

Empire Day: a novel and critical commentary

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Abstract

Empire Day: a novel and critical commentary consists of my novel, *Empire Day*, and a critical commentary discussing the process of writing it, and the problems of form and theme with which the narrative engaged.

The novel documents the military service of conscripts fighting in an unnamed, undefined colonial conflict on the eve of independence. The novel is split into two narrative strands, one presented from the perspective of Martin Welles, a war poet, and the other from the perspective of Amanda Budden, a university friend of Martin's who has given up on her own writing. Against a backdrop of violence, they struggle to find a moral standpoint that corresponds to their status as invaders, while at the same time they uncomfortably avoid trauma from their past.

The commentary addresses the issues of style, theme, character, setting and method. It surveys the war literature which provides context and conversation for *Empire Day*. The commentary includes entries from a journal maintained during the writing of the novel, which record events in the development of the fiction.

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Empire Day

1.

—Good afternoon, I'm Abina Matali and welcome to the Poetry Hour on Pathé Radio

4.

I'm still an hour early for the interview, despite catching the later train down, and despite that train seeping into London like groundwater, as if all the electricity had been drained from the wires and it were left to gravity to drag it into the city's gut. Swallow, swallow, you could see the iron ribs of the station's throat undulate in turn like the muscles of a snake. Swallow, swallow, in past the gagging point. Digestion. Forty-seven minutes early.

London is too bright in the low morning sun that slants viciously off the urban angles, bends my head, narrows my eyes. People in their dark clothes, people in their thousands, flicker past the white marble like migraines, headache after kinetoscopic headache. Straight up, the sky is blue but scuffed, too many days this month have worn it, have shredded the high clouds, have scratched the air with the contrails of planes. The red start of the morning has sunk to the horizon, bruised it purple, and the buildings on Hallam Street suture London to the sky like the stitches of a wound. Forty-three minutes early.

—Did you read the Laureate's article in the Times last week? He wrote that not even poetry can save the world now. I put it to you that, even if he's right and poets are toothless, and the world at large is doomed, poetry can still win wars.

London bends as if searching the pavement, something has fallen, London looks, looks, looks, for the end of the search is when a thing is really lost. Wind-ripped bunting necklaces the roofs and ledges of the buildings, red and blue and grimy white, forgotten up there with the bird spikes and the crusted roosts of pigeons. I trace a line of streamers from across the street, knotting around the elbows of lampposts, through the delicate branches of trees I cannot name, over my head to the Pathé Broadcast Studio's scaffolded façade, where vinyl pennants caught in the cross-braces chatter in the breeze. The Studio entrance seems half undone, pinned and bandaged all around with metal tubing, laminate boards, debris netting; the workmen have not yet arrived to finish the job and remove the cast. Or maybe this is how it's supposed to look, ironically deconstructed. It's a statement. Above the entrance, carved in speckled stone, are two lines in Roman chiselled capitals: Far I hear the bugle blow To call me—? the last part is covered by blue plastic sheeting, or perhaps that is

how it ends. Is it Blake?

Two men, breaching thirty, in clean-lined bespoke suits, stand beside each other by the big glass doors, insistent on their phones. Although they have separate conversations, their dissonance finds a sort of harmony through a shared language of deficit, consequences, control, limits, acceptable, final. A girl in a pale mauve pea coat, just a few feet away from me, is also talking on her phone, so small I can't see it in her hand. "Do we need any marge, love?" she asks her palm. The skin replies positively, I guess. "A'ight, I'll pop in the shop on my way back. Love ya, babes." Thirty-nine minutes.

Down in the road is a gassing of diesel fumes and the traffic into which it condenses, traffic that drains from somewhere to somewhere else like bleeding dammed by the pressure of a desperate hand. Motorists' hands, heavy on their horns. A billboard van with an advert for Churchman's No. 1, now twenty for a fiver, it's Churchman's, the fifteen minute cigarette. Fifteen fucking minutes. The girl in the purple coat has lit up and the smoke breezes around me like a ghost or a memory trying to form. Amanda smoked Churchman's. Smokes? Thirty-seven.

—I'm joined today by a war winner, somebody you may not have heard, well, anything about for a while, or even at all. At the same time as Bold Ombarrago's work was published to worldwide acclaim and a Nobel prize, this young poet, veteran and perhaps chronicler of the same war, was a much quieter revelation. He is the war poet Martin Welles. Good afternoon, Martin. So, would you agree? War winner? Is that a fair epithet?

Am I lonely? Is Amanda awake yet? What's early for London is earlier for Essex. Though didn't she say Tuesday's her 7am start? I haven't talked to her for months, ages. What would she think? To hear my voice. At this hour. Is the sun still rising over Grays, ratcheted up in fits and starts over the cranes, the yachts, the shiny mud flats? Is the shadow of the earth retreating across the black Thames into the dark places of Essex, the holes, where it pools and grows pungent, like the brown slime at the bottom of a pond? Is Amanda already on the path near the river bank, watching the hulking freighters crawl between the brown clay shores, water so low on their hulls they threaten to tip over and spill their intermodals like a rupture? Those are questions. Those are definitely questions to ask her.

Shit, this is so stupid. Thirty-two minutes early. It's close enough. What's that thing—? I go in from the street, from the twice-breathed air that leaves sediment in the nose; that

overcharged, lungjumping air. I go in, under the scaffolding and torn-up patriotic bunting. What's that thing with writers—? I go in, under the Blake. The big glass doors swing open before I can touch them. What's that thing with writers fantasising? The Studio atrium quenches me with off-season air-con and I force a breath or two, as a diver might, swapping the world's shuffled air for bottled stuff, purified by chemists. The atrium ceiling is vaulted into a glassy blue that seems more sea than sky, and somewhere they are playing Elsie's latest album for ambiance, from bubbly speakers, as if through water. What's that thing with writers fantasising about their first interview?

The far end of the atrium is cordoned off with bollards and rope, and visitors are lining up before an X-ray machine, a metal-detector arch, security guards. I fall in behind a mother and her children: one, an infant, clasped to her chest in a sling, is just a small conker-coloured head peering out from the folds of fabric; the other, a girl of four or five, moves in circles around her mother's legs, studying the nearest security guard as if he were a shopping centre Father Christmas. The girl glances my way for a moment before dismissing me with a flick of her eyes and a question to her mother: “Mammy, mammy, is a pony a baby horse?”

—I'd like to start today by talking about where you feel your poetry stands in this country. As I said in my opening piece, Bold Ombarrago's work received a much warmer welcome here. Do you think your poetry was perceived to have something of an imperialist agenda at the very time the public was looking for the exact opposite: words of liberation, freedom, and so on? I mean, it strikes me now that you were virtually unread until Elsie Anders discovered your work and recommended it back here. We may recall her quite animated endorsement on a certain chat show- do you think that, shall we say, advertisements such as that were a boon or a curse?

The mother sighs a sigh of an infinite patience and she lies, “Yes, love, a pony is a baby horse.”

—You write briefly of your time at university, but it really seems that the county of Essex provided your education, yes, would I be wrong? The county seems a preoccupation in your earlier poems, not that you're trying to escape from it, but perhaps simply the fact that it is inescapable. And it's personified really by this man that walks out of the river, otter-skinned. He's an everyman, he is Man, borne up out of the river, ejected from the mud, the clay. We get the sense that he is following you, haunting you. He appears in your pre-war

poems, as well as your work from during the war- he's almost a pre-ghost, the ghost of a man who hasn't yet died. This idea of pre-death seems a constant worry to you, would that be fair to say?

“Good morning, sir.” The skin of his face is slouched like centuries-old glass, thicker at the bottom than the top, slumped as if through a long fought-against relaxation. Repackaged in security black and white, he wears the company logo and shoulder-holstered radio like the brands of marketing. “Can you empty your pockets, please, sir?” he says and hands me a wide black plastic tray. The contents of my pockets barely fill one corner, keys, wallet, phone, notebook, a complimentary pen from a hotel somewhere, and I am shamed by the gratuitously unfilled space, this is all I have, sorry, I don't have any more change, I already give to charity. “Put it on the belt, please, sir.”

—You have poets of beauty and insight. Poets of substance. The poets of the moment who protract the moment into the future, into all moments, into the always-contemporary. And then you have poets of wars. And they seem to come and go, like a flashbang, they explode like a firework then vanish like smoke. Do you think that's accurate? And is it something that we in the media need to protect against? You know, wars cycle round and around, should war poetry be a defender against the revolution of conflict, the cyclical nature of conflict?

Arms slightly spread, head bowed a little humbly, I pass through the arch. It remains silent and its attendant guard, younger than the first, my age perhaps, watches me as if he recognises my face. I watch his for a second, do I recognise him? Buzz cut hair so blond it's almost invisible. Dark, shiny eyes under heavy brows. He nods at me, then glances at the displaced contents of my jeans as they emerge from the humming metal box. It feels like theft to pick up the items and place them back in my pockets, though the denim has remembered their shape and welcomes them with a kind of weightlessness against my thighs.

—Where does your poetry come from? Is it something you find in the world, something to be discovered and picked up? Is it from people, other poets and those around you? Do you take it from the interactions between you and other people? A sort of frisson from contact, like static? Or would you say it's entirely from within, from inside you, self-generated you might say? Bodily. Can you actually pinpoint the moment of genesis? Or is it a sort of mystery, in that it takes you, the poet, on a journey as much as it does the reader?

“Hello, Mr Welles.” The girl who leads me through the studio corridors must be all of eighteen, or nineteen, a gap year intern. Does she get paid anything more than her travel expenses and a little something for her lunch? She smiles like she does, smiling at every door she indicates and every celebrity name she drops. It's a rather sweet smile that rounds her lipsticked mouth to reveal shallow dimples in her cheeks, a smile altogether independent of a motive; it doesn't seem managed by any higher concern than happiness. After reporting in to her producer, she snaps shut her Marconi phone and flicks her head back towards me. “I've got to say, I love your poem- that poem- oh, what's it called? Uh.”

—Let's talk about your poem 'In Strange Vastness' which I consider to be one of your strongest and the most well-known, I should imagine. Ostensibly it's about the death of empire, I suppose, the sense of things coming to an end, a not altogether unexpected end. You touch on religion, or belief, how the speaker 'wielded weak a mercenary faith' and went 'blindly, without dignity or direction', until a conversion achieved through probing personal insight rather than revelation. It's not a conversion that brings enlightenment, I think, or even really comfort, or at least not immediately. But it does bring the determination to endure hardship. Hope. Bold Ombarrago has written about the same concerns, of course, hope for independence, freedom. Can you tell us what inspired that poem?

“Oh,” she says after a while of walking in silence. “Is it called 'Bearings'? I'm sorry. It goes, let me think, something like 'And now my eyes are pits of lead'- oh, and then, like, 'in them wades the sun to drown'. Is that right?” My gap year guide wishes me good luck and leaves me on a couch in the Radio 4 green room, with a cup of coffee and the memory of her smile. Amongst framed photographs of radio presenters and magazine covers bearing the grinning faces of celebrities, signs around the room invite me to not smoke, to not use my phone, to heed the RECORDING light and remain quiet. At the moment, the word RECORDING is unlit.

Softly, from speakers behind my head, I hear Elsie's insistent fingers on the piano. Left hand rumbling keys in a spell to shake the floor, right hand elegantly exploring the range from her body to the far extent of her reach. I can picture her small wrists, cuffed by my grip, eyes closed as she sounds the keys- the violin, there, that's her too, her wrists poised, such long strokes, bending the world away from her elbow, shoulder still, Atlas wrists to hold up the sky. And the guitar, when it comes in, that too is her. And her voice. The squeak of the soft pedal, fingers noisy on the strings, her tongue's constant battle

against the Estuary effs.

—You've only recently turned twenty-five. One might say that war poets of the past have become great by dying young, hermetically sealing their work, and burying it like a time capsule, where it can't be touched by later hands, their own included. Would that be an unreasonable thing to say? I'm not sure. But, as I mentioned, you're only twenty-five, you've come back from a war with a collection of poetry that, while it hasn't set the world on fire, was critically considered to be a strong début collection. You're a poet, you're still alive, where do you go from here?

Abina Matali steps from the studio door, tall and athletic Abina like I've seen on TV, wearing knee-high leather boots shiny as beetle shell. Her hand directs her across the room, to mine, the heels of her boots striking the floor harder than the muffling carpet reports. “Hi Martin, it's lovely to meet you. Did you find us okay? Pam sent Katie to fetch you, right?”

—We've come through yet another war. It was a war marked and ultimately ended by poetry. The next war seems certain, doesn't it? Already lined up and raring to go. Precedented. We're stewing in the anticipation. So, Martin, I suppose this leaves us with one final question, as we return, fittingly, to where we started: whether we win or lose our wars, do you agree with the Laureate or can poetry still save us?

“We'll lay down about three hours of tape and then cut that to about sixty minutes, give or take. Pam does some editing, the levels, mixing, adds the bumpers, gets it ready for broadcast tomorrow. Ugh, it's a bloody headache. Shall we?” I switch off my phone as Abina leads me through the door. As we enter, the RECORDING sign lights up, bright warning red. Time to be quiet.

2.

—It was the night the war ended, remember? Someone on high had decided we should keep an eye on Government House that last night before the constitution came into effect. So we did. You, me, Killen, Pakes, Franks, Ham, Bratt. Longman. Welles. I don't remember who else. Maybe no one. Driving through the city, four Land Rovers, was the electric off? I think the electric was off, all the city was dark. Well, that's how I remember it. Do you remember the state of the House when we got there? Emptied. Yeah, completely gutted. But we turned it into a right party. Have you talked to Martin lately? No, I mean, I got a Christmas card from him.

Killen played his ukulele and Pakes played the Governor's piano, what was left of it. The rest of us smoked and drank and heated meals on a gas stove. Surrounded by the smell of curry and cannabis and beer, we slept on the floor of the palm court, our faces against the polished cedar. The last I remember, the boys were playing light music, melodies of faraway beaches, the Caribbean, the South Seas, somewhere in the Fifties, in the movies. And when I slept I dreamt of Maria Montez in a grass skirt, coconut halves on her breasts, and she came to me, all Technicolor and soft-focus. Her clothes that teased in a fan-blown wind censored her thighs and crotch and nipples, and denied me until I woke.

“Andy?” And it was Martin who woke me. He crouched by my head, his helmet in his hands. His face was shiny with sweat. It dripped from his nose, fell into my hair. “Come with me.”

“I'm fucking sleeping,” I said.

“Come on.”

“I'm fucking sleeping, you prick.”

“Amanda.” Like a fucking teacher. Is that what he'll be when this shit war is over? A fucking English teacher in a crumbling Victorian school somewhere. Mr fucking Welles, Sir. Teaching poetry and the passive voice, he would go too easy on his pupils and give them marks higher than they deserved. His eternal fucking hope for them, an eternal fucking punk each and every one of them. I could have punched that gullible fucker in the face right there.

“All right,” I said, and pushed myself up off the floor. Empty foil trays fell noisily away from me, an empty bottle shifted against my boot, glass tinkling against glass. The boys

were all asleep, snoring, blanketed by the knowledge that nothing really mattered now, they were all going home. All that comfort before them, and around them, calling back to them, here, now, from a future peace into which we were all lazily headed. And fucking Martin pulling me out of the current, out of my long-looped trajectory.

“Come on.” Martin nudged my elbow. “Come see this.”

He cracked his fingers as he led me.

—I was cracking my knuckles under the fag-burned table. It was pissing it down, and Mum took me to the café on the High Street and I ordered a ploughman's and a pint and she paid. She never took me out to eat. We sat by the window and I watched the shoppers walking past, thinking that boy's fit, that boy's a poser, that boy's a bit fit too. Mum told me about Pam, who has a kid now, and Maddie, who will have one in December. Couples hurrying PVC-sheeted pushchairs and the plastic tips of their golfing umbrellas tapping on the window like the scrabbling of confused birds. And I had been five, once, or six, and Mum had knelt beside the unskirted bath tub and poured soapy water over my head from a measuring jug, washing no-tears shampoo into my eyes. She began to talk about her feelings and I wondered if they had coated the window glass with something, why my half-reflection looked nothing like me, about her feelings and what it meant that I was leaving. As I cracked my knuckles under the table, thinking cheese and beer is a strange combination, both made from tiny living things, she told me how it felt to have everything fall away from her. She said that at last she was free and I told her that I was glad.

“Where the fuck are you taking me?”

Government House, at night, powerless under a bright moon, ransacked and deserted, was a punched face and a sudden unconsciousness, a surrendering to gravity and a skull cracking on the pavement's abetting edge. Martin would have liked that image, or had he, perhaps, even written that? Seemed like a thing he'd do, worm his way inside like that. We walked quietly and softly, recycling the same foot-shaped pieces of floor, my dusty footprint just inside his dusty footprint, only slightly smaller, only just; walked through servants' passageways that seemed to connect to rooms only accidentally, rooms that formed big Os of surprise as we entered. A corridor would become a room would become a corridor until there seemed to be no difference and everything was a part of the same space. Martin would stop in the empty doorways and look left and right, remembering, perhaps listening, so much like the Green Cross Code, before he would continue. Maybe it

was eenie meenie miney moe. Each time we stopped, I would look at the hinges on the wall and wonder how the burgled door might have looked that had hung there yesterday, how heavy it would have felt when the housekeeper opened it, the wood's colour and smell, how glossy its veneer, how loud its shutting. Had it creaked? I touched each hinge as we passed them, but never felt oil.

“Why'd they take the doors?”

On the walls at each corner were signs of scuffing, scratching, where the thieves had bumped their prizes awkwardly through the passageways' unforgiving dimensions. In places, the white plaster had been chipped off and was now a quiet crunching underfoot. Every so often we would come across a discarded hacksaw blade, missing teeth, or a snapped-off caster, or the precisely lathed legs of a dining room table bearing the nicks and notches of an amputation by hatchet.

“Are we going anywhere in particular?”

Martin didn't reply, but pointed at the ceiling. I looked, but felt stupid for looking as I couldn't work out what he was indicating. They had taken the fixtures and the bulbs, left long channels in the plaster where they had pulled out the wiring. The sharp and misted glass of a dropped lampshade had been kicked angrily to the wall.

—She described for me how good it felt to be able to breathe again, to be herself again, without a daughter to look after and without a husband. Freedom. Had I really been so tight around her chest? Had Dad really been such a weight on her? If you couldn't breathe in a marriage, in a family, how much air did you really need? But I didn't ask her those things, just said that I was happy she was happy – was I? And I told her that I loved her – did I? And I remember thinking maybe it was always like this, all these unasked questions, even at five or six, in the bath. Under my bed, with the exercise books and photocopies of poems, was a school reading record from when I was seven, in which Mum had written ‘Amanda read enthusiastically and without any problems – she said this book was “brill”’.

He was probably holding up a warning finger or asking for patience, not pointing. Indicating a pause, for thinking. Now, let us be intellectual. “Where will you be tomorrow? Where are you going to be in a month's time?” he asked.

“Home. Maybe.” Fuck you and your profundity.

“How far away that all is.”

“Whatever. I know exactly how it'll be. It'll be familiar, probably, and like somebody

else's home at the same time. The flat will smell like a hotel, of other people, or of me but I won't recognise my own smell, the smell of my things. And next door's bolognese coming in through the holes in the wall that are too small to see. And them downstairs thump-thumping their bass, and the kids upstairs thump-thumping their feet across the ceiling. Back and forth till bedtime. So yeah, home, tomorrow or in a month, that's exactly how it'll be. And, you know, whatever."

"You haven't missed it?"

"Home? The place? Grays? Essex? Doesn't mean a thing to me. England? God."

"What, nothing?"

"Dunno what to tell you." I grabbed his arm and stopped him. "You know what, fuck you. Fuck you. 'Oh yeah, it's Amanda Budden, from Grays, from Essex, she's never had a complicated thought in her head' - and you know what? I probably haven't. And I don't care. What, what? Go ahead, go on, say all the same shit I've been hearing for years. 'Her work lacks refinement, depth... yeah, it's crass... juvenile,' there you go."

"I never said—"

"Yeah, yeah, you know what? Fuck you, Martin. Essex is a place, like everywhere else in the fucking world, just a fucking place for people to live and for things to happen. There's nothing special about it."

"I think—"

"Then write a fucking poem about it, you cunt." I pushed past him. "Which fucking way are we going?"

—Nan would sometimes tell me about how Dad and Mum met. He was back in London after two years overseas, where he'd been billeted for his National Service, somewhere tropical and violent. For him it hadn't been glamorous or heroic, just uncomfortable and mostly boring, and he'd spent the time doing odd jobs around patrol boats, mixing paint, always grey, draining oil from engines, cutting dents out of steel hull plates. Of course, to his mum, my nan, this meant he was a nautical engineer. So logically, as she had known a bloke pretty well at Blackwall Yard, she got my dad a start on a forklift, shifting pallets from dock to dock. Well, not too long into this job, the second week or something, he'd got wind from a lad in Southend about a guy selling the choicest weed from a hotel room near the new airport at Maplin. He'd told his boss that he'd got malaria from some big bugger of a mosquito and, feeling under the weather, had better take a couple of

days off work. It was a rainy day they'd chosen for their jolly up the M12, five boys from Barking crammed in an old Rover, the smoke from their rollies all around them like they were divers deep in the murk.

We walked one last corridor and there, like a goal, was a body hanging on a rope.

"Oh shit, is it one of ours?"

A phlegmy voice that came with the promise of a cough, "Watch yourself, Budden,"

Across the atrium, by the foot of the robbed-out staircase, a man stood half in shadow, the other half of him coloured starkly by the moon and by the light of the torch he swung lazily back and forth, in wide arcs across the room. For a moment the man was Dixon and then for each moment after that he was Longman. With one foot on one joist and the other on the next across, spreading his crotch like a colossus, big and bronze, Longman straddled long-hidden furrows of dust, bent nails, fuzzy grey insulation like lint.

"Ripped up the floor and took the copper pipes. Water pipes. Look at all the lagging."

"Come on," Martin said. He crossed the room easily.

The men looked at each other with congratulating grins, like roofers, like carpenters, fifteen years in the job, and looked at me and seemed like scared boys as I started to cross the beams. Empty boys, flick them, they'd chime. "Man-mode it," Longman said. He watched my feet as I came along the joist towards him, as if he could feel me coming through the wood, through his boots. And his male and unmoving gaze seemed to say you will fall you will fall let me help you. It was momentum really, and wanting to smack the look off their faces, that got me to the other side. My last two footfalls, the two that brought me to a stop a few inches from them, came heavily and shunted my energy down into the joists, rocking them all the way back across the room, unpractised ballerina shaking the boards.

"Well done," Longman said.

"Yeah, piece of piss."

The hanged man was already in motion. Had Martin set him swinging, or Longman, or had the breeze? Breeze? No breeze. I paddled my hands in the air, circles like a girl in a pool. It was even and warm, cooked all the way through by the still heat, with just this slight pinking here in the middle. This little heart of rawness and bacteria. I put my hand on his foot, my palm on his swollen toes, and held him for a moment, steadied him until all the movement had receded up his body, into his neck, through the rope to the ceiling. It felt like a murder, to stop the swinging, as if his life had left him for a second time, his half-open

eyes, his mouth tensed in the shape of the sound of a pre-word, tongue pushing out against teeth. Where's your little voice now, the one that was inside before your body was bent in a direction it doesn't bend? It's something like that, bending a shatterproof ruler, squinting and turning your face away, flinching, squinting and flinching and waiting for the snap, something like that.

"Who's this?"

"Does it matter?" asked Longman.

Martin bumped the heel of one hand on the palm of the other, gently to a convoluted rhythm. "His name was Gamm or something. He was an orderly. We were introduced."

"Did he have children?"

"Does it matter?"

"I don't know if it matters, I just wanted to know if he did."

"Yeah, but what does it matter?"

I stared at Longman and he stared at me, coolly, as if he had no intention of antagonising me and was simply, purely, asking the same question for the sake of curiosity. Martin had stopped fidgeting, was standing beside Longman, looking up at the dead man and the blue nylon rope which held him, squinting against the darkness. "Are we going to get him down?" I asked. Martin didn't move. "Or are we gonna leave it for the other lot?"

Without answering, without looking at me, Martin pulled out his boot knife and started to climb the deconstructed stairs.

—Mum, at that time, was a communist or a Marxist or similar and was drifting along the north Thames bank from Foulness to the mouth of London. I've seen the photos. Towns to her were inescapably capitalist, with the high street as their heart, so she was trying to get lost in the spaces between them. Travelling is simply trespassing on one property after another- all the fields are owned, all the woods and rivers. The only places that felt remotely free were the roads, the motorways. Everyone used them, everyone with a car or a van or a motorbike or a lorry, and even though she hadn't learned to drive she saw no reason why she shouldn't too, I suppose.

