceilinged room next to the sinks and the coat hooks. Green walls and the smell of mopped toilet floors. She does her weighing, moving weights on a steel bar that tips one way then the other till it

Nine Drawings

settles. She leans in close to read the number off the scale and pens it into her book. She measures how tall I am, telling me to stand up straight against a wide wooden ruler as she slides a bar down to rest on the top of my head. And she has a gander at my tonsils.

‘Say aaaahhh,’ she says as she presses my tongue down with a flat wooden stick. I cough and nearly sick up my cornflakes as she pushes it to the back of my throat.

.....

Upstairs in our classroom. First lesson. Writing. Our teacher tells us to remember what we did at the weekend and write a story. Then it’s spelling. Copying words off the blackboard into our rough books ready for tests tomorrow.

.....

It’s dinner time. Everyone gets given two sausages, a ladle full of carrots and a dollop of mashed spud. I walk back and sit down at my table. Everyone’s nattering and noshing, busy putting the din into dinner time. Children scraping knives and forks across their plates. Teachers at the top table leant forward, nattering quietly, talking lessons. Behind the serving hatch at the far end of the hall, white-pinnied dinner ladies clatter worn metal cooking pots into steaming sinks and stack washed plates on the drainer ready for the dryers, separate sounds that are twisted together, shaken up and jangled into one big noise that bounces off the high ceiling and echoes round the hall.

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Out in the playground, me and The Lone Lions get a tennis ball and start a kick-about. Other children are picking their team and joining in. The usual boys are showing off, kiss-chasing the girls down at their end of the playground,

My First Day Back at School

spoiling their hopscotch and two-hand clapping. The Railway Boy's finished his train driving and is crouched down on the steep embankment above the playground, watching the grasshoppers and the meadow browns float amongst the brittle grass stems.

A teacher blows her whistle for afternoon lessons.

.....

We've got art this afternoon. A desert wind is blowing across the classroom through the open windows, carrying the distant scent of dust-dry lawns and yellowed embankment grasses. Our teacher is stood next to the blackboard telling us to remember somewhere we've been. To think of our favourite place and to draw a picture from memory.

I've got lots. All the pictures and scenes that I remember from when I lived in Ulverston crowd into my mind. Memories of winter mountains with their high passes, pictures of dark Christmas tree forests and the wide, flat lakes that shone like mirrors under steel-grey skies.

The art monitor lays out wax crayons and a sheet of paper on each desk. I stare out of the window, seeing but not seeing as I settle a picture of the canal head in my mind and start to sketch it out across the paper.

.....

Our teacher has collected the drawings and is sat at her desk with our writing books stacked up in a pile next to her. I'm halfway out of the door when she asks me to stay behind. I stop, stood between steps, awkward and nervy in the empty classroom, waiting for her to finish her tidying up. I walk back to her desk and wait in silence. Keen to go. She looks up at me over her glasses as if she's remembered I'm there.

'While you've been away,' she says, 'the school decided to run an Art Competition for anyone to enter. There'll be

a prize and it'll be handed out on Sports Day.' She pauses, peering at me through the silence. 'I reckon you're a good artist so I think you should have a go.'

'Well what do we have to draw?' I ask. We share another silence as she flicks through the drawings.

'You can draw anything you want on any subject,' she says, holding my drawing at arm's length and squinting into the light. 'Why not do some drawings like this one, taken from your time spent away.' She pauses to look down at her watch. 'Your memories should still be strong so what's to stop you getting started?' She looks up, her quick eyes waiting for an answer — eyes that tell me she's got marking to do and a home to go to.