"The Lieutenant's in a mood, is he?" Longman asked.

"I dunno."

"About the Captain? Captain Dixson, I mean."

“No, seriously, mate, I dunno. Ask him.”

“Ha, or about something you said?”

“Look, Mary doesn’t care about anything I say. Nothing I say could make a change in him.” All the things I’d say to him if he cared. I’d tell him I have a pain in my stomach like my tubes are a filament forced to glow by insistent electricity hopelessly resisted. A twisted wire combusting in a vacuum. A bulb left on in an empty house, to fool the burglars while we’re away on holiday. Burning, it lights the darkness between the coils of my guts, throws baby-head shadows on to the inside of my skin, features murky as an ultrasound. Limbs more liquid than solid, a leg, an arm, a penis perhaps, indeterminate, in me, unsexable. I’d tell him my stomach aches with heartburn or the promise of a child. I’d tell him I feel like puking.

Longman offered me a cigarette. He shook out the match and we stood there, smoking into the tall space, into the shadowy place upstairs, where Martin was. Sometimes and then barely and even then hardly at all, the sound of his boots on the wood, his light tread on rib or board or frame coming down to us like a shifting of the sky. The moonlight, challenged by the lack of access, lamely bulged around the far windows of the veranda. Longman’s torch was down by his side, a bright still circle by his boots. Everything had lost some sharpness. I pictured Martin at the top of the stairs, sawing at the rope with his blade, sawing sawing, his teeth gritted as failure curled around his hand, his arm, the masturbatory motion of his elbow, his shoulder. And no strand of the rope will give, there will be no release, as knives won’t cut now.

Something called in the darkness. I said, “Is that Pakes again? Do you hear that?”

“I don’t know. What am I supposed to be hearing?”

“Is that Pakes on the piano?”

Longman listened. “I hear a plane. It’s a plane.”

“A fucking pl—I know what a fucking plane sounds like.”

How the silence murmurs a prediction of a voice, the sound of lips parting, the unthinking tongue.

“All right,” came Martin’s voice from above. “Take the strain.”

I held the body around its calves, my face against the damp fabric of its trousers, against the hard shins, my hands up inside the giving back of the knee. Longman, taller, held a little higher on the other side. I took the strain, lifted, and the legs parted, bending

outwards, and Longman's breath came on to my face through the gap.

"Ready?" Longman asked.

"Yeah."

"Ready!" he called out.

The weight came quickly as the blue rope fell around us. For a moment the body threatened to topple me, but Longman grunted, altered his grip, taking a step backwards and letting the dead man move towards him. We moved carefully, to place him upon the floor. And I was thinking, this is all new, this is all new to me. And the world, while we handled this dead thing, seemed all filled up with both ceremony and roughness, as gardening is, with rules and with right and wrong and also with violence and sweat and with shit for spreading. There is science below it all, science and ritual, understood by people far away, not by me, not by anybody here. I hardly breathed but there were no surprises or leakages or shocks, and the world appeared to accommodate our work, to accommodate this novelty as if happily surprised, and rewarded us, for the shape into which we eventually managed to set the uncompromising body was neat and full of care. As we waited for Martin to return, Longman and I smoked and stared at the man on the ground, laid across the wooden beams. He seemed like a tool put by. Waiting for something to need him again. Waiting for something to reinhabit him and use him.

—Dad saw this pretty young woman walking along the side of the motorway and whether it was the weed or a sudden attraction he pulled the car over, against the protestations of his mates. Engine still running, he hopped out and called to her but must have forgotten to apply the handbrake as the car started rolling down the road to Southend. Nan describes it secondhand, probably from Mum, that it was like an old-fashioned comedy film, a lot of fumbling and falling over, and sometimes there's a police car that goes past and sometimes that part's left out, but the telling always ends with Mum half in the car and half out, with my Dad flat on his back on the hard shoulder and his mates shrieking like schoolgirls, the handbrake eventually secured and all their lives saved in the nick of time. That's the story. Did the lads manage to get to Southend? Did Mum go with them? Love at first sight or did it happen slowly? Nan never provided those details, perhaps she had never been told. Perhaps it hadn't happened that way at all.

Martin came down the stairs. He looked at us then at the body. "I'll just say a few—"

"Really?"

He nodded. He stood over the dead man and took a folded piece of paper from his trouser pocket. It looked to have been touched many times, opening up in that easy, quiet way, and I could see printed words on the side facing me, down the centre like verse in a book. "Hear my prayer, oh Lord," he began to read, "give ear to my supplications. In Your faithfulness answer me and in Your righteousness. For the enemy has persecuted my soul, he has crushed my life to the ground. He has made me dwell in darkness like those who are long dead. My spirit is overwhelmed within me. My heart within me is distressed."

—I was walking back home from Nan's house. It was the first time I'd seen an ambulance down our street, but not the first police car.

"I remember the days of old. I meditate on all Your works, I muse on the work of Your hands. I spread out my hands to You. My soul longs for You like a thirsty land." He turned the paper over, scanned the text on the other side, and nodded. "Amen," he said.

"Amen," Longman replied.

"Are we going to bury him?" I asked.

"I said the words." Martin coughed. "Job done."

—Coming back from university after our last exam, when all the coursework was done, to find that Mum had sold all my books. Textbooks from school and Shakespeare plays with pages upon pages of my annotations, novels and poetry and poetry and poetry, pencilled words and lines and whole stanzas in pencil in the margins, she'd given them all to a friend to sell at the local car boot. I swore at her, swore with all the words I knew, screamed and screamed at her. She told me she'd sold them and more, pretty much everything, and the house, and she was moving to a caravan park up the coast, Clacton or Walton or Dovercourt. I cursed her and her new freedom, I told her I hoped she'd fucking die. I put the toe of my boot through the kitchen door. She said she'd let me have the money when she got it. Farewell to the happy long ago. Later, sitting outside on the low garden wall, crying, homeless now, I called Darren and pleaded for him to take me in.

Longman had roused the section and we'd moved from the stuffy air of the palm court out to the veranda. Swain, Polley, Franks, Ham, Pakes, Killen, Bratt, Budden. As we eight stood there, beneath a sky bellying above us like a pregnancy, too full of rain, the air around us felt empty and eager for a birth. Each movement of skin against khaki against the moist air threatened, puh, puh, had the potential, puh, puh, the first sound of the sudden command to puh, to puh, to push.

One among the seven lads advanced the idea of a romp on the lawn.

“Bare bollock naked.”

“We'll freeze to fucking death.”

“Man up. Where the fuck do you think we are? Fucking England?”

And with that Pakes unbuttoned his trousers and shook them down. That seemed to be the decisive moment, for the other boys followed suit, shrugging off their shirts and tearing at their tight-laced boots. After a few minutes they stood there naked, laughing, glancing at each other and at me, a kind of manic look on each man's face, which I realised was the expression of sudden, unexpected freedom. I started to take off my clothes and the boys went yelling and whooping out into the blackness of the lawn. I stripped and turned and caught Martin's eye from where he stood with Longman just inside the House. He looked away. I went down then onto the lawn. Beneath my feet, the cool and dewy grass had, from lack of care, grown wild with meadow flowers. The night was alive with the cries and laughter of naked men. Glimpses of penises in the dark, like deep-sea fish stirring in the silty gloom. I reached out and slapped one- there was a yelp, then a chuckle, and then he was gone. Ludicrous white flesh swimming away.

Martin came out and watched us from the veranda, hands in his pockets like a pervert, a sort of smug smile. Pitying, perhaps. Probably the smile of a psychiatrist, staring at the back of your head. But it came cheaply to his face, it seemed, a child-minding he wasn't completely undertaking for the wage: it was something he wanted to watch, he had found he could enjoy it. Perhaps he had realised at last that we were, after all, real. We were shapes moving in and out of his world, a brief semblance. Perhaps, as it moved between the light and shadow, he saw a certain limb, a familiar limb in an attitude recalling, just for an instant, a memory from his own body. Something he did when younger, the way an arm arched and flicked backwards, the curl of fingers or the leg's rising up onto toes. A king now, at last, for a while; a little king, of a little place, for a little while.

—Do you remember that night? The rain held off.

3.

Bentley was the halt where the train drew in, that year in late June or in early July, when the sun had swollen each rail an inch and the driver had braked, braked, been finally forced to stop on that too-cambered route. From my carriage I could see no station no signal, only the village's name on a sign, there, right outside my window, framed, by chance. This window of doubled glass, brown from smoke and faces and fingers, its rubber caulking turned brittle and dusting away. Behind it, a hedge of unsolvable branches, entanglements of black bark and black thorns, and on one twig, a blackbird, brown, perched between the inch-long spurs- no, upon a spur. In her all-body pause, she twitched her head, showed to me that one all-open eye, unblinking like death or all-life. There was an earthworm curled and dead in her beak. Essex imagined beyond the brickwall bush. Clipped lawns and cricket, cricket played like a hymn, with those who knew it and those who followed along and those who hummed. They'd be wearing whites and smiles down the pub, taking a lunch of bread and cheese and an onion, and spotting their whites with beer and mustard, with their ever-knowing who's a local and who just dropped in. And in the memory there's bunting flapping somewhere and crisp tents have been guyed neatly into turf. It's a holiday, or a remembrance, on a Sunday.

It's the first volley of the field guns. The ill-fitting window panes rattle, on and on. Through the smeared glass, the English sunlight is an invading, foreign thing. It flickers in geriatric patterns over the bed, the floor, down a shaft of spastic dust. Down onto my chest, my arm—this sweat, these cuts, these gritted scabs—this tan, whose arm this? An English arm?

A second volley.

A brighter sun than England's. Not England. Nothing like England. Drawing a wet breath, tangy with the taste of a cold, is more soaking up than breathing. The pillow smells, spirits and cannabis, aftershave, sex. Not my pillow.

The third volley—how many guns? Where have they been hiding so many guns?

The next breath, though shallow and pneumonic, empties the room of air, fattening my chest until the ribs ache.

“Fuck.” I pinch my eyes closed. So yesterday had happened, and there had been a memorial service, and now I'm lying in a dead man's bed.

The fourth.

She'd been so close, a dream of her, and now she's gone.

She'd touched this arm, this once-English arm. Like the first Captain, with his pieces sent back to England in a box, under a flag. Repatriation. She'd repatriated this arm, and the man connected to it. Repatriated these lips, just once, for a moment, with her own—so English, so pink and soft and civilising. And the dream had felt of nothing and she had had no taste.

Out of bed, aching from neck to ankles. Now she was gone and had taken with her all her Englishness and had left me a colony. Not much of anything English left in me, though, save these hands when I write and this voice when I speak, and perhaps this chin, this Anglo-Saxon chin. The provenance of the rest? A claim shared by the Army and the war, plus some miscellaneous pieces solely there to keep the thing fairly human-shaped, owned by nobody, perhaps God.

Fifth.

"Fuck." Stretching provokes the grievances of every muscle. The bed, another man's bed, had obviously not accepted me, is obviously not my inheritance. Its sheets wrinkled and violated, a sad remembrance of its owner. Spending the night in it- what had I expected? A conversion? A transference, perhaps, of the spirit of one man to another, via the scent, the sweat, the hairs on his sheets. I examine this un-English arm again, but there's nothing new, nothing that hadn't been there last night, only the red pressure marks like healed wounds.

And the memory of Bentley touches lightly, fitfully as a moth moves in silly desperation, or the wall-bouncing of a crane fly, a legged disaster, or a money spider walking needle-pointed, its millimetre gait registering somehow, between the nerves of the skin. And there were two young men across from me, holding hands and gazing out the window, at the bird or at the sky or at nothing in particular, just sitting there together and looking, unconcerned by our just stopping here. Two men, and I was for a moment confused. And embarrassed. And that is why I gazed out the window. I shifted on my seat and sent up decades-old cigarette smoke from between the fibres. Oh, what's the bloody hold up? the husband beside me asked. His wife woke quickly and unfolded, a levering of legs in flesh-coloured tights, sat up and tugged down her rising skirt. She looked around and before she spoke the steward's voice came forth from the ceiling, This train will not

continue to Clacton, all passengers must now disembark, this stop is Bentley, this stop is Bentley, all change please now for Clacton. Oh, for God's sake, the husband said.

Sixth.

Standing naked in the room. Nothing new on arms, chest, hips, thighs. The hair, mine. The moles, mine. Skin, mine. My face, a slight bristling of stubble but still my chin, my jaw, my lips she had once called feminine. She had been here. Right here, right here. Right before me. And in a way it's real and in a way it's not. I twist onto the toes of one foot—nothing new on my ankle, my calf, my buttock—an unbalancing, this *contrapposto*, before quickly placing it back on the floor, the pose too girlish. Feeling up and down my back, running my fingertips along the meanders of my spine, pushing into the gaps between my ribs. She had been right here and all the things I had for years imagined doing with her, I hadn't done.

Seventh volley.

"Fuck it." Cupping myself with a cold hand. Neither the man nor the woman have rendered any change there. A slight smile at the thought of either possibility. I let myself go, sitting down on the edge of the bed.

Eighth, ninth and tenth volleys as I pull on my trousers and step into sandals. Eleventh, twelfth, thirteenth and fourteenth as I slip on my shirt and button it almost to the top. Fifteenth, sixteenth, finding the right hole in my wristwatch strap, was it seventeenth now? I've lost count by the time I reach the door, open it, and step through into the lounge.

"Mary, Mary, the war's all over."

"Is that why? Is that the meaning of the guns?"

"No, it's Empire Day."

Shaw sits cross-legged on a rug, beneath the sun-white windows like a merchant and his wares, surrounded by watches and wallets, and by high-carbon steel knives and high-shined boots and a generous curled turd of gold chains, and by cigarette cartons stacked like bullion and mobile phones collected like the pages of a book, and, this most of all, by money, notes heaped around him in different denominations and different currencies, rubberbanded together in obscenely solid bricks, aren't they something simple like paper? "What did you have again?" he asks me, picking up a black notebook, thumbing off the band that held it shut, fingers swishing the small pages like fish breaking water. I know what I had and I undo the strap of my watch and toss the thing broadly in his direction, he catches it,

he doesn't, I don't care, it's no longer mine.

The husband was my father and his wife my mother. He complained to her and, by an extension logical to him, to those responsible for the train's stopping there, complained as we left the compartment, complained as we walked down the corridor, complained as we stopped before the buffet car and as he leaned out the window, to the air, to the hot summer air, and opened the slam door. Stop it, Dad, my mother said, I should like to see the village. I think I should like to too, he said, if I had only paid for three return tickets to this blasted place. There's another thirty pounds of villages I should like to see more and Clacton as well, I might add. Some of the disembarked passengers stayed on the platform, others made their way into the dark station, to find refreshments or to pass through into the village. As my mother led and my father followed and I slowly went along, keeping them in view, I saw the two young men from our compartment had sat down together on a bench. Then one graciously gave up his seat for an elderly lady, and stood beside his friend, their legs touching, the one looking up at the other looking down, and both smiling.

Stepping through the open doorway, a plastic barrel holds the door wide, the sun feels no more familiar out here. A wind is lifting and blackgrey smoke from the burn pit comes drifting over the platoon's bungalows, in through open windows, in through open doors. The smoke comes slowly rolling out across the dirt, finds me, rises and lingers around my face. Longman is coming out of the latrine, holding a magazine. He wears loose trousers and a vest, sandals, there is a hint of stubble on his jaw, down his neck. Flecks of black settle on his clothes, in his close blond hair.

"Morning, sir," he says.

"Morning."

"They brought the guns, just for today, for a send-off."

On the far side of the exercise ground, through the swelling folds of smoke, men are busy at the limbering of the field guns. Long-legged figures like horses stand in ambiguous movement, are held to almost stillness by men clutching reins. The sound of their agitation carries. From time to time, as the wind breathes, it is easier to see the men, they move with hesitation, back and forth as ants work, flashes of gold, of tall hats and black boots.

"Artillery?" I ask Longman.

"Hardly."

Up go the riders, and some of the men climb atop the caissons. The animals are

ridden through the smoke, towards us and the gatehouse beyond. As they draw closer, it becomes clear that the gunners are members of the Home Guard, but not wearing their usual uniforms, instead they have on costumes made up of a baffling collection of morning dress, lounge suits, and antique military adornments. They neither salute nor talk nor do they perform any action which might bespeak of our sharing this space. "How'd you like that?" Longman says, quietly.

I can recognise some of the men's faces, a couple of Home Guard corporals, a sergeant, but have no names for them. You are the dirt and the earth, Lord.

"Tom Bird!" Longman yells. He takes a couple of steps in pursuit of the line and I imagine him taking a few more paces and catching one of the guards and yanking him down, by his ear, into the dirt. But, instead, he simply plants his boots and shouts, as he would at any private, at his insubordinate children, "Tom Bird, you get your arse back over here, now you ugly bastard!"

One of the younger suited men, sitting on the rearmost gun carriage, up on the 13-pounder itself, his legs in cashmere stripes on either side of the blackened barrel, lifts two fingers at us, holds them there with a blank expression. For a second, I'm unsure whether this is the man at whom Longman shouted, for he is not at all ugly, young and heart-faced, small teen-aged head overborne by some ancestor's black sun helmet, gold chin chain hanging loosely around his neck. And then they are gone behind a denser partition of smoke, and only little things remain, the impression of the spike on the peak of his helmet, the indifferent two fingers.

Little to little, much to much, Lord.

"That little shit," Longman says. "I used to give him chocolate for his kids."

"Kids? He looks sixteen."

"Nineteen, I think, sir. He has three kids. God help them, this country's about to go down the shitter."

Shall we have a cup of tea? my mother asked my father. She was looking in the bay window of the teashop and he was watching the batsman fidgeting astride the crease, tapping the bat behind his shoe, adjusting his cap against the sun. The teashop by the village green had outside its door a number of white wrought iron tables, and chairs with floral cushions. Against the Tudor timber threshold leaned a blackboard, on it Traditional Cream Teas, Toasted Teacakes, Home Made Sandwiches, Soup of the Day, Sausage Rolls, Selection

of cakes, in pink and blue chalk, in a free, looping hand. It all sounds lovely, my mum said. I'll see if the girl will bring our tea out, she said. It would be such a shame to eat indoors on a day like this.

Longman sighs. "When do you think the lads'll get to go home?"

"What?"

"Now the war's over."

"We'll have to wait for word from higher up."

My sergeant taps his magazine in his hand. "Before I forget, sir, the Padre wanted to speak to you."

"Thank you. Where's Eseley?"

"I'm not sure."

"Never mind, I'll find him."

You are between the smallest particles of dust, Lord, and You are the particles of dust that move by the speaking of Your name.

"Will we get a new OC, sir?"

"Have to wait for word from higher up."

"But will they bother?"

"I really don't know, John."

The batsman drove the ball deep past the covers, so that it was sent not towards us but away at some tangential angle, so we could see in profile the plainness of its bounce and the untouched spans of lawn it bridged, then its smooth rippling over the grass as men in whites slid foot-first to stop it or came too late to try, and after all of it, after the men had lifted themselves from the staining ground, after the batsmen had slowed their runs and stopped in the pale centre of the pitch, after the umpire had flourished his hand, then we all could recognise its passage as having been the most elegant solution to the problem of crossing a hundred feet of perfect grass and we were all be awed, finally, by its simplicity. My dad, who had up to then been questioning why anyone could possibly choose another university over Cambridge, choose writing over law, suddenly asked, Good Lord, have you ever seen anything so poetic? And I thought, Perhaps one day I can know a thing so well I will see the elegance in it.

The Padre is on top of a stepladder, adjusting the fibreboard steeple nailed above the chapel door. "Good morning, Mr Welles," he says, seeing me. He steps down, pocketing

his hammer. "How are you? How are your men?"

"Fine, fine. The men are resilient."

He nods, biting the inside of his cheek. "The men are resilient, quite. Thank God they won't have to be here very much longer."

"Well."

"Would you say that's level?" The Padre inspects his work on the steeple, his left hand absently playing with the head of his hammer, his right hand rubbing his chin. I can hear the rasping of his fingertips on the sharp hairs. "What do you think? A little to the left?"

"I think it looks fine."

"Hmm. And how is your resilience, today?"

"Today? Today's barely started. So I should say it's untested."

"Living is hard, Martin. We know this. It's hard, both in the present and in the past. Even things you thought you'd moved beyond, things you thought you'd left behind. Remembering sometimes brings its own pains. Life isn't easy, and it doesn't want it to be. The high-bowled ball that life launches to threaten your feet, to get you out and make a fool of you too. A two-for-one delivery. I said as much, this morning, to Lance Corporal Budden. Amanda."

"Did she appreciate it?"

"I've always found that even if soldiers don't believe, they still are grateful for a few words of support. The human need to be understood, you could say, to be understood on a deep, personal level. And what is the journey of faith if not, at the same time and equally, a journey of self-discovery? How do we recognise the effect of the Holy Spirit within us if we don't know what we were like before? At ground zero, as it were. When we walk with Christ we're learning about the nature of ourselves as much as the nature of Christ Himself."

I smile. "I hope she sees it that way."

"I'm sure it wouldn't hurt if you could talk to her, too."

"All right, I can try."

"Oh, Martin, just a minute." The Padre touches my elbow. "Have you come across Mr Dixson's last letter by any chance?"

"No, no I haven't. His room's been emptied. I assumed Eseley had dealt with the details. Or the clerks?"

“The clerks left this morning, Mr Eseley informed me. Tidied their desks, packed up their things, quit the camp without a word. Seven on the dot. Nobody wanted to stop them from going.”

“Are you sure he had one, a last letter?”

“Well, I would expect he would, to send to his wife. From what I gathered their relationship was complicated, strained, but I would have thought—” He leaves the thought unfinished, perhaps unable to draw a conclusion, perhaps realising as he was talking that his conclusion contradicted his earlier thought. I want to tell the Padre about Dixson as I knew him, or rather those parts of Dixson he had let me see, or rather those few parts of Dixson I was most convinced were knowable. I want to say, His life was a melody of sound then silence then upsurging sound, talking then silence, shifting against the world then silence, action then stillness, inside then outside, his life, all lives, just this flickering. I want to tell the Padre, This is now the long opus of his quiet before the final, final and endless, rising note. But this conclusion, too, feels unanchored to any previously held conviction. All these words slipping off a world with no texture.

Instead, I say, “I’ll see about that letter.”

The girl brought the teas and scones to us on a round tray. She was tall, probably in her late twenties, probably almost twice my age, the short curls of her black hair had a bounce like a spray of sparks. A skirt to just above the knee, a small apron tied around her waist. A light blouse that caught the breeze, that billowed at the arms and chest. And as she leaned over the table to place the teapot in front of my father, I watched her breasts hanging in the hollow of her loose shirt, shifting in a bra a size too large, skin almost the colour of fired clay, how soft they looked. And then she stood up and smiled and thanked us and my father thanked her and no one had noticed but me. For those three the moment had been about service, about politeness, manners, and a sort of exchange, but for me, I had taken something, I had seen something and desired it and would have taken it if I had been able, and nobody knew but me. And this was my moment, I deserved it, I had promoted it from the banal, the meaningless, the non-moment, I had taken it and sanctified it. And nobody knew but me. And it is a lost moment to everybody there, it is unremembered, by everyone but me.

In the communications tent, Amanda sits on a bench beside a radio base station, headset over her ears. She is adjusting dials and switches on the equipment, reading

numbers off blue and green displays, and then writing numbers and codewords into a journal on the desk beside her. The other signallers, similarly cut off from the space by bulky headphones, look up at me as I enter, but immediately go back to their tasks. Over some piece of equipment in the tent come the sounds of a radio drama from home, the closing of a car door, footsteps in gravel, birdsong and country voices, an oboe blowing in a sweeping idyll. Their ears covered, insulated, none of the others seems to hear it.

I knock on the desk beside her journal and she jumps.

“Can I have a moment?”

She holds up a finger and writes four more short sets of numbers. Then she pulls down her headset, lifts one leg, twists, and settles down astride the bench. “Can I help you, Sir?”

“I was looking for Lieutenant Eseley.”

She looks at the other signallers, sees that they’re not paying attention. “You should know that Eseley is now substantive lieutenant, acting captain, local major.”

I nod. “Best man for the job.”

“Yeah. And Lieutenant Shaw is to be second in command.”

My nodding continues. “I see.”

“Sorry.”

“For yesterday?”

She gives a little grunt. “No.”

“Where is Eseley?”

She replaces her headset. “Burn pit.”

Larks, wind in the leaves, then heavy traffic.

A memory is a momentary wound, it gashes present flesh, right down to white bone past, for a view of what holds us up, and then in gushes blood and its million tiny ways of mending. There was a starling on the road by the teashop, dancing in its natural all-paranoid panic, eating scattered crumbs of teacake, and I watched it as my mother buttered a scone and my father swirled the last of the tea in his cup. The faraway sound of a train arriving at the station. A cheer from the fielders as one tossed the ball high in the air, up, behind him, out of sight, no matter now, not after the catch. The sun was hot, so hot, as if called down on purpose, by prayer or poetry, overspreading Essex, each duck pond, hump-backed bridge, village green, colour-washed cottage. That Essex sun, charging millions, like warm

dust lifted. And that girl's breasts, God, her breasts. And I don't remember for what reason we were headed to Clacton, that summer, in late June or in early July. And I remember it was then, at Bentley, that summer, one summer, that I first considered the screeching unexpected that swings across each day. And so all things fall into the receding deep.

The burn pit has more than doubled in size since we arrived at the Castle. Deeper and wider, now, by far, streaming ashy smoke into the sky, daily. The flames squirm for fuel, constantly alive in fidgety obsession.

"Robert."

Eseley turns. He wears a cloth around his face, over his nose and mouth, tied in a large knot at the base of his skull. He watches sergeants Tyler and Webb, similarly masked, throwing cardboard boxes of papers into the groaning fire. Tyler picks up a laptop and, laughing at the audacity, launches it several feet. It lands in a glowing pile, something sooty and unrecognisable, vast continents of ancient stratified ash, the flames drawing back for a moment, perhaps also at the audacity, before advancing again. Behind the men, an office-worth of boxes, storage crates, folders, laptops, tapes, FILING 3A one box says, FILING 3B another, RECEIPTS on several, and BULLWOOD on a great many more.

"Good morning, Mary."

"What are those records?"

"Oh, Home Guard recruitment records. Prisoner detention records. Interrogations. Court proceedings. You name it, there's a form for it. All these things we don't need any longer. We're moving on," he says with a smile. "You can't be sentimental about these kinds of things." Eseley gestures at the two boxes closest to him. Somebody has written DIXSON on them in thick black pen. FOR BURNING, it says beneath it, smaller. Over the lip of one are folded a couple of dress shirts.

"You're burning Dixson's things?"

"It's what he wanted. Had requested it specifically."

"Everything?"

"There's wasn't a great deal, to be honest. A couple of books, novels, magazines, a few photographs. And his clothes, of course, but even of his clothes there wasn't much to mention. He wasn't a man of things, you know. No, wasn't much—oh, tell a lie." Eseley crouches beside one of the cardboard boxes and pulls out a pair of high-shined oxblood brogues, forefinger and middle finger hooking the heels, holds them up for me to see.

“What size do you take?”

“Jesus Christ, man.”

He doesn't take his eyes from me, tosses the shoes into the fire. “You've got to let it all go. You can't hold on to everything.”

“Did you find his last letter?” I ask.

“No, the Padre asked me to find it. I looked. Wasn't there.”

You are the dirt and the earth, little to little, much to much, Lord, You are between the smallest particles of dust, and You are the particles of dust that move by the speaking of Your name, I breathe life in and breathe life out and every breath is from You.

“Mary, I want you to take some men up to Government House. Headquarters received a call this morning from the orderlies there. After the Governor left they've been guarding an empty building. Protecting the valuables and whatnot. No doubt turning a blind eye to their friends sneaking off with furniture and the like. The odd kickback. That's how it goes. I want you to go up there and see what's left. If you find documents, dig a pit.”

“What sort of documents?”

“Anything really, is the impression I got from higher headquarters. Ledgers, notebooks, minutes, filing cabinets of forms, anything. Dispose of everything you find.”

“All right. Do you have orders?”

“Written orders? I haven't.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means I don't have time for that shit, Mary. Get your men together and get to fucking work.”

4.

It was the second funeral today. By the time the Padre had begun the Lord's Prayer, it was evening. By the time the Padre had finished the Lord's Prayer, I was coming up. I stared for a while at the purple mantle around the Padre's shoulders, the gold edging, wondered whether the faint designs were pictures or patterns, what it meant, what it really meant, how the ancient kings wore purple, the royal colour, purple, didn't they? Purple, like the Pompadours. Everything else was desert camo, browns and yellows, fawns, creams almost, sand, all the men, Martin and Longman, Eseley, Shaw, Stanton, Polley, Drove, Swain, all of them sand, disguised, hiding, even the Padre, under his royal mantle. For a moment, I could brush this all away, all this sand, my hand rising, escaping the other, reaching towards the Padre, towards the helmet and rifle beside him, but I stopped it in time and brought it back down, no one saw.

—This morning, we're very pleased to be able to welcome to the programme three incredibly brave women who've come to share their stories with us. They're three ladies who've been brought together by tragedy and have found a way to work through their grief with companionship and each other's support. What brought them together was the loss of their husbands who were all soldiers who recently lost their lives in combat, isn't that right? Yes, so I'd like to introduce Sandra White, Angela Terrence and Becky Dixson. Ladies, let me first say, a very warm welcome to Home Today, thank you very much for being here.

All my mouth was smoke, all vapour and grit. Like someone had set a fire inside me, down my throat, and my mouth, a chimney, issued forth fumes. Like someone was burning a bull down there, somewhere inside my respiratory system, lungs or somewhere, in amongst the ravioli—alveoli, whatever—burning a bull, a sacrifice, an offering. The Greeks did that, didn't they? The Greeks or Romans. I could feel the smoke filling my chest, could picture Biology lessons at school, the diagram of organs inside the human body, neat like a map, a black rising cloud of smoke: lungs, trachea, mouth, nostrils, escaping like a Victorian skyline, Blake's hell.

For a while I didn't listen to the Padre, they were just words and there wasn't any swearing, which was strange, because everything needed swearing, surely, especially this, especially death or whatever this was. Bring the fucking light of Christ into a shit world. I could feel my mouth start to make the shapes of the sounds, top teeth perching on bottom

lip, straining for the 'f', and tried to watch the effect of the Padre's words on Martin's face. There was really nothing about it, his face, that I liked, too round in some places, too square in others, far too uneven and not at all perfect and definitely not a face I could kiss in a right frame of mind. Except his lips, his full lips. And that fucking forever-smug almost-smile. Even now. Like he knew something others didn't, and it was this secret knowing, no matter the gravity of the knowledge, it was the knowing that amused him. I wanted to smack him.

"Fuck you, Mary," I said.

Martin turned to me, his expression collapsed like demolition, falling about his too-fucking-thin jaw like stubble.

The rest of the company shifted to face me. The Padre stopped in the middle of his sentence, choking on a word, what was it, joy? The mantle was now a purple hand wrapped around his neck, throttling, his face going red. Yes, joy.

—Now, Becky. I've been watching you and seeing the effect listening to the stories of Sandra and Angela has had on you- it's all very raw still, isn't it? Oh, now I think we're all crying. Oh! Oh, no, please. Becky, do you think you could tell us your story? Can we- yes, there's a tissue- there's always plenty of tissues on this programme! There. Can you tell us about your husband- can you tell us about Paul?

The smoke from within was roaring up my throat and pluming from my mouth, my nose, fogging my eyes, hot and black and thick. Barely able to see Martin's face now, I blindly forced a finger towards him, touching his shirt. I said again, "Fuck you. Fuck you, Martin. Why are you here? What do you know, what do you fucking know about him? You fucker, what do you know about him that I don't?"

He must have grabbed my arm for I was stumbling away in the sand, pulled by a strong, insistent hand. After a while of my boots scuffing in the dirt, of his heavy breathing, we stopped and I hung from his grip, ignoring the pain in my arm. He didn't release me, perhaps gripped tighter, bruising, and I let him.

"Amanda," came the voice. It sounded tired and less English than ever, like a man just woken up, and not in his own home. "What the fuck do you think you're doing?"

"Oh go fuck yourself."

He pushed me and I tripped away, bumping against the ribbed side of a shipping container. My shoulder went against it noisily and I could feel the sound humming away to nothing in the metal. Martin came up quickly, his face near mine. "In front of the men? In

front of the NCOs, in front of fucking Eseley? What's your fucking problem?"

—Paul and I, we've been separated for a long time now. He's been in the army years now and it's difficult. And we had arguments and you know, sometimes it's best to just say, you know, let's just stop it here because it's not, it hasn't been working and it's not going to get any better. Especially when you have a child. But we still loved each other, I think. He still loved us, he still loved Julia, that's our daughter. Hmm? No, no we didn't get a divorce, I don't know why. Him being away seemed like a divorce, really. And that was enough, really. He hadn't sent a letter since he got deployed. The only one was his last one, the one he wrote in case he died. We got that one.

I turned away from him, closed my eyes, could sleep here, yes, upright on this metal bed. His face was hot and close. His syrupy breath, going in my ear, breath like his fingers in my nose and my mouth, his breath of coffee and something from a Christmas long ago that my memory failed to touch. Like biting the inside of your cheek and the pain, feeling the teeth go in. Like soft mud and the turf, the spade goes in, the fingers go in, in between the earthworms and stuff.

He spat when he said, spat on my cheek when he said, "Was there something between you?"

"I don't know."

Then he was clenching his teeth, I could hear it, the sound in his jaw. He sighed. "Well. All right."

"I mean—" And I really wanted to tell him everything I thought and felt, eyes closed like that, how easy, here, now, when none of this was really happening, to confess everything. "I mean—" I began again. He sighed again; his sighs, so drawn-out, breathing into my ear, seemed to be repaying some unending debt to the air. You had called me beautiful. I had held you inside. You had called me beautiful. And I'd believed you. You, you asshole, I would've changed my name for you, surname, Christian name, either or both for you. Man, woman, my tits aren't so precious I wouldn't have done away with them. You had called me beautiful. "I am ugly. I am ugly and awful and never made a wonderful thing. He must have been ugly, too, but I can't remember his face. He must have been ugly to stand me, must have been just as awful as me, me having never made anything good. I can make him love me, though I know he didn't, I can make him love me, in my mind, in the memories I have of him and how he spoke to me. I can make it up, and make it all so beautiful and

light. Give him his lines and directions, tell him where to stand, tell him how to move, it can be so sweet sometimes I just want to die. And it's all such bullshit, cos I can't write worth a fuck."

—We found out he'd died two weeks ago. The army weren't very supportive, you know, not giving us much information, really. They weren't even able to give us Paul's things, his personal belongings. You know, I had to badger them, again and again, just to get some help with the paperwork, or the pension, you know, everything was such a struggle. It's kinda like, not that they were ashamed or anything, you know, about how he died, but just that they didn't really care.

I opened my eyes, looked to the side, at him. His face flickered, like an animation badly drawn. His mouth, like jittery lines scribbled during a train journey. All the colours of his skin, all the shifting skin as he thinks, the moles where it's soft, those edges where it's hard above the bone, if I could touch that face, put my fingertips on his skin and press and feel how his nose moves, how soft his eyebrows are. His face, as it moved, as it said, "I— your poems, I really—"

"No." Turning my head, our noses touched for a moment, our lips brushed together for a moment, before the back of my skull slid off the rib of the container and settled into the slot beside it, parting us. "I don't care. We have to leave that shit behind, son. All that writing, poems and novels and shit. It doesn't work here. They're not, they don't fit, I tried, you've tried, they're like a whole other language, which no one else speaks and we've forgotten, like babies growing up and learning to talk, really talk, and everything before was gibberish. What is art here? What is art, here? Amongst all this. Just—it isn't, it can't be—it, can't, be. There is no art here and it's fucking sick to try."

"Amanda—"

I shot out my hand and snatched his arm, just above the elbow. "If you write a poem about him," I said, digging my fingertips into him, "make it bad."

He pulled his arm away. "Fuck you, you aren't the first," he said.

"What?"

"The first person. With Dixson."

"Do you think I care?"

"I don't know if you care. I just wanted you to know."

—It was a little out of character, you know, because it was a lot of feelings, but I

think that, because it's a letter in case he dies, you know, he put a lot of thought into it, to make it special, I mean you would, wouldn't you? I have it here, here, I carry it around with me. A bit like a talisman, I suppose, yeah, I like to think of it as a memorial, really. It makes it easier, sometimes, to deal with all the thoughts if I have it to hand, I don't know, maybe to read a little bit of it, or just touch it sometimes. It's harder for Julia because she doesn't have that, but I try my best to be a sort of memorial, too, for her, really, to be a bit of a living memorial, to help her when she thinks about her daddy. Yeah, I just try to tell her about how good a man he was, how good a soldier he was, taking care of all the lads in his company, and I try to tell her about how he was with her, you know, just little memories I have of them together but she doesn't, because she was too small then.

"I'll show you." We started walking towards the bungalows and he told me about the man Kipchumba. How one time he saw them together, Kipchumba crying into Dixson's shoulder. "I don't know what it was about." How Dixson had put his arm around the man and held him, pushed his face into his, cheek against his cheek. "And kissed his cheek, once. Just a kiss. Paternal—" He seemed uncomfortable saying it, added, "Almost."

The service had ended and the sun was fading and we folded into the groups of soldiers falling out from the yard. They looked, men from all the platoons, looked at me, the bonkers bitch from 2 platoon. They were all talking as they passed, and laughing. Martin didn't pause, kept walking, I followed him, even though his hand wasn't on my arm, even though he probably wouldn't have minded if I dropped away and left. I waited until we'd crossed the yard, past the command and communications tents, had found a quiet, small space in front of the officers' bungalow, waited to say, "Emma and me used to smoke spliffs there, behind the bungalows, and when we were on sentry duty together, and up in the observation post together."

Martin stopped and I stopped, close behind. He didn't turn to face me. He was holding his arm, with the other hand, just above the elbow, where I had grabbed him. His fingers kneaded. "So what? Doesn't everybody in the company?"

"I'm just saying that Emma and me were close. The only two girls in the company. We would hug, if one of us was feeling low, give each other a shoulder to cry on. It's generally what women do."

"I fail to see your point."

"I'm just saying that when two men are close, it doesn't mean they're in love."

“Wait, wait,” he said, and he was squeezing his arm tightly, fingertips in. “You’re trying to tell me that the only real relationship Dixson had was with you.”

“No, I’m trying to tell you that you don’t know what you’re talking about. You’re incapable of understanding what you see.”

“It’s my job to calculate on the seen and the unforeseen.”

“Oh please, you’re like a, you’re like a slug, you’re a slug just squirming around in the dark.” And, yes, yes, I would go to Nan’s when Mum and Dad were fighting, after dinner, and, yes, I would take my homework with me in a plastic bag. And Nan’s kitchen, in the dark, with that smell it had, when the sun had gone down, and Nan would make me a hot chocolate on the hob, the old pots and pans she had, the pantry with all those boxes and spices. And, yes, Nan brought it to me in a big mug while I drew felt-tip diagrams of glaciers and aretes. And the yellowbrown slugs that smeared themselves across the kitchen lino, over the step, onto the short pile of Nan’s living room carpet, lost. And, panicked by the light into which they’d crept, would turn upon themselves, rubbing all along the slick length of themselves, and retreat, back into the dark kitchen, along their own shining trails. “About feelings? You haven’t the foggiest.”

—Now, Becky, Paul—and we’re seeing a picture of Paul now, there he is, in his uniform—Paul was a captain in the Essex Regiment, oh, and this is Paul with, is it Julia, your daughter, yes, that’s a lovely photo, yes, he was in the Essex Regiment, the Pompadours, wasn’t he, yes, 1st Battalion, C Company, with Martin Welles, the poet. And he actually wrote a poem about your husband, isn’t that right? For those who don’t know, it’s called ‘Dead, Dead’ and I think it’s really, really it’s a startling poem about losing a comrade, and it ends, he describes your husband, and it ends with “the colour of death is all colours / seen differently from yesterday”. Have you read that poem? How does it make you feel?

Martin made sure Eseley and Shaw weren’t in the bungalow, then returned to me at the door. “Here,” he said, “come on in.” I followed him up the steps. He seemed cautious here, with me, but not nervous, like a naughty schoolboy, an hour before home time, breaking a teacher’s overtired appeal to behave, or a toddler reaching out a mocking finger when warned not to touch, inching towards to the danger just to see how close he could get before the burn, before the parent brought down the punishment. He went to the furthest door. “This is his room.”

“I know.”

Pushing the flimsy wooden door, impatiently giving it his shoulder as it failed to open to the small amount of force he had apportioned it, he led me in. The wardrobe now was empty, its doors wide, three plastic coat hangers hanging on the pole. The chest of drawers was empty, the top drawer on the floor beneath the window, the bottom drawer pulled out almost all the way. The bed had been stripped to a stained bottom sheet on the mattress, a pillow had been left in the centre. Nothing in the room but these disordered pieces of furniture and us.

“Lieutenant Eseley must have collected everything,” I said, for the sake of saying something.

Martin went to the middle of the room and did a small circle, shifting his feet slowly, perhaps to find clues despite the lack of mystery. He then sat on the mattress, picked up the pillow and set it in his lap. I sat down at the other end of the bed, stared at the bare wall across from me, tried to remember what had hung there, from that nail in the plaster.

“It wasn’t, it wasn’t just Dixson and Kipchumba.”

I looked at him.

I laughed at him. He was such a boy. The boy who used the long, convoluted sentences in workshop and was left red-faced when criticised. The boy who nodded, small quick nods like a seizure, when the one girl said that she could tell the story had been written by a guy. The boy mortally wounded by every flaw found and every suggestion made. Too wordy, too whiny. Such a little boy. “Really? You and him? Oh, Mary.”

“Well, we didn’t—you know, we didn’t fuck or anything.”

“Proud of that are you, son?”

He frowned. “What?”

“That you didn’t fuck. That you weren’t really into him, that he wasn’t really inside you.”

“I—”

“Because that’s who you are, Mary, that’s you in a fucking nutshell. Always the style, rarely the substance. You love the ambiguity, you love being the ambiguity, the not-entirely-this-or-that. Oh God, you know, I hate your poetry. I hate it. Your endless similes. Your unnecessary metaphors. That imagery. How you force a multitude of meaning. It’s beautiful, it really is, oh God, they probably cry at home, but oh God, the shit you write. There is one meaning. One fucking meaning. Your pointless poetry, who fucking reads that shit? I mean,

honestly. Widows and fucking schoolboys. What you and he had? I don't care. It may have been beautiful, or it may have just been his cock up your arse like every other relationship ever, I don't care. It doesn't matter. You get me? You're trying to unload this on me, but I don't care, just write it in your fucking notebook."

—It makes me feel, I'm sorry, but it makes me feel angry, I—hmm, at whom? Oh, angry at the army and at, you know, at Martin Welles, because I mean, these people didn't really know Paul. They may have known him when he gave orders and you know, he could write a poem about him, but it's just a poem, you know, they didn't know the man who wrote that letter to his wife and daughter. They didn't know the real Paul, the Paul that couldn't find a way to deal with what he was seeing and doing out there, and kept us away from him so we wouldn't be hurt by the things that had hurt him. You know, we keep talking about sacrifices, but I really do think it was that sort of sacrifice.

I shifted myself towards him, put my hand on his chest. Beneath his shirt, I could feel the cross.

"That shell went into his body and stopped him. Everything he felt for me- I don't know how much, maybe nothing, but everything he felt for me, everything he felt for anyone, just went out of him and into nothing. It's that simple, that shell just said 'no' and that was that. I'm sorry that I find it hard to accept that I was at two funerals today, for my friend and my— friend. I'm sorry that I find it hard to accept, in a world of options, you know, a world of choices, possibilities, an incredibly complex world, you know, of infinite grades between light and dark, infinite decimal places, I'm sorry that I'm finding it hard for something to just not be. Those feelings, they're not in some other state, they're not in heaven, fuck's sake, he never even wrote them down. They just are not."

"Even believing what I do, don't you think it fucking hurts me too?"

"Yeah, yeah go ahead, write him back to life, rhyme him back into existence."

"Christ, I didn't fucking mean to rhyme."

"No, no, I'm serious, son, you should write a poem about him. If you can. Make it vague, maybe he'll still be alive. Make it ambiguous, you know, dead, dead, dead, dead, and then in the last stanza he can leap out of the grave with a pretty couplet. That's fucking poetry."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Where does your art come from, Martin? From, fuck, from the world around you,

you dig your hands into the soil and rip up roots and bulbs and shit, and it's your own fucking guile, your fucking cunning that finds the buried treasure? From, from, the people around you, when they rub against you, like fucking static, or, fucking, like a fucking disease they breathe onto you, but they're the chosen people, you've picked them, you've picked your crowd, you've fucked without protection, because you know, you want it, you found it? Or is it from your cock, your balls, your fucking masculinity? It's something that's fucking in you, like hormones, like the fucking amino acids that you don't even see, you don't even, you can't even spell the fucking word? You, God, you don't fucking know, do you mate?"

"And you?" he said. "How the fuck is it with you?"

"That's the fucking thing, mate, that's the fucking best thing, because I don't give two shits where it comes from, because I don't pretend it's anything but what it is. My two friends are dead, what else is there? But you. You know, if it's not from you, when this war is over, what will you have left to write about?"

And I left him alone, there in that empty room, there on Dixson's bed.

—That's why we're working together, Sandra, Angela and me, and lots of other military wives, too, we're working together to try to change how the military treat the lads out there. You know, so when there's someone else like Paul, who didn't know how to deal with his dark feelings, that it isn't just poets and things who make money off their sadness and their deaths, you know, we have to make sure that there's someone there for them, who really understands what they're going through, to help them through it.

5.

—Dear

“Why's the Captain coming with us?” Harris asks as we walk to the lead Land Rover.

“Don't know.”

Harris carries little with her, but, standing in front of me, pulling on her webbing, her helmet, adjusting her headset and throat mic, rifle slung on her shoulder, she has the look of the overburdened, searching for a place to drop her load. She sees me looking at her. “I must've not washed all the coffee off my hands when I made some this morning. You know, in the cafetiere. Must have had grounds under my nails or maybe from using my fingers to wipe away the residue from yesterday's. I was eating breakfast and everything I ate tasted a little bit like coffee. Toast. Omelette. Even the scone, even with jam.”

—Dearest

I nod. “Must've made it all pretty boring. The flattening of flavour like that.”

“No no, not really, everything now tastes of one thing and the other at the same time. It's strange. Like a little secret. You know, something extra just for me. Like, the special omelette. The special scone and jam.”

“Yeah.” My throat mic is strangle tight. “But surely it's not a pleasant taste. Coffee and jam. Was it strawberry?”

“I couldn't tell. Were they pleasant, the tastes? I don't know. Mostly, I'd have to say no. But some were.”

“Oh yeah? Like which?”

“It's hard to say.” Harris looks around my shoulder. “Here comes the Boss.”

I turn and see Dixon approaching from the command tent, folding a map.

“Briefed them?” he asks me. “Estimates? Order?”

“All done, sir.”

“Good.” He looks at Harris, looks at me, slaps my upper arm with the map. “All right, let's go.”

—Considering and composing this letter has been for me rather like the recounting of a dream; I am confronted by the realisation that there really is no adequate register of expression with which to convey to you a coherent message, when the details of which are rapidly passing from the expository part of my mind into the dark inarticulate base. The

passage's tempo is increased by each abstracting minute, so I will write quickly- forgive any mistakes, forgive my handwriting, please. This is the deep breath.

Dixson rides in the front, beside Harris. I swing up into the back, sit opposite Polley.
"All right, sir?"

I nod. The Land Rovers start up and we leave the Castle.

"Why's the Boss riding with us?"

"I didn't think to ask him."

Beyond the concrete town, hours and hours of vacant waste, this hinterland. I rouse the men to check their arcs, to stand up with their guns, we're not expecting anything but it would certainly be a piss-poor showing to cock it up days before the end. From time to time, somebody calls over the radio, sighting a suspicious shape in the road or gunmen on the ridges, and Harris puts her foot down and the engine roars and we speed on through. Nobody discharges a weapon.

Polley steps down from the gun and shakes a cigarette packet at me. "Sir?" I wave it away. He sits down on the bench, smokes one himself, while he attempts to keep his rifle balanced, on its stock, on the floor between his feet, occasionally straightening it with only the most delicate of touches.

Longman comes over the radio, I finally managed that shit this morning, lads.