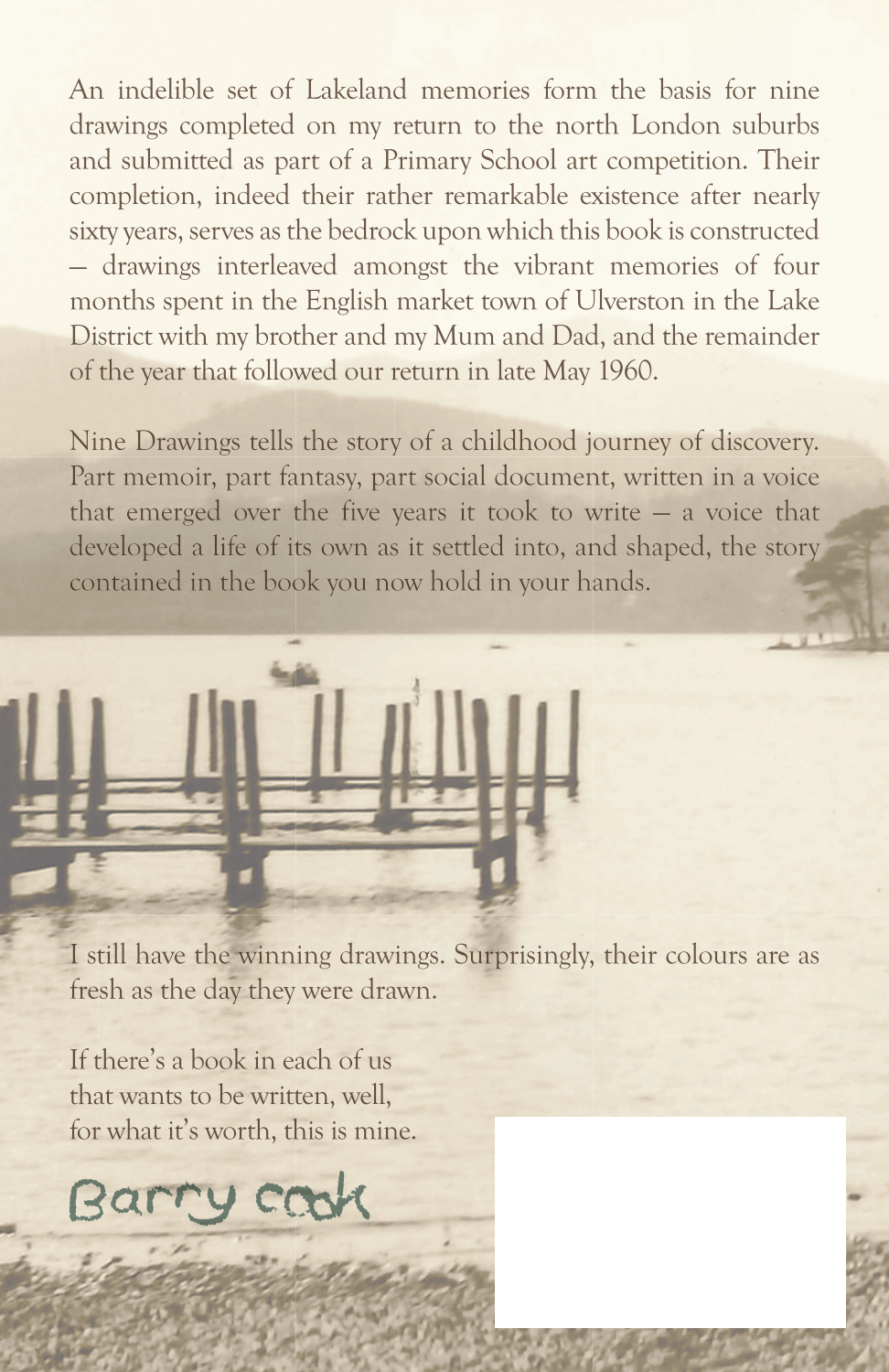
I hear myself saying 'Alright,' but in my mind I'm thinking that I've got better things to do. Like Cubs and Lone Lions and Crusaders.

'Good, because I think you'll do well if you try.' Her voice starts to push a bit. 'You've got the same chance of winning as anyone else,' she says, pausing to catch breath. 'And besides,' she adds, 'you've got a head start. All those new places you saw when you were away in the Lake District.'

She gathers our drawings together, puts them into a folder and slides it into her desk drawer.

I'm halfway to the door as I hear her close the drawer, take the first book off the pile and flick through to today's page, already deep into reading and marking as the door shuts behind me.

To read the whole book
you can **buy a copy here.**



An indelible set of Lakeland memories form the basis for nine drawings completed on my return to the north London suburbs and submitted as part of a Primary School art competition. Their completion, indeed their rather remarkable existence after nearly sixty years, serves as the bedrock upon which this book is constructed — drawings interleaved amongst the vibrant memories of four months spent in the English market town of Ulverston in the Lake District with my brother and my Mum and Dad, and the remainder of the year that followed our return in late May 1960.

Nine Drawings tells the story of a childhood journey of discovery. Part memoir, part fantasy, part social document, written in a voice that emerged over the five years it took to write — a voice that developed a life of its own as it settled into, and shaped, the story contained in the book you now hold in your hands.

I still have the winning drawings. Surprisingly, their colours are as fresh as the day they were drawn.

If there's a book in each of us that wants to be written, well, for what it's worth, this is mine.

Barry Cook