A crackling cheer from the men, they love their sergeant. Polley grins, shaking his head, ribbon of smoke tying knots in the air before him. Somebody says something I don't catch.

Nah, nah, haven't had a shit since this thing started. Getting on for a year now, isn't it? Anyway, two of them, big and black, like snakes they were.

I touch my throat mic. "Congratulations, sergeant."

Thank you, sir.

—If it appears that, in its rush to you, it rather rattles forward like a wind through a screen, please forgive its noise.

We drive down, from the table-land into a wide depression, an alluvial valley where, far from the road, compounds and farms rise from the lowland, their boundary walls compacted from the river clays, dried in the sun. The vegetation is sparse and stunted, greygreen bushes here and there, mostly in the heat-hazed distance which gives them movement like animals, the result of excessive drought, perhaps, or otherwise a recent,

hundred-year deluge. At the edges of the expanse, steep mountain brinks uphold the all-blue sky. Homesteaders with ancient rifles guard the gates of their properties, their children all standing up along the walls like coconuts or crockery to watch our vehicles pass. Congregations of sheep, goats, the odd malnourished horse, all wearing the sandy coat of the valley.

“Very near, Mary,” Dixson calls from the front seat, and as soon as he says it I feel the texture of the road change, from gravelly dissonance to a new smooth quiet. I call for the platoon to stay alert. Polley stands up.

—There is often a moment as one falls asleep, as I’m sure you’re aware, in which the mind, in its exhaustion, conflates imagination and reality in thoughts which are perhaps questions, or assumptions, or fears, and for the slightest sliver of time they make sense. If the mind is still alert enough not to fall into deeper sleep, one can find the string of waking reason again and those thoughts which once made sense are immediately rendered ludicrous. This is the general feeling in my heart: that I have been existing in that ludicrous exhaustion and I, in my blindness, have accepted assumptions that would not fool a wakeful, reasoning mind.

The white concrete flyover coils above Dixson, raised up on great spars like the columns in cathedrals, so wide around that two men couldn't circumscribe it in the span of their arms. He looks up and stares at the underside of the roadway and stands there with an expression that says standing there is, to him, the inevitable arrival after an implausible journey. That is the look he gives the underside of the white motorway, the look of an inconceivably small thing below the twisting tonnes of concrete, a small thing as he turns the ring that tightly circumscribes his finger and twists the flesh around it.

“Mary,” he says, with his eyes still on the lofted motorway and the unmarked blue sky beyond it. His voice is muffled as if through layers of tissue, as a baby must hear, as voices sound with fingers in ears. “What a fucking business.”

“Yeah.”

“What?”

“I said yes.”

“Yes, what a fucking business.”

—As you are aware, I am no longer. Though I have become resigned to the fact that we could never be together as we were before, I could not bear to let certain facts die with

me. To that end, there are a few things I would have you know.

We are caught in the space between the confluence of elevated roads. A few have been completed and surfaced, in some industrial past era, and these arch and curve in smoothly drawn lines like the graphed expressions of mathematical functions. Others end abruptly in air, rebar and steel mesh exposed as the torn edge of fabric. At these ragged ends, catenaries of chain hang from half-collapsed scaffolding, uneasily in the wind, chiming steel on steel. Below this and around us, the red soil is hard packed and flattened and staked out with orange flags, perhaps the potential site of yet another road running through the knot. We are foreign bodies inside a twining of organs, forgotten particles in the gaps between languorous flexures.

Harris stands beside me, hands on hips. She clucks her tongue. "M11 interchange, sir," she says. "I used to drive it all the time. Proper nightmare. But then, you know, there were cars, and tunes on the radio, and me needing to get somewhere, and hanging my fag out the window, with a pack of cheese and onion open on the passenger seat."

The rest of the platoon relaxes in the shadow of a steeply pitched on-ramp. The sun gives them a generous cool semi-circle but marks the space strictly, sharp as the contours on a map or the delineation between shore and sea. The sun says If I cannot be there, then let there be nothing but shadow and let the shadow be absolute. They are hidden there, in their sand colours against the sand, there in the absolute shadow, with their red arms and peeling necks, their blue tattoos of wire and skulls and flowers with names. They are singing and chatting and falling asleep, and perhaps the sun cannot see them through their camouflage.

Away from the platoon, closer to us, Amanda and Longman solemnly pace a stretch of dirt in the sunlight, Longman sweeping a metal detector in the space before them, a beeping thurible for a consecration. He listens to his headset as if for the far-off words of God. A 'furryfur', Amanda would call him. She, his boat boy, steams in the sun like incense wafting out. She would feed the charcoal with leaves and seeds, clove and sage and sandalwood and weed.

They pause in their procession. Longman turns his head and says something to her. Her whistle reaches us across the distance and Dixon says, "Go on, Mary. See what she wants."

"Should I come too, sir?" Harris asks, but I wave the suggestion away.

Longman pulls down his headset when he sees me approaching. "Here," he says. I shrug. "That's all you're giving me? Just here? Don't you want to walk the rest of it?"

"Not fucking likely. Just start here. It's too fucking hot for this bollocks. The Boss won't mind."

"All right." The sandy soil shifts and mounds and lets out small puffs like breath as I toe it. Beneath the top layer of loose dirt, the ground seems uneager, takes the mark of my boot like slate. I look at Amanda, she has seen it too. Longman sighs. "All right, let's get some more lads over here and get to it."

Longman chooses Polley's section to take their entrenching tools and get to work. Amanda goes to sit in the shade, I see her light a cigarette, testing frequencies on the radio, one ear piece held to her head, chatting to Pakes, Swain, Stanton. I unfold my own spade and mark out a square about six feet on a side. The soil, beneath the hard layer, is yielding and easily worked. I've dug out a corner of the square by the time Longman arrives with Polley and the men.

"All right. It's not as bad as it first seems."

"Hopefully it's not too deep, right?"

"Right."

And Dixson's voice over the headset, "Mary, stop pissing around and get back up here."

I fold my entrenching tool. "Carry on, sergeant."

—It makes little sense to keep secret things that, concerning two, have no business belonging to just one person. To keep secrets is to keep a part of oneself locked up, useless but as a prisoner requiring a constant sentry. This unending watch is exhausting and burdens all other cares, slowly suffocates them or starves them, until every part of one's being is disrupted, is spoiled by the tending of the secret.

Dixson is watching the clouds. Harris is away by the Land Rover, smoking, kicking the dirt. I sit in the dirt beside Dixson, reading through my scribblings from our morning briefing. "Are we positive this is the right location?" I ask.

"It was enough for higher headquarters."

"The person we got this from, was he Home Guard? A Home Guard captain?"

"That's right, Mary. That's what I told you at the briefing." Dixson looks at me. He

looks over at Harris, keeps his eyes on her, watching her as she leans against the Land Rover. “We took turns to beat the man. I took a turn. I used a truncheon, it felt right, a good weight, not too long, so that swinging it at him was almost like using my own hand. It took a good ten minutes before he gave up the location. And then we just kept going because why stop? After that, after ten minutes, why stop? After another ten minutes, though, he was still breathing, and it occurred to me as the man continued to live, that perhaps he was incapable of dying and by beating him we were committing a kind of sacrilege upon a holy presence. And at that point, I stopped and said, 'If he isn't dead yet, he isn't supposed to die.' And one by one the others stopped too and it must have been a bit like the Crucifixion if that had happened in a basement, but we didn't drop to our knees and worship him, we just stood and stared at his swollen bloody face that didn't really look like a face any longer. We just stood and stared at him in wonder, really, at the thing we had beaten into existence, this unkillable man sitting there softly breathing. If a few more seconds of violence might have done to finish it, no one ventured to try.”

I watch his eyes.

“I'm not proud of what we did, but it was an experience.”

His eyes flick to the right. There's something about lying, about concocting a story, something about the eyes looking to the left or the right, to the side that corresponds with the brain's creative hemisphere. Was it the right?

Sir.

“What did they find?”

“What have you got, sergeant?”

Looks like uniforms. Home Army uniforms, a lot of them. Oh. And—what?—yeah, flags. Our flags. Lots of our flags.

“Anything else?” Dixson asks.

“Is that all?”

Ha, about a thousand machetes and hatchets.

“Burn it.”

“Any firearms? Munitions?”

No, sir, not that we've found.

“Have him burn it.”

“Sergeant, I'm coming down there to see it.”

Sir.

“Mary. Just let the man burn it. It’s time to be done with this place.”

“All right. Get some petrol from the vehicles and burn it.”

—I have been to places and seen things that have no earthly right to still be part of human experience. It is the exposing of floorboards after a decades-old carpet is torn up, even more, it is the removal of the floorboards and the exposure of crossbeams and the centuries-old spoil of builder and carpenter. The sudden revelation of the underpinning of humanity. Death and violence and, above all, below all, the inhuman indifference to suffering. This is a secret I am now unable to keep, for I have witnessed and been party to each of these and, further, more damning, I have felt, until recently, perfectly at ease.

Longman is alone by the hole, the trench now. They’d extended in one direction, found all of the cache within an area about five by eight, two feet down. The red spoil was heaped to one side, carried the bootprints of many feet, four petrol cans shoved firmly into the top, like rotten teeth along an angry, abscessed gum. An unrelenting orange fire plays everywhere in easy waves, bold in this generous world of flammables, and the smoke rises straight in the still air, black, thick as a film, all oils and tars.

“Sir!” He stands slightly behind me, directs me with a pointing arm against my shoulder. “Look there, where the uniforms have burned away.”

Around the blackened remains of polyester, leather, plastic, I can see the rim of a fifty-gallon drum, and out of it, out of the cinders, like stems arranged in a vase, several black pipes, perforations in each topmost section. One of the pipes points towards me and I can see right down into it, right down its centre.

“What am I looking at?”

“Cannon barrels, twenty millimetre.”

And I’m staring straight down into it.

“Get the fire ex—”

And I’m staring straight down into it, and how is it possible, on this day, to be looking down into the barrel of a cannon, and just standing there and staring, right now, watching as the barrel skirts itself with steam-white gas that flurries out and becomes nothing. Watching the flames retreat in sudden shock, coil, uncoil, then, braver, reignite. Watching the cannon upend, towards the sky, then clatter back with the others in the barrel, steel on steel, they come to rest. I feel the shell passing by, a bully in the air, and I drop, in reactive

fright, after it has passed, directly to my knees.

Longman is standing over me, grabbing at my shoulders, I can see his lips moving, his eyes wide. There is no sound but I can tell he remembers, for a second, perhaps even three or four, he is human after all, he has children after all, who must occasionally fall from height and risk their necks, perhaps for as many as four seconds but fading quickly away, he has been transported, back to that farmyard, where he killed those men who stood above me. He wipes my cheek, viciously, perhaps mistaking sand for blood, and eventually his voice arrives, as if all the way from home, and I have never heard it call me back there so passionately, there is something still in it, Longman's voice, his voice that has been so eroded by his years of service, with boys from the Estuary, something that was until now hiding between the Crouch and the Chelmer, those crow-black waters, as he shouts, "Sir, sir! Are you hurt?"

"No."

"Jesus, that shell would've taken your head off."

Turning, I see no sign of Harris or Dixson on the rise. "Shit. John, John, get Polley."

Longman yells into his headset.

I start up the incline.

—I loved you. It is difficult to nurture a love when the object of affection lives at one far-flung remove, it is difficult but it should be risked, and risked with every straining muscle, risked with a smile, and grateful, because the love is worthy. I failed in this respect and am, and will forever be, haunted by the half-reflection, the ghost of how our lives may have been. For me, our love has been like a body laid out in the front parlour, and never buried, because of some gloss or blush of hope I have guarded within me like a flame. It has guttered, it has guttered to the extent that one might not even rightly call it a flame, more properly an ember, and not even that at times but—but—but at least, but at the end, I have not let it go out. The body laid out, there preserved in its unageing perfection, for me was never forever dead.

The bones from her chest are arranged in shockingly white filigree, the disordered flesh around the wound blooming like petals opened up, red and scattered skin like the autumn. The underwire of her ruined bra, made crooked by the bullet's spin, rears up, a surprised and quarrelsome snake. It is a wrought and twisted spiral, hideous in its lack of restraint. The gratuitous freedom of wire and bone. For a short while I try to move the wire,

bend it back into shape, a deliberate shape, only for a short while, as it resists and will not go straight; only for a short while, as the effort makes her breasts move as breath had, as I had witnessed. Her wrist in my hand feels small and it is an object as I hold it, something shifted out of the world. But her arm has soft hairs, so blonde and light they cannot be seen. My thumb feels them, smooths them. But her fingertips are small and stained lightly brown. There is nothing in her, she has been emptied. But her mouth and eyes are open. She has no inside and there is no outside. She has been shared with the world. She is not alive, and there is no middle.

“Fuck!” Polley shouts upon seeing her. “Is she dead?”

His question, the possibility. For a moment, it can be true. The word feels vast and almost too big to get out of my mouth. “Yes,” I say and when it comes it exits like the passing of an era, full, never having meant anything more than it does now and never able to mean more.

The word pushes Polley away in an instant, and he runs over to Dixson. A moment. A last moment to see her in some way a person. The simile, the metaphor. How like a. Still as a. Cast. Crust. A general sense of emptiness. And then Polley’s voice with the panic of a boy caught in a dark room, the bulb burst, the electricity failed, “Lieutenant!”

—Each moment in the day when I find I am not distracted by this or that small task, or this or that matter of life and death, I remember the first moment we saw each other and also, with a great deal of regret, the last moment we saw each other. I remember the last time I held you, and the last time I held our daughter.

Standing up is something new. Turning my back on Harris and walking away, almost a blasphemy, this dismissal, that she is no longer important. A little way beyond, Dixson is curling in the dirt, curling like a dead worm, still, his movement, this worm, determined from above, by whatever sense birds have, sighted, stabbed, pulled out of the ground, wounded, not eaten. Just a waste. The slush around his body, painted out in all directions by the unthinking movement of his limbs in pain, sucks at the treads of my boots. His closed eyes, vein in his forehead prominent like a bone, his clasped hands pushed so hard into the bottom of his ribs, as a child wishes with all its might.

“Get his shirt open! Get some pressure on!”

I unclip Dixson’s webbing, let it fall around him. His hands fight me as I pull them away from his abdomen. And then his blood is a leaping fish and I try to catch and kill it. Oh

fuck oh fuck. My fingers grip elusive wetness and try to wring a neck that isn't there, a strangling of fluid and air. Pressure, pressure, somebody is screaming in my ear, put some fucking pressure on it! As I dam the wound, the blood pushes back against my palm, a warm and muculent writhing like a frog, pissing to be free. You have to stop it, fuck, he'll be dead in half a fucking minute! And still it comes, the blood, I can barely see my fingers, my own skin drowning under the blood, the pumping blood, like the oozing of saturated earth, this blood, this blood has given me a butcher's hands. This blood, his blood, it is so hot.

"I can feel it going," Dixon says. "I can."

Shadows appear around me, the air grows darker, as more men approach. I hear their breathing. Somebody hands me a dressing but the blood and the desperate shouting gloss my fingers and my crude grip fails. Get out the fucking way! Somebody snatches the dressing from me, shoves me aside so that I fall heavily on my elbow, my face, in the dust, close to Dixon's face, in the dust. His face is peaceful, no sweat, no blood. His face is very clean. A tension in his muscles, but no sweat, no blood, a tension like the ache of too much smiling. He blinks, it is a sudden and smooth motion, and seems to come from without him, from beyond him, as if somebody is manipulating his eyelids, his clean eyelids, with their fingertips. Close and open, not yet not yet. He turns his head and looks at me as somebody works to stop the bleeding.

"Draw out this sacred time," Dixon tells me.

"What?"

"Can you? Stretch it out?"

I want to smash his perfect nose. "Wh—I don't know wh—what?"

Polley swears and whips the sodden dressing away from the wound, streaking blood like pollen or comet-tail across the space between us, onto my face, warm as spit, it makes me flinch, none onto Dixon's, his perfect face clean. His perfect clean eyelids, they blink again, under somebody's fingers. Franks, Franks, order the medevac. Another square of gauze, Polley slams it down, wetly, hammering at a Test Your Strength striker. He is busy with tape, like a gift-wrapper. He looks at me, shakes his head. What the great fuck are you doing? Shakes it for me, not Dixon. What the fuck, Mary?

—Don't cry for me. I am prepared.

"This doesn't feel like dying." Dixon laughs, and it is the laughter of sleeping, and it is the dream of something humorous forgotten immediately upon waking. "I don't think I'm

dying.”

Make yourfuckingself useful. Somebody hands me the field medical card. “I don't have a pen.” Somebody hands me a pen, a transparent Biro from an office somewhere, the sun shines down its prised length and lays pale rainbows on the white card.

“Boss, I'm giving you atropine.”

“Atropine,” he calls her name. His eyes grow large and black and empty like fingerholes inviting exploration. “Atropine,” he calls again, each syllable funnelled by his lips to a sigh, forced to stoop. His lips, dry and cracked and peaked with white, continue to work after the word has left. “Stop writing that.” He is looking at me, squinting as if I'm bright. “Forget the details, the wounds. They don't matter. Write these down, these words are important.”

The medical card is small, the ballpoint blunt, but I can make my handwriting fit, constant ink loops, almost without white space.

“I am holding the moment,” I write as he talks. “It's my words, I'm holding the moment in my words. My soul will not let death in, even as it comes raging at the doors. There is no room in here for it. Sealed up, ears, arse, tear ducts, sealed like a bomb shelter.”

He sobs, once, no tears.

“Everything touches everything.”

I write it down.

“There's a pinprick of Anglo-Saxon gold. I'm trying to touch it, oh God, I'm trying to touch it with my hands. Specks between my fingers. They're blowing, all away, they're running like children, like little children, running in the playground. Oh, my girl, my little girl. She would run to a pair of legs, a pair of legs in jeans like mine, and grab them, and then cry when she realised those legs weren't mine. Oh my little girl. Whose legs will she cling to now? Who will hold her when she cries? Who will be her father?”

—Ever yours

Medevac is twenty minutes out.

“Was it ever this hot in Essex? All of Essex is a November evening settling on the afternoon with the whole weight of the present, smothering it at four o'clock with red rear lights and diesel fumes and the spray of leafy puddles lifted by the passing of lorry tyres. Oh God, it's all a cave, all my life is a cave, it's a cold cave. I don't know how to die.”

He's not going to last. He's got—Jesus, only seconds.

“Get back, all of you. All the people we’ve killed and now all of you lot around me like this. How can you care more about this? All the things that you’ve seen. And you, here, for this?”

Nothing?

Nothing. We’re done.

“I’m done.”

Jesus, are we stopping? You’re having a laugh, right, are we fucking stopping?

Polley pulls away. Somebody taps me on the shoulder. Is it my turn?

—Ever your loving husband

Encapsulate the moment. I tell him, “Wrap the people you love around you. Your wife, your daughter. Remember what it was like to love them. Wrap it around you. Can you see them? Can you see your daughter? Hold her. Can you feel your daughter? Is she warm? Hold on to her. Hold her wrist in your hand, your fingers around her wrist, her skin, her warm skin. Do you feel it?”

Jesus Christ.

Are we really fucking stopping?

There’s nothing.

“Don’t quote your poetry at me, Mary, you fucker, your ugly fucking poetry with its ugly fucking words, get your fucking poetry away from me. You squirm and shake and wallow in that shit. It’s all been said before, and better, fuck off out of here. I don’t love the woman who was my wife, I love and equally hate the daughter we had. Fuck right off with your shit, it’s shit, you offend me with it.”

How do you keep talking? I want to ask him. Why won’t you just die?

“Get away from me, you f—my life is all thrown up in the air—and I am waiting below to catch it.”

And that’s it.

Dixson is now just a mess on the sand.

A clumsy pile of uniform, bare skin, caked mud, brown gauze.

Polley lets out a long breath.

Nobody talks. Nobody swears.

Everyone is just standing around. I don’t know where Amanda is. The air seems strange without his voice in it. The sounds. There are engines, the Land Rovers. The flies.

They are beginning to discover Dixon. I wave them away once, and then they swirl and multiply and come again, and I let them land.

6.

—It's funny, you're asking what it was like being around Martin Welles? I mean, because I've thought about that for a long time. Not really knowing that I'm thinking about it, you know, not—not focusing on the very nature of that question, but sort of having the vague idea circling around my mind. Yeah? Does that make sense? But—what was it like? Well, I don't—have you ever looked at your toes? Doesn't matter which foot. Like, really looked at them? Like, before a shower, or a bath—if you have a bath. Or like afterwards, when you're clipping your toe nails or whatever? Or scrubbing your hard heel—no, but, my point is—my point is when they're squeezed together, you can see how they've shaped themselves against their neighbours. Yeah, your fingers, too, I think, yeah, bending against each other, maybe from being in the womb or, or, or maybe from when you're growing. How imperfect they are, how unstraight. Or maybe it's just mine—what about yours?

At the edge of the city closest the airfield there was a church and behind the church was a pasture abounding in what would be called buttercups back in Essex but which were here referred to by another name. The planes had been taking off since dawn, leaving contrail streaks as they mounted the clear sky, streaks which, over the hours, had been so torn and shifted by high winds as to now resemble clouds. Every thirty minutes there would be an uproaring of the jets and another silver plane would attempt the sky, away from me, at an angle and distance to make them seem so small and slow and unsure. Every take-off appeared to risk disaster, but each succeeded, miraculously it seemed, and their trails populated more tenths of the sky.

2 platoon was on patrol. Martin had said in his briefing that the army believed the Home Guard could not be trusted to dispose of their weapons and equipment. He had gone on a long, boring lecture about civil war and our responsibility to future generations. Even though we were leaving, it would be immoral not to tidy up after ourselves. They might bury their weapons in anticipation of further conflict and we were to find them and destroy them. Another platoon had been sent out of town, to search a farm compound in the valley. I could see them down there, small shapes moving in and out and around whitewashed farm buildings. A metal-detecting team paced the dirt each side of the main road to the airfield. They seemed so tiny from up here, featureless moving points of brightness against the red soil.

When Nan died, Dad came back for the funeral. He brought his girlfriend with him. 'Paula from work' he called her. She was obvious in the usual ways but I could tell by the way Dad acted around her that he thought she had subtleties. I got out of the car and stood in the cold, waiting for Mum to follow, but she just sat there, staring through the windscreen at Dad and Paula outside the church. I tapped my knuckle on the window. She rolled it down. "I'm going to stay in the car," she said. I argued with her, she loved Nan like her own mother, it would mean a lot to me, but she said no, no, no she wouldn't come in, no she wouldn't see Dad, no no she had a good book, it was a thriller, and that would suit her perfectly, ta very much. I realised at some point that she would not be able to do it, no matter how I pleaded, so I left her, told her go home and told her I'd get a lift back from cousin Lizzy or somebody. I heard her wind up the window quickly, and I went inside alone.

"Doesn't it feel like we're the only people in the world?"

Harris walked beside me down the street. Far ahead, towards the church, more of the platoon mingled. Far behind, where there were tarmacked roads and cars and telephone wires strung between the buildings, were the others. Harris and I were between, our boots sounding together, on the dusty street, crunching on sand, spitting out gravel. The houses at the edge of town were all uniform concrete cubes, roofs made from sheets of corrugated iron, most bearing old warning signs of stick figures and lightning and fire. Repurposed utility buildings and substations, possibly, from an abandoned industrial project. Lean-tos of wood and metal had been constructed between the cubes, to create outhouses or to join multiple cubes to form larger dwellings. Chickens clucked and fussed in runs made from wire mesh and tent pegs. A dog barked. The sound had a rhythmic shape, two short barks to one full-throated, which must have meant something to it for it would not relent. Somewhere a baby cried and that seemed to have no pattern to it at all.

"It does," I said. "Cheeky ciggy?"

"Go on then."

I sat on the concrete doorstep of the nearest house, right on a sky-blue stain of paint, right on it on purpose, which must have been years old, but which had such a high gloss as to look fresh and wet. I chanced it and touched it and sat. I looked around to see what they had attempted to paint, when they spilt this, but couldn't find any part of the house in that particular shade. The radio pack fit neatly on the very top step, against the house's wooden door. It buzzed loudly, and I gave it a thump near the battery, making sure

to avoid the antenna.

A young girl, beads in her hair, bracelets made from stringed seeds on both her tiny wrists, watched me from the steps of the next house over. Five, six, seven? I'd never been able to tell with kids. Her black hair was pulled back tightly, making her forehead seem larger, shiny in the heat as the tint of sunglasses. A fly buzzed around her face, but she didn't appear to notice. I wanted to swat it away. I smiled at her, took off my helmet.

As soon as I did, she jumped up from the step. "I think you're a man!" she cried.

Harris slung her rifle back and removed her helmet. At this, the girl shrieked and ran inside her house, calling out something monosyllabic in her language, the same sound again and again. We shared a glance, smiled at each other.

Christ. The colours in the stained glass were all dull. Christ. Someone had dog-eared a page of the hymnal. Christ, Christ, Christ, Christ this and Christ that. God. What am I allowed to feel here? God. How small the coffin is. Nan's God. How small. The old reverend who seemed to know her better than me calling her 'our friend', uncle Jim giving a long reading from the Bible, 'our dear friend', tribulations and nakedness and swords, an old man with a hearing aid playing a big electronic keyboard. Nan was so old. She used to hug me. 'I urge you to use all the resources available to you in your journey to an understanding of our God.' What am I supposed to feel here? We are more than conquerors. Dad saying something about Nan when she was younger, when her children were small, little kids safe in her love. What is valid here? Nan is in that little box in front of us, dead, strength for today and a great hope for tomorrow, Nan had that in embroidery on the wall above the mantelpiece, lots of swirls and little yellow flowers, all discoloured by the sun and fingers and the years, neither death nor life or any fucking thing can separate us from God, and the hairs on my arms standing up. I can still feel her hug.

I shook the pack of Churchman's at Emma. "Ta," she said, taking one.

Harris was overburdened. She looked up the street towards the church, where most of the platoon were milling around. Somebody, probably Martin, was having a conversation with a group of locals, a woman was pointing at the church, a man was quite forcefully pointing in the opposite direction.

She started to bite a fingernail, then pulled it sharply away from her mouth and said, "Can I tell you something?"

"All right?"

“This can’t go any further, right? You can’t mention this to anyone else or I’ll be for it. Right? Well, so, I was with the Captain. I drove him out to Bullwood. This was about a fortnight ago. He was leading the interrogation of the prisoners.”

“Dixson was?”

“That’s right. It wasn’t just any old prisoners, though, you know, because they have the Home Guard to do that. It was those nurses, did you ever hear about that? Would’ve been back when Welles was in the hospital. They were going round injecting all our wounded lads with dirty needles. Did he never tell you about that?”

“No, he never said. But, you know, that’s his business really.”

“Yeah, suppose you’re right.”

Cousin Lizzy handed me the trowel and I dug it into the soil, avoiding a worm, its wet end slipping into a hole, how pointed its throbbing arse was, how ludicrously pink, and brought up a scoop of earth. And I stepped forward to the edge and tipped the earth on top of Nan’s coffin and I was thinking what right do I have to cover her in dirt? And I was the last one and everybody else was turning around to leave, so I was alone on the edge of the grave, stepping with light feet, careful on the edge, like on that archaeology programme Nan used to watch, don’t disturb the finds, extra careful like it was the end of the world, looking in, holding the cold metal trowel, and thinking what a stupid fucking ritual, what a stupid fucking ritual, what a stupid fucking ritual.

The baby was still crying, the dog still barking. Something had riled up the chickens and they were pacing back and forth within their wire run. The radio pack was buzzing again. I tapped my ash off the side of the steps. Harris held her cigarette in her mouth as she used both hands to retie her ponytail. With a cry, the little girl appeared back on her doorstep, pulling her young mother with her. The woman, tall, slender, in a long colourful dress and her hair all up in a pile upon her head, gave a sort of wave, an awkward smile. I returned the wave, such as it was, and the mother quickly retreated back into the house, leaving the girl standing there watching us.

—There were so many things wrong when we were there. Not ‘wrong’ but—well, yeah, wrong, but also—difficult, difficult things. When you talk about it, you have to talk about, like—there are layers upon layers upon layers, nothing is simple—like, the narrative of it, it’s—layered—you—what’s the word I’m—you have to find the unchanging thing, and hold on to it. You know, things we saw, things we—but, I mean, it was very difficult, to

connect what was happening there, and then, to things that happened before, here, you know, in Essex. A disconnect, I suppose. But it wasn't completely unconnected, though—I mean—like—there's a path from time to time, place to place, that's what I feel, and the path is a person—or, each person is a path—you know, I'm not, I don't really know where I'm going with this. What was the—the other part of that question?

“Dixson wanted me to go into the room with them. They'd put them all together in this big processing room, I mean, that's what they called it, but it was just, you know, a classroom or something. Desks and a white board. He wanted me to go in there and be with them. I don't know why, maybe he thought I would be able to calm them down or something. You know, because I'm a girl or something. Stupid cunt. Calm them down? They'd shaved off their hair, put them in fucking rags, and told them they'd be shot or hanged or something. Shaved off their fucking hair, man. And when I opened the door, they were all on the other side of the room, hiding behind the desks, because they thought it was a guard coming in. But when they saw I was a girl, they ran right over to me.”

She took a moment to smoke. She had bags under her eyes and dirt on her cheek. A strand of her chestnut hair had come loose from her ponytail and dangled in front of her face. She kept pushing it backwards and it kept returning to the front, and it was as if each time was the first or she was simply resigned to it.

“They were on their knees around me, grabbing at me. Like, proper pulling on my clothes. I thought they were going to be pull my trousers down, mate. I was pushing their hands away, touching them, pushing them away. And they were begging me, pleading, like almost kissing my feet.”

She kicked at the bottom step, the toe of her boot tapping out a beat.

“There were eight of them. Most of them were young, like you and me. There was one older woman, probably in her forties, I guess, I don't know. She seemed to be the calmest one to me, she just sat on a chair away from the others, holding her skirt, like tightly in her hands, and just staring at the wall on the other side of the room. Wasn't anything on the wall. A light switch. A pipe that went from the floor up into the ceiling. Just a brick wall painted in a thick sort of greenish blue. I don't think she even moved when the others were kicking off. It was like she accepted it, you know, like this is what's happening and, like, there's no way it could be any different, so why fight against it, right?”

“Right.”

“But the others. Crying and screaming and begging. ‘Please, please, we didn’t do it!’ Scratching their faces, you know, proper clawing themselves, blood and everything. ‘Mercy, mercy!’ Hitting their chests. Really hard. Like thump thump thump. And wailing. You don’t often, you know, hear people wailing.” She swallowed. “With, what’s the word I’m thinking of? Despair? With despair. It’s hard, I mean, I guess I’ve never really seen that before. It’s not like at home, cos, you know, you don’t get people acting like that. I mean, what do you think, like when people die or whatever? Wailing?”

—So, yeah, he made things imperfect but—but he—he made things imperfect but around him you became aware of the imperfections and, because of that, the imperfections kinda—what’s that thing about hurting as few people as possible? You know, I’m trying really hard to not make it sound like this was all going through my head at the time, because, you know, he was just Martin, really, you know, not really a friend but then again not really—I mean, for me at least, because I knew him before, he was never really just Lieutenant Welles. Look, you know, you’ll probably cut this bit, but there were times when I really fucking hated his guts but there were also times when I could, you know, stand to be around him. I guess—I guess it doesn’t really matter what I thought about him, does it? Because he has his poetry, right, and you’ve got him, you know, the man himself—he can account for himself, and the people that were around him don’t really—doesn’t it give him a little too much credit to pretend that he affected me?

“Dixson came in just after that and they slunk away. But one of them sort of, you know, was braver I guess, and she stayed there and held my hand in both of hers and she looked right at me, and she had these really intense eyes. And she—” Harris looked at the sky for a moment, then sat down on the lowest step, below me. “You know, I’m not really—I don’t really know how to—that one, that nurse, she said ‘I have a baby’ or, you know, ‘My baby, my baby’. And—” She waggled her hand in front of her. “And ‘Don’t let them kill me’. And, but, and she mentioned Mary.”

“What? Martin Mary?”

“Yeah. Martin Welles, that’s what she said. My baby is his baby, that’s what she said. Mate, I got fucking chills down my spine when she said it.”

“No fucking way. She must’ve been lying.”

She looked at me. “I know! I know!”

I caught up with Lizzy before she reached the main group of mourners. She was

wearing a navy coat with a fake-fur trim around the hood and wrists, had the hood pulled over her head. She asked me how I was and if I was going out with anyone and I said something like I was all right cheers and no not going out with anyone since the last asshole. Then she asked how my mum was and I said something like she'd been better but, yeah, she was all right, too. Lizzy agreed to give me a lift back home. We drove for a while and then Lizzy parked in a lonely little road near an electricity substation. She pulled out a glass pipe and asked if I'd ever smoked weed before.

"When he heard that, Dixson told me to leave. So I waited outside the prison and just smoked and smoked. Must've been in there for an hour, at least. I don't know what else happened, I can't really remember much after that."

"So what happened to them? The nurses?"

"I don't know, I drove the Captain back to base."

"Jesus."

"Dixson wouldn't talk about it, on the drive back. Told me to shut up. God, I don't know what they did to them." Her bottom lip started to shake. "And I was there. It's just... why were they... like, they were caught up in this thing that was so much bigger than them, it was so, I don't know, so uncaring and so, like, so blind to who they were and their lives. All these men, men with guns, who fucking cover their faces like fucking cowards—"

Harris put a hand over her mouth, her eyes wide and flicking from side to side, trying not to blink. I touched her arm. She closed her eyes, nodded, thankful.

"It's just... men and their fucking laws and, Christ... what could I have done? I just lie in my bunk and I think what if I'd said something different, or, or, you know, screamed at Dixson to let them go or, I don't know, I don't know. And, I know, I know, I couldn't've done anything, I probably couldn't've done anything, but what does it mean that I can't stop thinking about what I could've done?"

"Don't, don't. Look, love, lots of people wonder what could be different if this thing didn't go that way or that thing never happened. I mean, I'm pretty sure everyone does that. It's normal human behaviour, you know. Clever people, you know, scientists, or psychologists, or whatever, they must have worked out why people do it. There's probably a good reason and it's probably something to do with basic human stuff."

Lizzy was singing along to a song on the radio, closing her eyes at the chorus. The heater was on full blast. The windows fogged up. My ears felt hot, there was a flushing

down to my cheeks, and a squeezing sensation across the back of my head as if somebody's hand was there. My arms felt incredibly long, legs too, limbs no longer part of my body, my mind no longer part of my body. Like bobbing on a choppy sea, able to keep my head up for a few seconds, before a dark wave washed over my head, submerged me. I would struggle and eventually resurface, to face the terror of seeing another wave approaching. An everlasting drowning.

And Harris started to cry when she said, "And what should I tell Martin?" And she drew his name out and barely managed to cut it off before it became a sob.

"No, no, you don't tell him anything, because what's there to tell? Some girl that, yeah, she might have met him in the hospital, but, shit, she could've just seen his name on a chart or something. And it being his baby? Fuck that, no way. Mary? Shagging a nurse? Knocking her up? Don't be an idiot, dear."

"I will never, never, never forget her face when she said it. God, she was so scared. Not for herself, for her baby. But—oh shit!" She cried out and twisted around. The little girl was directly behind her, standing beside the steps, hand up high where she'd tugged on Harris's rifle. At Harris's exclamation she had let go and started to step away, eyes wide. "Oh, oh," she said, breathing heavily, a laugh somewhere in those breaths, her shock becoming relief. "Oh, shit, I'm sorry! You scared me, love! You shouldn't touch that."

"Come here," I said, holding out my arms to the girl. "It's all right, come on. Come over here."

She stopped retreating and stared at me for a moment, turned her head slightly to the side. I beckoned her and she slowly approached, the beads in her hair clicking together with the moving of her head. The bangles on her arms shone in the sunshine. She came to me and I grabbed her and placed her on my knee.

"All right? What's your name?"

"Netty," she said.

"How old are you?"

Netty held up five fingers.

Harris shook her head at me. "Oh, look at you, Mummy."

"I don't think I'd make a good mum, really."

"What is this noisy thing?" Netty asked, looking at the radio pack. She reached out to touch the pack.

“No, don’t, don’t, it gets really hot.” Before I had even finished speaking, her eyes and little fingers had moved on, and she now touched my neck. “Like my tattoo?” I asked. She made a face like no, she didn’t particularly. I drew my finger along the line of small yellow flowers. “These are celandines. A bit like the flowers behind your church.”

She nodded but she had already grown bored with it. I rolled my eyes and looked past her, to Harris. She was watching, enjoying the last moments of her cigarette. “Are you all right?”

Harris nodded. “I’ll be all right, you know. Fucking hard as nails, me.”

“And don’t say anything about that to Mary, all right? At least? That’s just a mind fuck right there. He’s a sanctimonious prick but he doesn’t deserve that.”

“I know.”

I turned just in time to see Netty reaching for the radio’s antenna. I slapped her little hand away, harder than I had to, “I said don’t! You’ll burn your fucking hand off, you stupid—”

She held her hand against her chest but she didn’t cry, just slid off my knee and ran back to her house. With a start, I noticed that Martin stood in the street, Sergeant Longman by his side. Martin pointed at us.

“Oi, you two,” he said. “Get a move on.”

—No, no, you’re welcome. I’m sorry you couldn’t use all of that, but—no, I haven’t talked to him for a long time, now. I don’t know how long really. What, how often I think about him? Or the war? Well, you know, only every day, but—yeah, no, I’ll tune in, you know, if I’m not at work or—yep, cheers, thank you, oh you’re welcome. Yep, no worries, bye, bye-bye.

7.

At 4 in the morning and with no one having slept, we will march the evacuees through the town to the airfield with every step on these streets seeming a sort of trespass. This eight-mile journey. We have taken up our weapons and we have put on our armour and we have put off sleep and taken down the flag from the lawn of Government House. We are all somewhere beside ourselves with weariness. The moon is high and central, commands a cloudless sky, its light presses the stars towards the speckled horizon. There is no electricity for the street lamps now, telegraph poles are standing like struck trees, the wind is snatching at the wires. If there were light enough to see the absurdity we would all have to accept it, and the world would manifest a correcting disaster and deliver it unto us to rationalise this mistake. So keep your eyes to the front, keep on walking, be oblivious, let the joke keep playing just a little longer. Oh, the difficulty of getting us from here to there. Expressing the movement of people and the thinning out of time. There is only the body's wish to collapse and the effort to keep it standing.

Five hundred and forty-seven people, that is the joke.

—I'm sitting in the early morning sunlight in my study, with a nice cup of tea, with the heat going and the setter at my feet, and I'm reading the work you sent me (dated three weeks ago). I've shown Charlie (Portman) and he was very positive, and Charlie (Young) and he too had a majority of good things to say. Miriam's response was more muted as I'm sure we both expected. Of the three, she is the one who must take the opinion of her people into account, so perhaps we can take from her tepidity that her people are not of the same mind as six months ago. I admit that six months under Miriam may be enough to change anybody's inclinations, or indeed kill off any semblance of artistic capacity altogether. Still, she writes 'static' and to me that means 'steady' and that has never been a bad thing. Trust me, Martin, you should stay still.

The route is quite straightforward, although we have never walked the ten miles in their entirety. First, the Avenue. For a mile the wide road runs uncurving, and during the day one can sight all along the gentle downslope, from Government House towards the town, even perhaps the airfield on the far side. On either side are high hedges hiding concrete walls that bound the square grounds of mansions, the homes of administrators, of colonial officers, magistrates, and various civil servants of high ranking. Perhaps a hundred paces

separate the black gates, iron bars thick as a wrist. Behind each gate, a long gravel drive through short lawns, and the brick mansions themselves, their windows now unlit. There are now no cars parked there and no guard dogs alert their masters. The homes on Lexden Road have a similar look, their hedged-in acres, their orange bricks in places acknowledging the pearly local stone, but here they counterfeit the wooden Tudor jetties, smokeless skinny chimneys, weatherboards of plastic and painted aluminium. At the end of the Avenue, a junction, with the first real house in the town straight in front of us, half a mile away, across an expanse of poor dirt and brittle, thorned weeds.

Five hundred and forty-seven refugees and 2 platoon walking amongst them, that's the joke. I can't see the lads, they are lost in the dark and the mass, but I trust them to do their duty. From time to time, with soft voices, we talk over our throat mics. Longman, somewhere at the front of the procession, does not let the silence last more than a couple of minutes before he asks one or another of the platoon to report in. It mostly seems that he is keeping them awake, rather than gathering information.

Here, at this junction, for no way leads directly into the town, let us instead take the righthand road, that passes obliquely through the undeveloped scrubland. Ahead, after a mile, you shall see the gates of our base, the Castle, and its lofty walls, chipped and stained, and topped with wire. Even taller, and rolling skyward, see how the smoke from the burn pit escapes into the night's altitudes, blanking out the stars. The great green steel doors will be barred to us and perhaps a guard, standing sentry by the wicket gate, will issue a challenge, then wave us by. We will follow the road, past an occasional cottage, past sheds, and head towards the north side of the town. We will cross the stream and the first concrete houses will emerge around us. There will be no figures on the pavements or in the road, the curfew holds for a few more nights, deserted, the town tipped over and its people poured out.

—I've included Miriam's comments (though part of me is loath to do it, wants to throw it in the bin) because I believe you're in a place with your writing where such words can only serve to be constructive. I trust you to take them in the way I did and remember what you told me (and I've subsequently stolen it): soldiering is your obligation, poetry is your duty. Paying your dues to English and the human race. Did I recall it correctly?

Here, the occasional movement of shutters, then faces appearing at windows, drawn out from sleep or insomniac chores, no doubt, by the shuffling sound of our unlikely herd. The unlikely, gathered in the dark. Send the sun, send the sun, no, stall the sun or stop it, as

it's only the dark that keeps all this from shading into the impossible. Some had refused to leave their belongings, some had wished to return to their homes to collect their valuables, but most had been willing to forsake their possessions or, indeed, they carried all they owned with them. They rarely talk, here in the town, and only in whispers to avoid waking their erstwhile neighbours. What had this one done, who had this one slighted, how was this one's loyalty aligned, to necessitate this urgent night-time escape? Some of these have killed. Some of these have written names of people, pages and pages of people, who are now in prison or a grave. Fear of death or fear of a reversal of order, how all their fates seem stacked together, ordered upwards from tame to grievous, a tower trembling and likely to fall. A trick, keeping plates spinning, keeping balls aloft. Skill, skill, skill, and luck. Training, training, training, and luck. Yes, duty, duty, duty, and luck. Memory, impression, poetry, duty, and luck.

After repeatedly shifting between the front and the rear, I find myself near the middle of the crowd, and I can't tell if it's by chance or contrivance, but Amanda walks beside me, very close, our elbows occasionally touching. She smells of grease and Swarfega, and warm dust like a radiator's unexpected heating in cold late spring. The radio pack she carries gives off a low, unrelenting buzz. We are only together for a moment and then she moves away and I don't think she even recognises me. The marching is killing the outside me, dismissing all the child-learned simplicities, the body's primitive duties, like walking and breathing and bearing weight, brushing them away as one, on the verge of sleep, brushes away thoughts that verge on genius, but only the mind's encroaching dullness tells one so. Inside, all is words. Poetry and prose. These naked lives, lives unprotected by law or rights, exposed here, on foot, with only these lads and these weapons roughly on the same side. Floating along, my pace becomes the cadence of phrases, and the distance left to travel becomes a sentence overrunning without full stops, and my breath, breath, breath is like a sometimes-shying sometimes-surging interference of commas. We are marching into separate formations of ourselves, reordered with every pace, and that's the same as every day, but now I can feel it and I can chart the differences between each snapshot of my thoughts like paging through a photograph album.

There's a siren in the north. In that direction is home.

—I am having a number of problems with this manuscript. First of all, is this an imaginary place? Has it simply been given the name of a town, the rest given up to

imagination? I don't know Colchester or its geography or its history or people, but a certain percentage of the readership might, and people will criticise errors - it's human nature to find the proverbial sore thumb, eyes are very good at that and the reader loves to feel more intelligent than the poet. I think Martin might have shot himself in the foot here. I recommend you have a word with him and work together towards a more generalised theme for this collection - the provincial does not do well in the current market. My advice would be that sometimes it's best to change names or places. Expansion, granting the reader admittance into this poetic world. I think specificity is the enemy here: it is shutting doors and keeping out the reader from his exclusive club. Specificity for emotion, specificity for character, but not specificity for place. You may wish to put it to him that, at the moment, on the strength of these four poems, I would suggest a local press would be more amenable to this kind of local poetry.

Does she remember? I wonder if she remembers. I wonder if she still exists. When we were young we would go down to the woods. It was the end of summer and the town had been cooked through and was still hot. Tarmac melted. A haze rose from the pavements. The grass became hard and sharp. All these days were broad and filled with breath and swelling and they promised to ever expand. All life, for us, was wide and golden and it felt like you were inside something and it felt there was also something inside you. She would shriek and run and, hiding behind trees, jump away as I approached, and her hair was blonde, and her eyebrows and lashes too, so blonde they were hard to see, and she had freckles in the centre of her face like someone had spat them onto her, and she was always a little faster and a little taller than me and she would always lead me on but never run too far ahead, and one day when I tried to trick her by going the other way around a tree we collided and we both fell down, our heads in pain, with blood, and crying, and she ran home and I ran off to hide in the woods, and I cannot remember her name. I remember the weight of the chain that came off her bicycle, I remember the slickness of the grease on my fingers, the smell of the dust our shoes kicked up that rose around us and browned our legs, the smell of hot tyres in the sun, the colour and the texture of the brick dust from the wall at the bottom of the garden, I remember how far to bend to enter the tunnel of branches that led to our den, and I remember how my fingertips would press into the ridges of the bark as I waited to pounce on the far side of a tree, but I cannot remember her name. What was her name and did she ever exist?

—I am also having trouble with the wholeness of the collection, if you catch my meaning. His subject is incoherent. That of course can be expected of a first collection: he doesn't yet know what sort of poet he is, so he writes about everything. Martin must ask himself: if it is not about the war, is it war poetry? If it's not war poetry, is he a war poet?

Do you remember? I wonder if you remember. I remember the last time that we talked. On the footbridge out from Keddies, one June evening, overtopping Queen Street traffic. Your exams all finished, coursework submitted, you awaited the end of your last term. Boxed in by concrete and steel and filthy glass, you and I leant on the handrails and talked about your moving away next year. The sun as I recall had found a cleft between the roofs and came in rolling, all lusty yellow and far too sharp, and we turned our backs to spare our eyes. We lounged in our purple blazers and watched our shadows grow around the fuzzy ends of cigarettes, the sticky trace of trampled gum, noticed how their fast advance obscured the stained and cracking floor. I remember I tried to touch as little as possible, then, fearing our bodies might strain the concrete and its steel core, so I stood off somewhat centrally and watched you darken between the sun and me. Hands in pockets, I was watching you, lanky, smooth-faced but a hair or two the razor had missed, relaxed, so easy, two years older than me, you there. Your life was planned and effortless, so effortless, in that way your moving was or how you spoke and sported. I had watched you playing cricket, during afternoons of PE, when I should have been running circuits of the field or been busy with some other exercise, watched you in your whites on the pitch batting balls away, your command of the crease uncomplicated, attacking, attacking, each stroke like nothing more than an investigation of a possibility. Joyful, curious. But most of all you didn't fear the bowler's approach, did you? That was all years before. Years before the bridge from Keddies, the traffic in the evening sun. And I remember thinking, there, there as you talked to me of the Sixth Form and beyond, that I will never know somebody as well as you and I remember thinking I will never like somebody as I like you. I can think it now, can think it without fear, no, still a little fear, that maybe I loved you a little. Or perhaps I was in love, instead, with the life that bent around you, that sparking, spastic, hormonal life, that life you stood and faced fearlessly and which you drove away again and again and again. Fuck it, fuck you, your too-bright smile and the easy way you said my name, said anything, and fuck your perfect blazer with its tidy lines, the way the sun made you gold and how you knew your future, yes, knew it. Possibilities pitched at you, batted all away, as you liked. Fuck all

of it and fuck you most, how I never really knew you or took some time to recognise the shape of you, the shape of me, the holes in time we jointly filled that I never knew were holes at all. I thought you would be there in September, but you weren't there.

I am lost. "Where are we headed?" I ask on the mic.

"We're going the right way," Longman's voice comes back. "We follow this down to the market, cross the High Street and then we're straight on to the airfield."

Yes, this road, it crosses the northern end of the High Street, east to west, as shoulders or a crosspiece. Head Street. Years back, miles away, there were Christmas lights strung across the top of Head Street, that busy cross-roads, a light snow that was slush on the road and ice on the pavement. An early evening in December, shoppers shuffling through the dark, traffic droned unending. A different Head Street. Mum was several steps ahead, and I was lagging, she was angry or I was angry, perhaps I had made a fuss. She carried bags, were they presents? Present. I am in the present. This isn't the farthest we have marched by a long chalk, nor the longest we have gone without sleep, but there is something different here, tonight, some trick or coincidence that complicates the night.

—She has highlighted various lines and phrases. She has marked them all the same: "Successful". This woman is a character. I'll try to give you the gist:

—“Now the guns are starting not
—to work and even the fullest tyres
—deflate”

"Market," Longman says. "Eyes open, lads." The stalls have been all put away, shutters lowered and padlocked over the display windows of shops. Here are darkened signs for a laundrette, for a cafe, for a furniture store, a sign promising the freshest coffee, a sign for the Theatre Royal, a sign for the Palais, the Imperial Hotel, the Palm Tearoom, Mother's Curios. Here the road widens for a stretch, opens and invites the end of the broad High Street. The sun was shining, as I recall. And Dad and Mum and I were watching the floats go down the High Street, watching the parade go past, the Army and Scouts bands, Roman legionaries, Paxman's engines and Boudicca in a chariot, the carnival, marching soldiers bearing rifles, cadets, the mayor, and Dad and Mum were smiling as I recall, Dad was taking pictures on his Purma, the sun was shining, Mum was wearing sunglasses, and we were happy as I recall. That was years ago. Perhaps there are photos of it in albums. Photos from Dad's Purma. The film he used, the reds were always so deep. I always thought that, I was

always surprised, the reds are always so deep. The Army band wore red. The Roman shields. The mayor's red robe. We are here now.

—“Every thing is winding down,
—almost every other bullet fails”

And we hear it far sooner than we see it. So here's the disaster. As it had to be. “Car!” Longman hisses. He calls for a section, calls them by name, calls for them to make ready, calls for them to hold their fire. “Stopping,” he says. I hear Longman's voice, not over the headset, but clearly through the air, berating the driver. “Okay,” he says, now over the radio. “Let's keep going.” As we walk past the stationary car, I see a man on his knees, hands placed on his head, he has turned his head and he watches us. “Keep an eye on him, last man,” I say. “Yes, sir,” comes the swift reply.

—“The voices in radios no longer human,
—these sounds a human does not intend to make.”

Head Street is known by another name now, a letter and a number, and it runs straight down into the valley, shedding houses and cottages as it goes, gathering dust, pierces another wide stretch of scrub and abandoned shacks, oil drums and breeze-blocks, thorns and waste. So we reach the end of the town. The airfield is ahead, in the downland, runway lit up, buildings lit up. In the floodlights, ludicrous bright, the two passenger jets are clear to see, and I can tell that the refugees around me can see them too, a murmur rising amongst them. So we reach the end of the Colony. This transition. A new upwards journey. Relief. This is the difficulty of getting to here from there. My memory is like a town at night. There are lights in windows behind net curtains, and from time to time I step into a streetlamp's orange glow and my shadow swings around, and there're the red rear lights of cars in strings along the bypass, cars with people heading home, and I wonder about their homes, where they live, how far they have left to drive, but I don't know them and I don't know where they're going, and I'll never know. And the lights pick out the edges of the leaves in hedges, and shine off the ice-skinned puddles in the holes in the road. And, for all the ill-defined things I see, the only thing I feel is the bulk of the things unseen, the weight of shadow behind them that gives them mass. The memory is not the town, but the night upon it.

—“We are in the Boxing day afterness,
—a dullness war has gifted

Do you remember? I wonder if you remember. The sentries knew we were coming but still seem shocked at our approach. Longman explains, parts them. The refugees are lined up inside the empty hangar, roughly in a queue. Some stay shaking on their feet, they have come this far and a will to see the end bolsters them, while some collapse to the ground. Men of company headquarters go out among them and inspect their visas and identity papers. And I watch, because I have to watch. "Good effort today," I say to the lads. "Everybody pulled together. Damn good effort. Now get some kip, we're returning to base in two hours." 2 platoon find a corner at the far end of the building and they collapse, using their daysacks as pillows. Within minutes the corner is filled with stinking, snoring bodies. Longman is sitting against the wall, knees drawn up, head down and arms shielding his face as if bracing for an impact. But I have to watch. I wait and I watch, the sun will soon be dawning.

The corporal comes towards me, it must have been an hour or so since they began their work, the corporal comes towards me with his clipboard, he's reading something, he's ticking something off with a pen. He comes towards me and I move towards him.

"Five hundred and forty-seven," he says.

It is a spell, a magic spell, he has spoken. I want to take his hands and kiss them. Dixon said we have to win something. And this is our victory.

"Five four seven?"

"Five four seven, that's right, sir."

"All right. Thank you very much."

I have watched, I have waited, the night will soon be over.

—"The poets now can write about us,

—far away and afterwards"

8.

—Dear Martin,

—I don't know if this letter will reach you before you leave, before you return home.

In some ways I hope it doesn't - I hope it ends up in a letter tray somewhere, in an empty room over there, in an empty building where no one will ever have to go. Because that will mean you've already left and it'll be there and you'll be here and I can tell you these things in person. I hope for that so much. But I will write this letter and I will send it, because I just don't know, and the world has lately taught me that I cannot trust it to be so kind. Perhaps you will open this letter or perhaps it will be a man named, I don't know, Masterson. Why Masterson? I don't know, but perhaps that will be his name, the man who finds this lonely letter in the tray in the empty room in the empty building where no one's been until Masterson turned up. So I suppose this letter should be addressed to both of you. That might even make it easier to write. So let me start again.

When the sun had gone down and when the Governor and his staff were on a fast plane flying back to England and when the platoon had finished installing halogen lamps along the length of the path to the estate's edge and when the diesel generator had started to thump-thump-thump in the night and when the dozens of exhausted people still waiting along the driveway had collapsed around the lamps like moths in the darkness and when Government House had become so crammed full of evacuees at various stages of the evacuation process that the heat from the ground floor had become almost overwhelming - that's when Dixson found me and told me to go to the Governor's rooms and that's when we fucked on the much-disturbed sheets of the Governor's four-poster bed.

We didn't undress, he simply pulled down his trousers and underwear and simply pulled down my trousers and underwear, and he simply pushed me against the side of the bed, bent himself simply around my bent body, forced my face into the soft sheets. When he had finished, he let himself down on top of me, his face on my back. I twisted around and he looked up, smiled slightly, touched the flowers on my neck, touched my cheek.

"You have red marks," he said. "Pressure marks. My red-striped tiger bitch."

"The word is tigress, idiot."

Slowly, he pulled out and rolled onto the bed, flat on his back. He tried to pull the too-big condom off dramatically, but it sucked at the end of his cock and it stuck, and he

pulled harder and when it came off it came with a snap and a spray of semen across the bed. “You fucking idiot,” I said. I too rolled onto the bed, the other way, and we lay there, not touching, looking up at the canopy above us, its rich wood with its dark and churning burls, its ornamental carvings.

—Dear Masterson,

—You don’t know me. You probably have never even heard of me. Here in England they usually call me Elsie, just Elsie nowadays, although my full name is Elsie Anders. I am, I suppose, a singer. I have made three records and had nine Top 10 singles. I have also acted in five films. In chronological order, these are: *The Valiant*, *Down by the Seashore*, *Four Days in Heaven*, *Panic in the Ranks*, and *Kisses from Elsie*. They were fun to do but generally didn’t meet with much critical acclaim. The audiences enjoyed them, though, and frankly they earned me a not-inconsiderable amount of money, so I should not be ungrateful. *Four Days in Heaven* remains my favourite, although the critics did not love it. I starred alongside Eric Chambers, who is a rather wonderful leading man and a marvellous tenor. Eric has been rather more famous for rather longer - perhaps you have heard of him?

Dixson had rolled away from me and fallen asleep. His shirt had ridden up a little, revealing the lower few bumps of his spine. For a short while, I drew circles on his back. My fingertip stroked figures-of-eight around moles, around the squamous red dots that would become moles, and pictured him dead. His unfeeling skin, nearing room temperature with every beatless moment, still smooth and perfect, still, preserved in a second several seconds old. He woke and rolled over and stared at me. His eyes lazed back and forth over my face, and I knew he saw in my expression the death of my fantasy and a horrible uncertainty which I knew was perfectly visible. He seemed to see through me, and, through me, he could see all the others.

“What are you thinking about?” he asked.

I had no will to lie. “I was thinking about you, dead.”

It didn’t seem to offend him, nor even surprise him.

“Did you know about the shaman near the base? He owned a bookshop, where Welles spent most of his free time. Obviously. He sold bottle caps, at first, this shaman, can you believe that? Bottle caps and hub caps, empty aluminium cans, the ends of cigarettes. Ah, who would buy that? Rubbish, eh? Well, yes, it was, but he did, to people looking for rubbish. I suppose, perhaps, there is a market for anything. But he had magic, or people

thought he did, which is the same thing. And for a time, I think, we thought he had some power over us, too. So one day while Welles was looking at the books, I asked him what he saw ahead for me. Know what he told me? He told me I'm going to die in England on a nice, warm, sunny day."

I laughed. "Mate, that's some kind of fucking immortality."

"Isn't it? I hope I die here. God. Returning to England? Death would be better. Essex? I can't stand those petty, pissy, moist women."

"Oh fuck you, I'm an Essex woman."

"Are you? I mean, are you any longer? Aren't you something else, now, after all this?"

"I don't see how I could be. I haven't changed."

"I would change you. I would bring you to London. Afternoon tea at the Langham, and afterwards jazz. Then an hour or two at a dancehall to warm us up and a late-night walk along the Thames to cool us down. And finally to bed, before the dawn. You'd never want to return to Essex. I've never wanted to."

The Thames. I used to sit on the benches on the Grays embankment, and watch the breeze off the Estuary shivering through the tall grass that the council cut once a year. I would sit on a bench and toss stones towards the bruise-brown bank of the river. Their fall was always a chorus of percussion, playing amongst lager cans anonymous with rust, and bloated, encrusted plastic milk bottles, before eventually dying with a soft splash and a gentle floating. I would count the number of crates on the decks of the green container ships, coming from Tilbury way, massive in the middle of the river. I would always reach an improbably high number before the curve of the meander and the abstraction of perspective made me lose my tally.

When I was up there with Darren we would stroll hand in hand and he, with can in hand, would grow less and less aware of me and walk faster than I wanted to go. I would take back my hand from him and light a cigarette and stop on the path and create a Conradian fantasy where I was a crewman on a passing freighter, perhaps with a fire in its belly. And he would come back, eventually, from some distant point, and piss and moan as if he'd only realised he was alone a mile along the path. Then I would kiss him to shut him up and, if he had a condom and there was nobody around, we would fuck in the cold grass. That would be, to him, his victory. I wouldn't enjoy it. That would be mine. And I needed

him, and that was his real victory, but he didn't know it, and never would, which kept me in front.

"I haven't changed," I said.

"What if we had children?"

"Oh fuck off, you sappy cunt."

"We could have tiger-striped, leopard-print children—"

There was a knock on the bedroom door.

"Oh Christ." Dixson shoved me, hissed, "Get off the fucking bed."

I could hear the door opening as I slipped down off the bed, out of view on the opposite side, landing heavily in a half-naked squat on the rough woven rug, head bowed beneath the level of the mattress. I bit my lip against my bladder, against my muscles' wish to piss in this position.

"Get the fuck out!" Dixson bellowed to the visitor.

"But Sir, but Sir!" came a voice and it sounded like the accent of an orderly and who else might choose to argue with the Captain? "But I thought the room was empty, Sir! I'm sorry, Sir, I'm very terribly sorry."

I stood up as the orderly turned to leave, saw that Dixson had rushed the door naked from the waist down, saw that he stood in the open doorway still, breathing heavily. He shut the door, softly, and looked at me over his shoulder. "Jesus," he said. "Get your fucking clothes on and get back to work."

—A rather mediocre poet named Martin Welles had just had a small book of poetry published. To be absolutely honest I don't know much about poetry and I wouldn't have even come across his work if my manager, Lucy, hadn't rung me up one evening and told me this poet had stolen lyrics from one of my songs. It would have been lawyers at dawn if Lucy hadn't read the whole poem down the phone to me. You know what they say about the difference between lyrics and poetry? That the music is the thing. He didn't have the music but replaced it with something else. I don't know how one can write lyrics inside some other form of writing and make it look normal, natural, but like I said, I don't know much about poetry. He had used two of the verses, but he had found something better in the words, so much purer than what our song was trying to say. So I told Lucy, 'Get in touch with his people' and I had sent a letter off to him that next afternoon. It was probably far too full both of invective and of gushing praise, but he sent a reply within a week.

At the foot of the staircase, the foyer was dense with people, with barely any space between them, standing, sitting against the walls. Possibly they were in a queue which had wrapped upon itself like the curling of a snake, or possibly they were simply milling around and waiting, but it seemed impossible that there could be sequence in which one would be first and one last. The smell of them was like a drowning, like the water that burned the back of the nose, the throat.

The sound of their murmurings, such a deflated chorus, in their own language mainly, with fragments of English, fragments from prayers. "Dearest Jesus." I stepped down to the resonant wooden floor and began to push through the crush. "My comfort divine-" I had my feet stepped on, had elbows in my stomach, elbows in my breasts. "Dear Saviour, send the Glory-"

Above their voices, so barely above that at first I thought it just another voice, a little higher, a little more melodic, a pleasing oscillation, came the soft notes of piano keys. And there was a man's voice singing: "I sat down by my love, till she began to mourn, I'm of this opinion, that my heart is not my own." Bounced and shoved, I made my way through the corridors in the general direction of the palm court, for that was where the Governor had his piano. "Sometimes I think I'll go to my love and tell to him my mind-" As I pushed through the crowd, my passage seemed to alert them to the music, and they fell silent and turned their faces towards the sound. "My love he will say nay; I show to him my boldness and he'd never love me again-" And it was not too difficult, now the crowd had hushed, to follow the sound of singing to the heavy, brass-inlaid wooden doors of the palm court, which were wedged ajar with a dining chair. "I cannot think the reason young women love young men-"

The tune came to its end as I opened the doors, and as I saw Pakes and Killen at the piano they struck up another song.

"The captain cried all hands for we're away tomorrow, to leave my one true love at home in grief and sorrow." Pakes sang the mournful tune, accompanying himself with the spare, bouncing, familiar tune on the piano. He didn't have a strong voice but Killen appeared to know the song and lent his own voice, keeping time by drumming his hands on the piano lid, stamping his boot on the floorboards. Although at times they favoured different lyrics, they each gave way when the other seemed more confident. "She cried 'Why must you go from me and fight for strangers, when I would have you stay here away

from dangers?”

A calmly rolling wave of evacuees came through the door, moving around me, some of them singing, drawn in and coming on and on and filling the wide room. Perhaps they heard the piano before they heard the words, perhaps it was during one of the times when neither lad was sure of the lyrics to his song, but they must have recognised the tune for the soldiers' sad tale was overtaken by a hymn, stridently sung. And, yes, that was what it sounded like, that was where I had heard it, had sung it years ago at school. Neither Killen nor Pakes seemed to mind that their song had turned into something new, seemed quite happy to have an audience now.

—We have sent letters between us for almost a year now. He has sent me his poems, those he hasn't yet sent to his agent. In return, I send him recordings of my songs. And we tell each other our opinions of the work. A back and forth, some of him into me and some of me into him, I hope, at least a fraction. And I realise that I miss him - I have never met him but I miss him. How is that possible? Is that my childish imagination? Or is it, as I suspect, that so much of him has overtaken so much of me? That possibly sounds quite vain but I just ask you, if you are able, to listen to my first record and then listen to my latest. And after listening, I challenge you to tell me my music hasn't changed. It is like night and day.

More evacuees had entered the palm court, sitting on the floor, leaning against the walls. Franks and Bratt had arrived, to investigate the commotion, and they stood in the doorway, watching. I sat at the window and smoked. They sang of ploughboys and lost loves and the reaping of the barley, of corn dollies and graveyards and sly farmers' daughters, of beer, beer and the changing seasons, and all among the songs, all beneath them with the vastness of a sea, was the perpetuity of ageing and death and rebirth.

“What a load of bollocks,” Franks said, pushing through the crowd and sitting down beside me. He clapped his hands towards the piano. Killen gave him the finger. “Come on! Let's have some real songs, lads!”

“Oh, leave them alone,” I said, offering him a cigarette.

“But it's bollocks, mate. Why're we listening to a load of guff about harvests and things? I'm not a fucking farmer, mate.”

“Doesn't it speak to something deeper in you, though? Doesn't it make you remember home? Can't you see the corn, and the forests, you know, the land your

ancestors worked?"

"I'm from fucking Romford, mate, I've never set foot in a fucking field. Except to piss in it from the side of the road. My old man's a plumber and my granddad was one before him and I don't know and don't care what his dad did. It doesn't fucking touch me any deeper than listening to the Home Guard lads singing their anthems about kings and fucking fabled heroes, or a hymn at the sodding chapel, or the newest Elsie single. It's just fucking boring music, mate, from the last fucking century, and it doesn't do anything for me."

"Oh will you stop fucking moaning." I stubbed out my cigarette on the window sill and got away from Franks.

—So now you know who I am, at least as much as you'd need to to understand this letter, why I wrote it and sent it. You know the fundamentals of our relationship: it is a relationship based on a mutual admiration of each other's work. It is based on words. Just words, I suppose, for we have never met in person. Perhaps that sounds strange to you, for how much can really be conveyed with just words? How much can anything mean with just words? If you are asking yourself that question, just know that I have been asking that of myself for a long time now and I still have not been able to truthfully answer it.

I pushed open the door, it swung wide silently under its own weight, and watched him from that place. He was leaning over a desk at the far end of the first-floor office, writing quickly in a small black book. I could see under the desk, see his feet, one perched on its toes, the other resting on the heel of the first. So like a schoolboy, it was how I remembered he used to sit in the seminars at university when he would read his short stories to the class. After at least five minutes he looked up, with the sort of vacant expression of somebody not expecting to see anything, maybe a shadow. A little jump.

He said, "Amanda."

"I found you," I said, shutting the door behind me. He nodded at me, smiled with one half of his mouth. "What are you doing up here?"

"Finding a quiet corner."

"Hiding?"

He harrumphed and his cheeks went a little red. "If you like." He went back to writing in his small black book. I watched him, his face, as he wrote, the wrinkles on his nose, his clenched jaw, his cheek when, from time to time, he bit the flesh inside.

"Do you remember that evening after exams?"

He looked up. "Which evening?"

"It was, I don't know, one, two years ago. Probably second semester. It was the exam for the reading module."

"Reading module? Can't recall it, sorry."

"No, no, fuck the exam, but do you remember the evening afterwards?"

"There were many evenings, that's how each day ends—"

"Look, don't be a dick."

"I'm sorry, but, really, it doesn't stand out to me."

"All right. Forget it."

Martin sighed. "Christ, just tell me what it is about the evening you want me to remember. Why don't you tell me about the evening, your evening? Maybe I'll remember."

I shook my head. "That's not the reason I was asking. I wanted to know if you remember, and obviously you don't. And that's all I wanted to know."

His frown was deep and he slapped shut the black book and his pencil rattled on the desk in front of him. "What the fuck are you talking about? What happened?" I watched the pencil roll to the edge of the desk and for a second hang there. Then it dropped. Before it hit the floor, Martin drew in a breath. "Wait. Was it when you'd drunk too much? That time you were totally legless and I walked you back to your room?"

"Yeah, that would be the one."

"So what about it? You drank too much, I probably drank too much but not as much as you. I walked you home. 'Stumbled' you home, I guess would be more accurate. I think I tripped, didn't I? And I scraped my shin on the staircase, wasn't that it? Then I listened to you puke your guts out in your toilet for hours on end. Typical fucking night for your toilet, no doubt. Oh, then I fell asleep on the floor of your room, fucking uncomfortable floor and the sweet aroma of your vomit all around, oh, and then I woke up when the cleaning lady opened the door in the morning."

"Yes," I said. "That's it, that's the one."

He stared at me and shrugged perhaps the biggest shrug I'd ever seen.

—I sometimes wonder what it would be like if we got together. I'd be good to him, but awful sometimes; I don't think our lives would fit together very well. So I decided I'd love him at a distance, like watching him across the school playground, and cherish this crush and make it something glorious, in my mind. But then the next moment I decided I'd

drive my love like a joyrider, drive it into him, and do us both in spectacular fashion: all glass and tyres and blood like one of those police camera programmes. A too-serious commentary over thermal pictures from a helicopter. A horrible, ugly, false-colour mess of a love. Abstracted and ugly and great, like sex is.

The door opened and Dixson entered. Martin rose, stood sharply to attention. I slowly followed suit. He looked from one to the other. "What are you fuckers doing in here?"

"Nothing, Sir," Martin said.

"Then I need Budden to get on the blower to HQ and order us some planes. There are two already at the airfield, refuelling now. I've held them, but we need several more by noon tomorrow. And Welles, since you're so good at writing, maybe you'll be kind enough to help your platoon fill-out six hundred exit documents? I need one of your men, whoever speaks their language best, to tell those people downstairs that they'll have to leave their belongings here, we're going to have to walk to the airfield. Pick somebody tough, because they won't like to have to let go of their things."

—I'm sure you've felt it yourself, Masterson, the terror of not knowing, of having to make a decision in this world. Of having to choose a door to open. This world where the simplest choices have always only the cruellest outcomes, where behind one door would be deluge and behind the other drought. But, Masterson, what else is there for me to do? What else could there possibly be? Nothing but to open the door, to take the risk, to love, and to love lively, for what else is there of value on this earth? What can I possibly write at the end of this letter, but these words, in a way starting all over again:

—Dear Martin,

—I am waiting for you.

—Ever yours,

—Elsie

9.

—Dear Elsie,

—‘If you have time for thinking, you’re doing it wrong,’ he told me, but what time isn’t made for thinking? All time is for thinking, which doesn’t preclude other things from being piled upon the thinking, because there seems to me room enough in every moment for a thought and an action or a word or a perception of one’s place in the world. Don’t you think? And that doesn’t mean that every moment must have a thought within it, because sometimes moments come and there is no thought to fit it - or, it might be that the moment is so oddly shaped or so bent beyond its standard mould that no thought could possibly fit it. There have been many of those moments, recently.

“Jesus Christ, I don’t think I’ve ever touched this many people in me whole life,” Pakes says, his hands patting down the left leg of a tall young man. He isn’t talking to the man he is touching, who stands expressionless in the entrance hall of Government House, but to us, or perhaps to nobody. “You’ve got me mum, me dad, brother, probably twenty, you know, thirty-odd birds, couple of real nice girls. Shaking hands with a couple of lads, I guess. The geezer who gave me me job.”

“Doctor, dentist,” I say. The queue of people trails out of the large wooden double doors, down the cobbled path to the driveway, and then along the driveway to the iron gates at the front of the compound. I haven’t been to inspect the gates in the last hour, but it is possible that, by now, the line of refugees stretches further than that, snaking back down the main road to the town.

“Eh, that’s more like them touching me.”

“Right.” I watch as Polley, taking his time looking through the contents of a woman’s purse, is trying not to laugh. “Tackles?” I suggest. “On a Sunday.”

“Oh, yeah. Forty?”

“Fights, too.”

“Another ten, twelve.”

“So what’s that coming up to? A hundred?”

“Yeah, maybe, don’t know. How many have I done today?”

The figure is marked on my clipboard. “Two hundred and thirty-seven. Eight with this gentleman.”

“See? See? Didn’t I tell you? Christ.”

—I wrote some of this first in a diary I found in a drawer in a desk in an office belonging to somebody I’ve never met. It was the first paper I could find that wasn’t in a box marked for burning. It’s a diary from two years ago and, as I’ve flicked through the pages several times now, seems to be completely empty except for one day in April. ‘Remember Maggie’s birthday,’ it says, April 18th. It’s written in blue ink, deeply with a ballpoint, in a nice neat hand- much neater than mine. Male, female, it’s hard to tell, no significant sloping, nice large letters impressively joined up. I wish I could write that well. I don’t know if April 18th is Maggie’s birthday or whether the owner of the diary (Maggie’s husband, Maggie’s sister, Maggie’s owner if Maggie is a pet) just realised on April 18th that the date of Maggie’s birthday was significant enough or forgettable enough to deserve writing down. But why nothing else? A singularly forgettable or unforgettable event. It makes you wonder just what this diary’s owner was like, with such a fickle, or indeed, practically perfect memory. Is memory like that for you? I can’t say it’s perfect for me. It’s strange.

“Where do I go now, sir?” the young man asks me as Pakes, satisfied, waves him on. There’s sweat running down the side of his thin face, it seems to have found its favourite path, droplet following droplet on a course around cheekbone, over the curve of a puckered dimple, to a hanging point just behind his chin, where, drip drip, it falls on to his loose shirt. It’s sky blue with white buttons, dark spots on the shoulder.

I point to the door to the orderlies’ office. “Just through there. Give them your ID card.”

“Very good, sir,” he says, his heavily-accented voice high and boyish. “Thank you, sir.”

“Home Guard?” I ask.

“Yes, sir.” His hand wavers, a big hand with long fingers, as if he wants to raise it for a handshake. He must think better of it, and the movement becomes his own beckoning towards the door, as if assuring himself that it is the correct direction.

“All right.”

“We could do with a couple of them metal detectors, you know,” Pakes says. “One of them big arches like they have at the airport. Get them to walk under it, one at a time, you know the things?”

“Yeah, I know.”

A man in a dark grey suit, white shirt, pink tie. He wipes his oxbloods on the doormat, left foot, right foot, left, right, left, and then done. What might he have stepped in? Polley pats down his pinstripes, Pakes looks inside his briefcase. He thanks them both and smiles at me and I point him to the orderlies' office.

Two young men, brothers, light hair and sunburns, who flash their passports and say they're from England, and could we please, would we be awfully kind as to let them get the hell out of the country. On the next fucking plane, if you don't mind. Pakes pats the thighs of one, Polley the thighs of the other, and I nod and point them to the orderlies' office.

A mother, her head covered with a colourful, patterned scarf, carrying a small, sobbing boy. Polley tells her to put the child down and the boy starts to scream, grabbing at his mother's arms and legs. He is still wearing his pyjamas, with muddy trainers on bare little feet. His eyes are red and ringed with tears, his mouth open with white teeth bared as he screams and screams. The mother tries to make him stand by himself, pushes him, tries to hold him down to the floor, but the boy clings on, like a stubborn hair caught on the fingertips.

"Pakes, hold the boy for a second," I say. For a moment I wonder if the mother will object, but she has been emptied by the fight, and as Pakes picks up the writhing child and bounces him as best he can in his arms, she thanks me and forces a kind of smile that still has a little sincerity. Polley proceeds to pat the mother down and then Pakes reunites her with the child. The boy continues to cry and I point her to the orderlies' office.

"Fuckin' hell," Pakes says under his breath. We all share a smile. And it's okay and it's all washing off, but Pakes and Polley have touched two hundred and forty-odd warm and shivering and sweating and shaking bodies, and I have seen two hundred and forty-odd faces of fear, exhaustion, of desperation, and that is enough for one day. And that is enough. And still they come. And they are down the path to the drive now, and down the drive to the gates now, and past the gates, and now, no doubt, they're down the road to the town.

"It's eleven, Sir," Polley says, looking at his watch.

I look at mine, so untrusting. It is eleven. "All right. You lads have this under control?"

"Course, Sir."

"I'll ask Sergeant Longman to come up to the House."

“We don’t need the Sergeant, Sir.”

I nod. “Even so.”

“Right-o.”

The sun outside is gold and high and held up on the back of a blue sky as if in celebration. The line of people is a colourful procession, out the door, down the stone steps, along the cobbled path to the driveway, and farther. Mostly, they stand, but some sit on the ground, on the grass, some are lying, in the immobile queue, with sheets or newspapers over their heads to keep off the sun. Just outside the door, an old woman touches my arm as I pass her. She whispers, “God bless you.” I look at her for a moment, wonder what it is she hopes to escape, now, after all the years she has already endured, and nod, before walking on.

—All the ways of people smelling, their bodies and their breath, made worse, much worse, by the warmth of them and the closeness. The annoyance of their many voices, too, calling out and chattering and in two languages that were never meant to communicate. Somewhere there is the sound of weeping, not of a child, not for the multitude of little griefs that befall children, but weeping that takes the whole body, the seizing sort of weeping that commandeers the body. I’ve cried like that, once, I think.

I manage a few steps before a passport waves in my face. It’s held by a short young woman with fair, freckled skin, red hair, and light eyes windowed by small, wiry glasses. “English, I’m English!” she says.

“All right. Please just wait in the queue. Everybody’s going to the same place.”

“But the man at the gate said we could get in faster if we had our passports.”

“I don’t know what he meant by that, but we’re not doing any sort of fast track. Everybody has to go through that door.”

“But-”

“I don’t have the men to deal with two queues, all right? This is the only way it’s going to work. Right now I have a line of, what, a thousand people, and I don’t expect it to get any shorter, no matter how many claims we process. Half the people in this country want to leave, they just haven’t got here yet. So, you know, you’ve got a dozen in front of you, and a million behind, so really you’re one of the lucky ones.”

“Welles!” Dixson comes jogging up the queue from the direction of the gate. He shoos the woman towards the door. “You’ve got to let them in first.” He turns to the people

near him. "Everyone who's not English, move to the side." He makes more shooing motions. "Get your men out here to deal with the line, Mary."

"Pakes! Polley! Step lively! Get your arses out here now!"

Dixson taps my elbow and leans in. "Governor wants it this way. I got an earful earlier. Look. I told him, I told him, 'We don't have enough men for that, Sir.' And he called me a bugger and a waste of space. He says, 'I asked for a regiment of England's finest' or words to that affect, and then he says, 'And what did they send me? A regiment of Essex boys.' So, you see, I'm not going to take that, so I said, 'It could've been worse, Sir-' and I pause, for effect, and then say, 'They could've sent you two.' So, look, he's none too pleased with me."

"Yes, Sir. I just think--"

"If you're finding time to think, you're not doing it right, Mary. Those are my orders, and now they're yours too. So don't be a dickhead and just do what I tell you to."

"Yes, Sir."

"And Mary, your men look like shit. Smarten them up. Come on, I mean, Sergeant Longman, at the gate? He's the first beacon these people will see, he's supposed to be the white fucking cliffs of fucking Dover and he's got an unbuttoned shirt, sandals, fucking shorts, fag in the corner of his mouth. I didn't even see a weapon. It isn't Dover, it's fucking Canvey Island. What a show."

"The war's over--"

"Oh fuck off. The war's over when we're home. And we won't be home until this lot is sorted. So get your act together."

"Sir."

Dixson looks up and watches Pakes and Polley come running over. I tell them curtly to see to the line and allow passport holders to have priority. Their faces show no ambivalence about their feelings, but neither looks to the Captain, and they fall to their job. I, however, do look at Dixson. He is sweating in the heat. Large dark patches on his shirt, in the middle of his chest, like too-enthusiastic shadows beneath his arms. But he doesn't smell of sweat, he smells of aftershave, perfume, not any hint of his body. He is so close and hot, I can feel him as if he's actually pushed against me, even several inches away from his skin. He is like a presence and a pressure, rather than a person.

He sighs. When he opens his mouth his breath is a mist of alcohol and the

unmistakable, deep-breathed trace of weed, one up out of his stomach, the other up out of his lungs, and all of it seems just air, not anything of him, just warm air. “And then the snarky arsehole asks, ‘Do you have an Essex boy to take me to the airfield?’ and I told him, ‘No, Sir, it’s an Essex girl.’ So I’ve had Budden and Harris fetch him a Land Rover. That’ll show the fucker.”

“All right.”

“All right, Mary, crack on.”

—And all this prompts the conclusion, that there are far too many people on the earth and each person, their heat and their noise, takes up twice the space it should. Then it comes, not as a surprise, but slowly in spits and starts like a dream recalled, then suddenly all at once at the end, clearly at last, that the bad breath and the sweat is yours, and has been yours all along. Those voices, too, so familiar now, and, of course, nowhere near as bad, have been quarrelling in your head for years, all this chattering and this weeping.

Longman is still smoking when I arrive at the gate. The sunglasses on his nose are small-lensed and black, like holes. Standing in the space between the wide-swung iron gates, sandaled feet spread above an ample broadcast of dog ends, the sergeant talks to each person in the line, directs those of them who have brought their belongings towards Bratt and Franks, who are building numerous unstable structures out of suitcases, rucksacks, and plastic bags. The cigarette flaps in his mouth as he sees me and mutters, “Morning, Sir.”

“Morning. Any trouble?”

“Only from the Captain.”

“All right.”

“I’ve sent Drove down the line to pick out the Brits.”

“How long is it now, the line?”

Longman takes off his sunglasses, flips them closed, and slides them neatly into the breast pocket of his shirt, all in a single motion he seems to have performed countless times before. The sun now pours its unobstructed light onto him, and he blinks only once, like it’s the dull sun he grew up with, like it’s nothing new. No tears, the light doesn’t even seem to reflect off the wetness in his eyes. He doesn’t need to shield them as he looks down the road. “Probably getting on for a mile. I’ve had to have Phil and Wright move the road block further along towards the town. We were getting too many vehicles coming up the road.”

The distance to me is overtaken by the sunlight and everything beyond the first ten

metres becomes a blurred, teary vagueness. So trusting. "All right. Captain said Budden and Harris went for a Land Rover?"

"Yes, Sir." Longman flicks the end of his cigarette to the tarmac. He stares at it, the glowing ember on the black driveway, a final funnel of smoke rising, almost as if he wants to bend down and pick it back up. Gently, he crushes it with the toe of his sandal. "You know, that's my last fucking fag. When do we get to go home?"

I smile. "I'd sooner not say."

—It's the strange little things that return, like that one time I remember a double history after lunch, while, with tightened trousers, we watched the Lower Sixth girls - the netball team in their short blue skirts - walk past the windows in single file. And I can't tell you why it is I remember that, or quite what it says about me or how I was then, but I can't believe that the memory, small as it is, has no bearing on who I am. You could say that the memory has lived again, while it has no doubt died in the minds of all others involved, all those girls in their skirts, the boys in the classroom, and has brought itself back into being, has made itself important, by my writing it in this letter to you. It has crowned you and me. This letter marks the passing - from the world to me, from me to you - a kingly passing of a moment that has gone.

Longman stares at me for a while. Strangely, it is not uncomfortable. It is not critical, it is not judgemental. A long, silent stare. And it's my eventual frown, perhaps, a not unkind frown, a frown lacking anger at least, that makes him finally speak. If we weren't here, if he bore no echelons on his shirt, if we didn't have this shared year and these shared times, it might have been different. Perhaps it is for him, perhaps he could put all of that aside.

"They tried to cut your heart out, son," he says. "At the farm, when they almost took you. They tried to cut your heart out and they would've eaten it. You know that, don't you? Did they tell you that? When I was knifing those bastards, when they were on top of you with their machetes, when I was stabbing them in their fucking throats, I was fucking laughing, son."

I watch his eyes.

"They would've hacked open your ribs, and taken out your heart, and carried it in their fucking pockets to their shaman and he would have done some magic on it and they would've fucking eaten it. That's what I've heard, that's what the Home Guard lads are saying these bastards do. So don't you feel any shred of guilt about anything that's been

done here, because there's no shame in what we did. When God is judging us, he's going to be looking at them, and he's going to be bringing down his fucking fire upon them, because compared to the evil they do, the evil we do is spit, it's fucking spit."

I nod, and in a voice that seems to me tiny and weak, I say, "I need you up at the House."

—Every poem, every song, every memory, from me to you, you to me. I couldn't really say they were important, I wouldn't say they were holy, but they are each a survivor from a world now gone, and each precious in its own, small way. We have kept them safe as they evacuate, as they escape the time we've lost and are still losing, annihilated by the now. At least that's the way I see it, here, in the now, writing this in somebody else's empty diary from two years ago.

"Mary, come with me," Dixon says, standing at the door, watching the shorter queue advance, watching the longer queue remain. "Governor wants to see us."

"Yes, Sir."

"Do you have your cap?"

"Not on me."

"Get your fucking cap, Mary."

So I get my cap from the table we set up in the entrance hall, where my clipboard has been put down and not picked up and upon which the count of evacuees is no longer tallied. Under Longman's supervision, Polley and Pakes pat each person still, each pale or tanned or sunburnt person, but only once or twice, a bit like a congratulation, before waving them through to the orderlies' office.

We follow them into the office. A group of orderlies in their black uniforms stand by the windows, watching the two lines of evacuees approach the desks set up in the centre of the room. One line, that of the passport holders, moves quickly to the desk at which Swain is sitting. He glances at their passports, writes a few lines on a white form, and then directs the evacuee to another door. The other desk, where Corporal Pallister sits, has a single person in front of it, the mother with her child. The child is crying and the mother is shouting at Pallister.

An orderly starts to move forward to intervene, but Pallister sees him and holds up a hand. To the mother, he says, "I can't issue you a visa for the child, because you don't have a birth certificate for him."

“I will not leave him! How can you do this? This is my son, he is my son! I gave birth to him from my body! He was inside my body! He is mine.”

“I’m sorry but if you don’t have a birth certificate-”

“What is a birth certificate?”

“It’s a form, a piece of paper-”

“A piece of paper? You are telling me I need a piece of paper? This is my baby, this is my son! What is a piece of paper?”

“It’s not just a piece of paper, it’s a document that states you are the boy’s mother-”
Pallister sees us at last and his eyes widen. “Sir! Sir! I need some help over here!”

Dixson walks over. I stay behind him. “Just tell me straight,” he says to the corporal, “what do you need to make this work?”

“Sir, look, without the birth certificate, there’s no way to be sure that this is her child.”

Dixson stares at the corporal for a moment, then turns to the mother. “Is this your child?” he asks.

“Yes!” she replies. The boy is holding her around the neck so tightly, she almost gasps the word.

He turns back to the corporal. “Just write it on there that I took the birth certificate. I needed to inspect it. And I’ve lost it in the throng.”

“But, Sir, I can’t lie on an official-”

“Yes, you can. And I will lie when it comes to me. We’re all going to lie and it’s all going to work out. Because this is the right thing to do. This is the only thing that matters now, making sure these people don’t die. I know it, you know it, the lieutenant knows it.”

Dixson points at Swain at the other desk. “Even Swain knows it.”

“That’s right, Sir,” Swain says, not looking up from his paperwork. “But to be honest, I’m really not listening to a word you lot are saying.”

The corporal sighs and picks up a pen. “What did you want me to write?”

—Remember Maggie’s birthday. April 18th. Out of all these dates, this year of pages, out of all this empty time, he or she has passed that on, has passed it to me, and now to you. A clerk who once worked in Government House, who maybe now is back in England, or maybe now is beneath the earth, who left their diary in the bottom drawer of an old oak desk, in a tiny office off the first floor landing, by a large bay window with grubby panes,

which looks out over a once well-kept garden, with roses, dead roses, all crushed and stamped now to the soil. He has sent that on, only that. I don't even know what matters now, or if anything ever did.

The Governor, his back to the open window, sits in a burgundy leather chair behind a monolithic partners desk that dwarfs him, makes him seem a child. Upon the desk are piles of empty forms, a newspaper from England, a coloured, contoured map of the Colony with ESSEX and the other assumed place names written upon it in red ink. I can see MALDON, EPPING, SOUTHEND, HALSTEAD. On a crystal ashtray in one corner, a slender half-smoked cigarette lies smouldering. In the opposite corner of the desk, a tumbler engraved with a pair of ghostly pheasants, an almost empty decanter of whiskey beside it. There is, opened near the middle and placed face-down upon the desk so its spine is bent almost double, a copy of *Empire Day*.

We step up to the middle of the office and stand to attention. He regards us over the tops of his half-moon reading glasses. "Captain Dixson. Lieutenant Welles. I would offer you each a cup of tea but I appear to have misplaced the servants. My apologies."

"Sir. Quite all right, Sir."

—I must leave you with that for time is short.

"Is it you, Captain, I have to thank for this?" He gestures to the door, to the window. "There's not a great deal of breeze through here. The smell from downstairs is growing quite overpowering. I will not miss this, believe me."

"It's just the smell of people, Sir. All people tend to smell the same when you bunch them up and make them sweat."

"I can appreciate that." The Governor scratches his nose, flicks his fingers towards Dixson. "I know you're an old boy, Captain. What about you Mr Welles? Secondary modern?"

I look to Dixson. He nods. "Grammar school, Sir."

"Well, yes, of course." His hands are in constant contact, stroking, tugging, twisting, as if he is never entirely convinced his fingers are still attached, has to reassure himself. But he never looks at his hands, he doesn't seem to be aware of it, an unconscious obsession of touch, his hands in possession of a distinct independence and well beyond his influence. "I regularly find myself returning to those school years. Quite frequently in these darker days, I must admit, and I increasingly find myself quite overcome with a sense of ... loss, perhaps?"

What do you think of that? What could that possibly mean?"

"Some unfinished business? One often has dreams of school."

"Perhaps. I always thought there was something numinous in the boy's changing room, little bits of God or ghosts buoyed about on every particle of sweat, in that uneven air of smells. Armpits half-heartedly deodorised. You know the smell. I think I must have breathed it in and kept it, somewhere in my lungs, and it grew divine in its perpetuity as everlasting things tend to do. It can't be flushed, I think, or refuses to be, despite the substitution of my body's every cell, pulmonary included, a whole new body after so many years, isn't it? Perhaps it is hanging in a hollow somewhere, mocking the transience of its neighbouring atoms as they shuffle in and out, in their millions. It's a nice thought, and comforting. The smell of boys remains."

Dixson coughs. "That all sounds rather unwholesome, Sir."

"I suppose in this day and age, yes, I could have put it better."

"Choice of words would not have helped, I fear."

"But you know the smell."

"Of course."

The Governor turns to me. "And you?"

"Yes, Sir."

"And you can smell it now."

I nod. "Yes, Sir."

"The young man proves my point." The Governor smiles at Dixson. "Choice of words aside, we may not bring back the past splendour. We have what remains behind."

Dixson rubs his jaw, roughly, his cheek distorting. He is clearly losing his patience. He approaches the desk, leans upon it. With a quick motion, he grabs the map and pulls it to the centre of the desk, rapping his knuckles on the word ESSEX. "I need your help, Sir. To redeem this whole sorry mess."

"A mess? I'm sorry, Captain, exactly how might I help you?"

"My orders now are to evacuate those in danger of reprisals, to disarm the population as far as is possible, and to find and destroy stockpiles of weapons. I am bound to you, to ensure your safety, to ensure that you and your staff are on that plane tonight. By the deadline in four days' time, I hope what is left of my regiment is also in the air, or better yet at home, but I have no guarantee of that, I cannot guarantee that. We have been

abandoned by the Army and by our country, it seems. Left here like a morsel of food just waiting to fall into the toothy maw.”

“Indeed. I do not envy you. The government has gone above both our heads, I’m afraid, and they’ve really dropped us in it. Entirely unfair. It certainly sounds as if you have been assigned a quite difficult job.”

“Difficult? It’s my job to calculate on the unforeseen,” Dixson says. “In this job there is little reason, no order, a great jumble of directions and bearings— it defies mapping. There are no landmarks. You have to make peace with that, to be assured in uncertainty. Do you think many people can live in the unknown? To be lost in the centre of the mystery and be fine with it? Naked in the tiger pit? No, not many.”

“How might I assist you, in these final hours?”

“Sir, I advise you to get on the phone and tell them to bring up more planes. As many as you can get. I advise you to fill those planes with as many evacuees as they have seats and when they’re full and they’ve taken off and they’ve been emptied in England, bring them back and fill them again.”

“Have you any idea, Captain, what would happen if I let them all into England, all these people who think they have a claim to our country? I would be crucified. I can assure you of that.”

“Sir, I urge you to consider this plan. To save these people would be—”

“Save them? From whom? This is their country- now. This is their country now. Not ours anymore. This is what they wanted, all along.”

Dixson takes a breath, turns his head to me.

I join him at the desk. “Sir. They don’t care if the people they catch are locals or if they’re English, if they think they’re Home Guard, if they think they wore that uniform, or had anything to do with us, they will shoot them or hang them or butcher them. The only thing that will be left of these people will be their smell, trapped inside you, rotting in your lungs forever. Do you want them alive in England or do you want them dead in England? Because, either way, Sir, they’re going home with you.”

—Ever yours,

—Martin

“Mr Welles.” The Governor pushes back in his chair, away from us, the leather creaking against his movement. He taps his finger tip on his desk, his nail loud on the dark-

stained walnut. His other hand touches his cheek as he looks at me. "Perhaps it would be best, as we come to the end of our time here, for all of us to consider this war's legacy. I am sure there are things the Army would rather those at home did not discover. Perhaps there were indiscretions, perhaps when hot-headedness got the better of a squaddie or two. And the Home Guard, they were practically untrained, isn't that right? Of course, I'm sure your regiment did its damndest to whip them into shape, but the nature of those men—"

"Sir—"

"Welles," Dixon says. I look at him. He is not looking at me, his eyes are fixed on the Governor. "We'll continue to process the evacuees in the manner you prescribed."

"Thank you, Captain. Would you kindly have a man find me when my transport arrives?"

"A man? Yes, Sir."

"Well then. Carry on, gentlemen."

We salute and turn and walk to the door. Dixon touches my arm and murmurs, "Don't look so fucking glum: when this cunt is gone, I will be the king of this country, and I'll do as I like."

—PS. Please find attached the poem that I promised you. It isn't any good, lately they rarely are, because something's gone, the bottom's fallen out. Perhaps the first line stays steady, perhaps it has some merit, it hangs up there like a Norman arch, pointedly holding on, while below it, all's in ruin. I don't know, all words seem less than useless now, or rather they only work when arranged on forms or in reports. Such rare workers, these words. No time here for rhymes or beauty. All conscripted now to save lives or careers. And perhaps there's no higher calling, and perhaps we should all surrender and be gladly dumb forever, and let these words be plane tickets and exit visas. I think I would be happy with that, quiet and happy, and wordless I would be a person again, some sort of person.

10.

—THERE SHE GOES AGAIN!

—PANIC IN THE RANKS (Elsie Anders, William Raft)

—I cannot be the only one who feels in familiar territory as soon as Elsie Anders' name appears in capitals on the screen, and I cannot be the only one whose spirit feels positively renewed by the end of the first musical number. With her every-girl appeal and a quaint charm that is quintessentially English (and she's not hard on the eyes either!), we are ready and willing to follow Ms Anders wherever the story may take her - and, in this case, we are on our way to the deepest jungle.

Martin leaned against the wall, one hand in his hair, one foot drawn up, knee jutting out. All angles and shapes. He stared at the door on the opposite wall of the corridor, stared at the words SECURE PROCESSING 4, drew his hand down his face, his lips against the back of his wrist, and coughed. "You know," he said to me, "we should have killed him back then."

"Hmm."

"I mean, we could've done it there, couldn't we? At the university? You, me, I mean both of us had ample opportunity to do it before the cuffs came out." His hand in the air, conducting thoughts. "He had a weapon, he—" He stopped talking but his hand continued to move.

"Hmm."

"What do you think they did to him? Torture? Beatings. Dixson's told me some stories. Eseley. Lieutenant Eseley's done some things."

"Worse things have happened to better people."

The door opened and made Martin jump. Ombarrago stepped out into the corridor, urged forwards by two Home Guard corporals, burly men with cloth masks tied over their mouths and noses. He wore khaki slacks which he had to hold up at his waist, and a buttoned-up white shirt stained coffee brown around the collar. His arms were thin, his feet bare, and all the tendons of his neck stood out like the exposed roots of a tree.

At first, nobody talked. Martin slid his foot down off the wall, flattened his hair, and crossed his arms. To within an inch they were the same height, Ombarrago's head slightly

lower, as he had to twist awkwardly at the waist to hold his trousers up. They stared at each other. Ombarrago almost like a pedestrian at the kerb, gauging traffic. Martin almost like a child by a broken window, gauging a mother's anger, constructing the lies. Could Ombarrago smell the university on Martin? Smell the creative writing, the photocopies, the "I really liked it"s. To his credit, Martin didn't shrink, returned the gaze with a sort of stubbornness so Ombarrago was the first to look away.

"All right?" he asked Ombarrago. The wasted man looked back at him. "All right," Martin said again, the same tone, perhaps the first had not been a question after all.

"Sir," one of the corporals said, from behind his mask, "we release him to you."

"All right," Martin said again, holding out a hand towards me. Ombarrago moved as directed, his passage silent but for the soft slap of his skin on the tiled floor, the sound of his baggy clothes shifting against his body.

We followed the narrow, tiled corridor to another narrow, tiled corridor, and another, followed red lines painted on the walls, on the floor, past locked rooms labelled with words like SECURE and CONTROL and EMERGENCY. One door said PUNISHMENT and I pointed it out to Martin. He sharply shook his head and kept on walking. Through sets of double doors, barred like cages, named AIRLOCK X1 and AIRLOCK X2 and X3 and X4, each guarded by a pair of similarly masked guards, until the red lines ended at a wooden, glass-paned door labelled B. HALL with a yellow circle beneath it.

"Stop," Martin said, stepping in front of Ombarrago. He pulled a cloth from his pocket, shook it out. Ombarrago looked at him, expressionless, looked at the cloth in his hands. The shaking began in his arms, then his head started to move, then his legs. His breathing was fast and loud.

"Sir," I said. "You should tell him."

"All right." Martin sighed, cleared his throat. "I'm Lieutenant Welles. We're taking you out of the prison and we're going to drive you out of the city, down the coast, about a hundred miles. And then we're going to let you go. There'll be some people waiting for you. Your people. And that'll be that, we'll have no further business with you." He opened the cloth bag, straightened the strings and rolled the open end down a little. "I just wanted to let you know. You know, that we're not going to kill you. We're not going to harm you."

Quickly, he raised the bag above Ombarrago's head and brought it down until the man was hooded. The bag sucked in with Ombarrago's breathing, in and out. He made no

other sounds. Martin cinched the string. He unbuttoned his holster and drew his service pistol.

“If they recognise him,” he said, “we’re in trouble.”

I placed my back to the door and pushed it open. Lines of chained prisoners marched down the next hallway, three abreast, guards armed with batons keeping them straight, shouting orders. The smell of their sweat and the heat of their bodies. The unrelenting clattering of their shackles. Somebody’s wayward arm brushed against me. “After you,” I said.

When Ombarrago had passed me, Martin murmured, “Harris’ll drive. You and me with him in the back.”

“Are we hiding him?”

“I’d rather we didn’t have to explain it to the Home Guard.” Martin directed Ombarrago along the hall, hugging the wall. “Straight to the end and through the doors. Quickly.”

As we passed the prisoners, some would look at us, at our charge, and perhaps they knew who it was and perhaps they didn’t but it didn’t matter, as whoever looked received a crack on the skull from a baton and then they didn’t look again. Blood and moaning. Drops of blood on the tiles. Dashed like imperfections in the on the ash grey glazing, little red bubbles. Yellow lines on the floor and walls. Martin kept his eyes always forward, his hand on Ombarrago’s shoulder, not letting go, pushing him towards a pair of doors at the very end of the hall. The word EXIT.

The yellow lines took a sharp left at the doors and went on down a long perpendicular hallway, stretching away into a grey distance. The prisoners marched on, wheeling to the left, down this new tunnel. Martin didn’t pause, took his shoulder to the door, almost lifting Ombarrago off his feet as he pulled him through. I followed and, without another look, let the door close behind me.

—Ms Anders stars as Gloria, a nurse who finds herself stranded in the forbidding jungle, and William Raft (a more capable leading man a lady could hardly ask for!) plays Captain Harington, sole survivor of his unit after a devious ambush by the enemy. Rescued in the nick of time by Harington, Gloria and he must face the perils of the jungle and a merciless enemy, as the Captain escorts her back to civilisation. Adventure and romance are in store for hero and heroine.

Martin placed a hand in the small of the man's back and pushed him, not roughly, into the sunlight. We followed and stepped out into the central courtyard around which wrapped Bullwood's concrete halls. Tiny square windows high in the walls, chain-link fences, wooden sentry posts with armed guards. The ambulance was parked where we had left it, twenty paces from the prison's main door, with Harris leaning against the driver's door, smoking a cigarette.

Martin holstered his pistol. He led Ombarrago across the gravel. Harris tossed her cigarette to the ground and saluted. "Are we ready to go?" she asked, eager, her face pale.

"Yeah, we're going."

Martin pulled open the doors and vaulted up into the back of the ambulance, a windowless box on the back of the Land Rover chassis. I helped Ombarrago to step up, climbed up behind him, and slammed the heavy doors behind me. Martin moved him a long way by his shirt, pushed him down onto one of the two benches inside. Ombarrago went down heavily and let out a grunt. Martin sat on the opposite bench and I sat beside him, both of us facing the hooded man. Martin's fingers were shaking as he loosened the string on the bag and pulled it first over Ombarrago's chin, and then lifted it off the man's head in a quick motion.

The engine coughed and the Land Rover shook and then there was rhythm and reverberation in the metal box, the benches, the cabinets of medical supplies, the stretchers folded on the floor, each thing moving against its neighbours, rattling, straining, metal against wood and plastic and the three of us, bouncing unsecured. The watery sound of the gravel displaced by the tyres. Martin's teeth clenched. Ombarrago's rapid breath, his wide eyes. The heat, oh, the heat in here.

"Cheer up," Martin said. "You won. You're going home."

—With three well-received films already and a string of hit smash songs, Ms Anders could well be forgiven for 'going through the motions' at such a point in her career, and it is a credit to her craft that each new performance is not only fresh but going from strength to strength. Mr SJ Ampton fulfils his workmanlike duty as director and the evidence of his firm hand is clear in the top-notch performances from his stars and their supporting cast. The dialogue is light and humorous, and although it is often delivered at a dizzying clip it never fails to hit its mark and highlight the sparkling chemistry between Anders and Raft.

"Oi mate," I said to Ombarrago. "Any time you want to thank us, you go right on

ahead, all right?”

“Don’t expect him to answer you. He doesn’t speak English.”

“What?”

“He won’t speak English.”

“Why?”

“It’s the language of the invader.”

“Well,” I said, “this is going to be an uncomfortable trip.”

The Land Rover slowed and the bumping subsided.

“Security checkpoint,” Martin said. His hand was on his holster. We could hear barely hear Harris’s voice over the idling engine. Another voice responded, deeper. Harris’s voice again, level, unfussed. “They wouldn’t—” I started to say, but Martin put a finger to his lips, turned his head slightly so that the gesture included Ombarrago. Once more the deeper voice. A laugh. Then Harris’s laugh. “Cheers,” we heard her distinctly say. The Land Rover’s old engine wrestled with its fuel, its parts working loud as war, a moment of hesitation like pounding on a door, then it found its stride and the ambulance pounced forward and all three of us rocked to the side, almost fell off our benches.

When we had recovered and resumed our seats and reacquainted ourselves with the regular movement of the vehicle, we heard Harris on the intercom.

On our way now, Sir.

Martin’s knee reached Ombarrago’s, the rocking making their caps kiss. We all were looking at it. Martin sighed, leaned back and set his head against the vibrating shell of the ambulance. Then he slowly pitched forward, placed his elbows on his knees and placed his head in his hands. I heard him whisper, “Dear Father, thank You for Your watchfulness and Your faithfulness. You are with us in times of danger, Lord, Your love and Your protection are unwavering, Lord. Jesus, Your incredible love is manifest. We pray that it will continue to shield us and guide us and our friend. Yours is the victory and the glory, and nothing is possible unless it comes through You. Jesus, in Your precious, holy name we pray, amen.”

I coughed. “Don’t expect him to answer you.”

“Well, I believe He’s answered it all already.”

“Okay then.”

There was a slow flow of heat from the two men, heat and the smell of sweat, finding all the corners of the ambulance, finding all the holes. Martin’s shirt was wet under

the arms and wet on the chest. Ombarrago's chin dripped, silvery lines descending the stairs of his face from the high line of his close-cropped hair, down his wide forehead, over his cheeks, the displaced tip of his nose. From below, or from the cracks in the doors, the smell of diesel and dirt. What dirty and desperate things we all seemed and for a moment it was hard to escape from the thought. I wiped my face with the back of my hand, ran my hand through my hair.

—NO NEED FOR TAKE TWO WITH ELSIE!

—KISSES FROM ELSIE (Elsie Anders, Terry Copple)

—Box office darling Elsie Anders plays Elsie Anders in this new Pathé production. A rollicking romance set in the very studio in which it is filmed, Kisses From Elsie sees our starlet, alongside Pathé stablemate Terry Copple, racing against time to finish their movie after a rich producer withdraws their funding.

Ombarrago watched me.

"Look," I said to him, "you don't give a shit, I know, why should you, but you know who you remind me of? An ex. He was the fittest lad at my school, but he was total crap at schoolwork, maths, English, French, you name it he failed at it, so he went and got himself an apprenticeship. It was with, I suppose, a scaffolder? They did your run of the mill scaffolds on houses but also like stages and fun fairs and stuff. Any big temporary construction. Scaffolder? I don't know. Doesn't matter. His name was Darren—"

"Oh, okay, Darren," Martin said, emphasising the first syllable.

"What, I told you about him?"

"You mentioned him. Long time ago."

"All right. Well, yeah, this is about Darren." I pointed at Ombarrago. "You don't know about him, so, yeah—"

"Seriously, the man doesn't care."

"He won't know if he cares until he hears the story. Let's not tell him what he does and doesn't care about. It's a free country, right? So, anyway, we were getting pretty serious. Doing all sorts of stuff. Fucking fifteen, I was, at the start. Mum would've done her nut. Well, I say that, she actually did do her nut when she found out. You know, ordered me to my room, no phone, no dates. One time, because we'd somehow planned to meet and Mum was going to go out but eventually didn't, I'm not sure why, but this one time I

remember climbing over the fence at the bottom of the garden, the back garden, and going out across the allotments. I was getting all these looks from the old boys in their deck chairs, you know, tending their veg, fag in the corner of their mouth, handkerchief on their head, that sort of thing. I'm in a little skirt, a really busty top, you know, wearing these really stupid shoes, fucking heels getting covered in soil and mulch and what have you, skipping over their rhubarb and slipping between the bean stalks. His dad's house was right there so we, you know. And then I'm going back through the fucking allotments, hair all everywhere, back through the fucking, what was it, rhubarb and shit, back over the fence, back through the garden, back to my room. You know, shower and bed."

The Land Rover slowed. Harris's voice, Home Guard, hold on. We sat in silence, listened. There was no talking, Harris didn't stop, and the engine grew louder after a minute. Never mind, Harris said, they didn't care. Martin touched the intercom. "Thank you," he said. "Cheers, Bomber," I called while his finger was still on the button.

—With a cohort of their closest acting pals, Anders and Cople must scrape together footage while overcoming disgruntled studio officials and a vengeful exec who is determined to see the film never makes it to the projection room. But they also find the time for romantic dalliances and moonlight walks - who could fail to make the time for the young lady who sends the hearts of a million young men into palpitations?

Martin looked at me. "Continue," he said.

"You know, I was fifteen, I was young, right? And it had been like three years of us together, doing this and that. So, after one time in his bed, and don't get me wrong that was, he was pretty incredible in that sense, in his bed I said 'I love you' and that kinda killed the whole thing. You know, I was expecting an 'I love you' back, wouldn't you after three years? Yeah, and he dumped me. Said he wasn't looking for anything serious right now. Whatever that means, he'd been looking for it for three years. On and off, I suppose. But still. It crushed me. I'd walk round the town, along the river, down to Tilbury docks and back again to get him off my mind. This was the last summer holiday before uni. I'd done my final exams, you know. The days were bad but the nights were worse. God, I spent I don't know how many days moping around, going around town, half-wanting to bump into him, half dreading it. But I did run into his old mate, Steve, and Steve was all right. He was no Darren, right, but yeah, he was not bad. So this all came to a head, when Steve had taken me to see a film at the State. I forget what it was, some Eric Chambers piece of shit probably, we didn't

watch much of it, just sat at the back in the dark snogging, his hand up my skirt, that was who he was, and I gave him that much.”

Martin frowned. “Why?”

“He paid for my ticket. I mean, I enjoyed it, don’t get me wrong, he was an all right kisser.”

“Okay.”

“After the film, though, when Steve was, you know, sniffing his fingers and whatever, guess who the fuck we saw outside the State, out in the road? Yeah, right, fucking Darren. And guess who the fuck he was with? Amber fucking Chapman from college. Oi oi, I thought, what’s going on here? So I went up to them and asked Darren what he was doing with her. And Amber, well, she’s always been a gobby cow, and she’s all ‘jog on’ and she’s saying, oh, they’d been going out for years. Yeah, right under my fucking nose. And I told her that him and me had been going out for years. And she screamed at him and then she screamed at me, well, she saved the worst of it for me. She started gobbing off, calling me a slapper and a tramp. Giving it all that—” I imitated her jerky head movements, “you know, and sticking out her bony hip. Well, fine, I thought, say what you like about me, that’s fine, and I gave her it back and more. But then she started going on about my Mum and my Dad, I guess Darren had told her or she’d got it from school or something, but, yeah, no, I thought, I’m not having that. So I grabbed her by the hair, you know, right at the roots, pulled her around and sort of spun her away, waited for her face to come around then punched her square in the fucking nose. It probably didn’t land as well as it should’ve, I think it hit her cheek or her eye first, but then her nose started bleeding, you know, proper gushing, and she screamed and fell flat on her arse. That shut her right up.”

“Jesus Christ.”

“What? I left it at that. You know, I didn’t pummel her. She pissed off and Darren pissed off and I said goodnight to Steve and I was off to uni the day after. I met you a couple of days later, I suppose. What about you, did you ever do anything like that when you were younger?”

“What? Get in fights? No. No, I kept myself to myself mostly.”

“Not even over a girl?”

“No, sorry, not even—”

“Well you’re an absolute fucking saint.” I shook my head at Martin, tutted. He made

a small dismissive sound in the back of his mouth, smiled slightly. Ombarrago stared at him.

Martin stretched. "I need a piss. You?"

"Yeah, I could go."

"All right." Martin touched the intercom on the wall. "Harris, next service station."

The Land Rover slowed and Harris's voice came back over the speaker, What are the chances?

—It is no surprise that Anders steals the show, her pitch-perfect performances and flawless footwork in the beautifully choreographed musical numbers never fail to impress. When the story grows thin or by the end of the long film's second hour, one might be forgiven a certain weariness, but you can always rely on Elsie's sparky attitude and youthful energy to carry the audience to the conclusion. And what a conclusion! It is well worth putting in the effort to reach the end, as the film's final number is staggering in its audacity, and its assured execution is a testament to the skill of both director SJ Ampton and that of his two young leads.

Harris had parked the ambulance at the side of the coastal road. Martin had taken Ombarrago to the landward side of the vehicle, while Harris and I had chosen the opposite.

For the men, the scrubland of grasses and shrubs and red soil, an occasional tree almost by accident, gentle rolls rising to the highlands at the heart of the country. For us, beyond a metal crash barrier that ran the length of the road, the ocean spread out away to the horizon, a beautiful green blue, speckled with the dark and multi-coloured shapes of boats, their small bright sails protruding forwards like thorns or shark teeth. Closer, on sand banks as white as cuttlebones, fishermen cast and retrieved their nets, wading knee-deep into the slate ocean with trousers rolled up to their knees, broad hats keeping the sun off as they worked. Farther out, sea birds soared and dived above swirls of creamy water.

Emma tapped out a cigarette and set it between her lips. She offered me one and I took it, accepted the flame from her lighter.

"Grab me the loo roll, would you?" I said, climbing over the crash barrier.

"No probs."

I unbuttoned my trousers and squatted in the tufty grass that covered a shallow incline to a pebbly beach. I could almost enjoy the moment, brief as it was, the view, the cigarette, the relief. Emma came over, trailing smoke, and sat on the barrier, facing away from me. She held out the toilet roll behind her.

“So what happens when we let this bloke go?” she asked.

“It starts the timer and we’ll have a week to leave the country,” I said, taking the paper.

“Home in a week?”

“That’s the plan.” I handed the paper back to her and pulled up my trousers.

“What’s the first thing you’ll do when we get back to Essex?”

“God, I don’t know.” When I get back to Essex, I’m going to collapse on the ground with my bags all around me, and I think I’m going to cry and just fall asleep there. “Drink? A nice cold drink. And I’d like to think I’d savour it, the drink, and the drinking, extend the moment, but I won’t, I’ll probably drink it without thinking, and the moment of drinking and the taste won’t really register.”

Emma looked at me as I mounted the crash barrier and sat down beside her. “I know what you mean.”

“What about you, mate?”

She laughed, looked into the sky. “You know me: decent fags, decent beer, a decent shag, I’m golden.” She laughed, took a long drag. “Nah, you know, like you said, I should probably do something meaningful and be in the moment, yeah? What’s the word, what’s that...? I dunno. Is... mindful? Mindful. Call everybody I know and tell them I love them? Is that good?”

I nodded. “That sounds good. That’s something that’s not just a moment, but it keeps on going.”

“Yeah, fuck, listen to us, what are we like?”

“Mindful.”

“Yeah, mindful of sounding like a bit of a twat.”

—NINETY MINUTES IN PURGATORY

—FOUR DAYS IN HEAVEN (Elsie Anders, Eric Chambers)

—What a small but perfectly neat film! Oh how one wishes to be able to say this but after two large, loud, and generally well-received productions, this seems like a misstep for Ms Anders. Small it certainly is, the film taking place almost entirely in the car of put-upon mechanic Charlie Blunt, played here by a curiously miscast Mr Chambers, as he chauffeurs tour guide Rachel Tyson (Anders) on their four-day pursuit of a holiday coach. But neat? No,

unfortunately this is an uneven mess of a film.

“I was thinking,” Martin said, as he helped me into the back of the ambulance.

“Didn’t you go out with Darren again while you were at university?”

“Well, yeah, when I went back home in the holidays. What? He was available, or he was taken, but as taken as he ever was with me, in other words, not at all. And we had a history, you know, so it was easy.”

“All right.”

Martin settled down in his seat as the Land Rover rumbled back onto the road. Ombarrago was already in his place on the bench, holding his hands together in the space between his legs. He stared at the wall opposite him.

“What about you, mate?” I asked the silent man, sitting. He looked at me. “What’s your story? We want to hear about you.”

“Don’t,” Martin said. “You don’t realise what he’s been through.” Ombarrago sharply turned back to Martin. “What? And I don’t realise either? That’s probably true.”

“And he deserved it too, I bet.”

“Will you stop?”

“Well, let me write your story for you. You’re a poet, so there must be a yearning in you to write. You were a student at the university, so you probably studied literature and it was probably English literature, so that pissed you off. But it probably also affected you and informed the things you wrote, so that really fucking pissed you off. Then you had a kind of awakening and you cast off our language and I don’t fucking blame you. No more Blake, no more Hardy, God, bloody heaven.”

“Andy—”

“No, sir, the thing is he wrote a poem and his people murdered our people and now we’re at war. I forget the details, but—”

“I hardly think you can blame his poems—”

“Well, I don’t know. He’s a shaman, his poetry is his magic, his poetry is what he wants to replace us with. Remove our language, remove our canon, remove us from his country, and pour poetry into that empty space. Magic, poetry. I think you of all people should recognise that.”

“What the fuck’s that supposed to mean?”

“Oh please. You don’t see yourself in him? What was it you wrote? ‘Poetry’s

consecrating...’ something. ‘Removal’, that was one of the words. You know, for normal people, it’s hard to see the poetry in things while people are dying. It’s hard to hear the poetry when they’ve sent the bailiff because you can’t pay the gas bill for the past four months. It’s hard to hear the fucking poetry when you’re waiting on the platform for the fucking 7:57 to Fenchurch Street and it’s already 8:30 and you’re going to miss your interview and, Christ, you can’t even afford the fucking ticket in your hand. You stupid men. There are things for which it’s worth a war, and there are things where it’s just fucking moronic. You men, you boys, you fucking children.”

I reached over and slapped Ombarrago’s knee. “If all of this was for the best, then fine, be free. I just don’t want to be here because you wrote a fucking poem.” I slapped his knee again, harder, and he let out a grunt. “Why don’t you fucking say something?”

Martin placed his hand on my arm and pushed. “Look, you’re allowed to be angry—”

“Damn fucking right I’m angry. I’m angry that I wasted my life to fucking words, with no boyfriend and no job, and a mum who was glad to see the back of me, and no future and a thousand fucking mosquito bites and death at any moment, and, yeah, right now I’m stuck in the back of a bone-shaking Land Rover with what must be the most and the second-most stubborn cunts in the world.” I slow-clapped them. “Well done, gents, well fucking done.”

And Martin laughed. He jerked his head towards Ombarrago. “Is he the second-most?”

“I’m not fucking telling you.”

—Dialogue-heavy and over-long, the film seems to have over-estimated the profundity of its story. Ms Anders standing up in the sunroof of Chambers’s car singing a song to all the travellers on the motorway is a high point, but it is only four minutes and then we descend into another interminable soliloquy of lost and unrequited love. Our silver screen sweetheart gives it her best shot and you cannot fault her enthusiasm in the face of a titanically leaden script that sinks soon after the opening number. Mr Chambers, by contrast, appears throughout to be running on autopilot - one cannot remember another role in which he has acted with such stilted expression and obviously so little confidence in the words he is reciting. It is such a pity because, on paper, the combination would appear to guarantee a smash hit.

We sat in human silence, just breathing and sniffing and somebody’s stomach growling, but neither man seemed to care whose nor indicated that they had even heard it.

Deny the humanity of the other. If each man could have made the other a statue, or dead, perhaps he would have, if only to save the inconvenience of having to share a space with him. It struck me that, possibly, possibly, they actually didn't mind this cramped conference of ours, with no need for communication because communication was out of the question, just breathing the same air, smelling the same smells. That seemed to deny Martin's discomfort and the purpose of Ombarrago's silence.

He would just stare at one or the other of us with what looked a bit like pity but what was probably nothing, indifference. Just waiting for this experience to be over and to be out of the Land Rover and away from us and free.

When he next faced me, I said, "I'm jealous of you. Can I say that? Is that fair? You got what you wanted, you've got a new life. You went through hell to get there but you've got a brand-new world and you're the king of it. And us, me and him, what did we get out of this? You won this fucking war. You paid a fucking price but you won." I nudged Martin. "Is that fair?"

"I don't know. I don't really think fairness has a bearing on anything." He scratched his jaw. "It's not fair that any of this happened, I'm sure nobody deserved it, the good things and the bad things, but things happened because of things happening before them and we just have to wait and see how it all turns out."

We let that sink in. Ombarrago seemed to let it sink in deeper, however, and within minutes, his head was against the wall and his eyes were closed.

"Oi chatterbox- boring you, are we?"

Martin shushed me. "Let him sleep."

—Although of course, filmmakers and actors must take risks in their careers, we believe this is a film that Ms Anders should chalk up to experience and quietly forget. We cannot help but think that she should, as soon as humanly possible, return to the well-trodden path upon which she first ventured - namely to re-join SJ Ampton and benefit once again from his undeniable expertise.

We sat in silence for an hour, watching Ombarrago sleep.

Harris over the radio, We're coming up on it, sir.

"All right. Rise and shine." Martin tapped Ombarrago's ankle with the toe of his boot. The man shook and came awake like a balloon inflating, suddenly and with a loud gasp. His eyes were wide as the eyes of stalked animals. Martin held up one hand, placed

the other gently on Ombarrago's knee. "Whoa, whoa. You're all right. Calm. Calm down now."

He gave me a look, mouth slightly open, brow hard, and I wasn't entirely sure what his expression meant.

—There is a time for a bird to leave the nest but it seems that Ms Anders could do with a few more flying lessons.

When the Land Rover came fully to a stop, I opened the rear doors and jumped down into the dirt, thankful for the slight breeze. We had left the main road and stopped on a wide empty expanse of dirt, on a rise above the coast. The sea seemed calm from up here, the calling of gulls carrying to us. Across the way, perhaps forty feet from us, was a small car with three men standing beside it. They wore light coloured clothes and each had a wide-brimmed hat on his head, like the fishermen, casting their faces in shadow.

Harris came out of the ambulance cab and stood beside me. Martin and Ombarrago joined us and we stood there together, listening to the far-off gulls. Ombarrago didn't move.

Martin gave him a small push. "Go on," he said. "They're your people."

The man hesitated. I coughed. "Are we sure?" I asked Martin.

"No, you know what, Andy, no, I'm not sure. But, frankly, I don't know what we'll do if they're not and I hadn't planned for it because I thought this would be pretty fucking straightforward. But now you mention it, yes, they could well be Home Guard out of uniform. But, you know what, Andy, I don't particularly care at this point." He gave Ombarrago a harder push. "Go on, sod off."

Ombarrago took a step but Martin grabbed his shoulder and pulled him back.

"Take off your hats!" he called across to the men. For a moment there was no response, as if they hadn't heard, or as if they like their leader would refuse to communicate, but then one removed his hat and the other two quickly followed suit. Martin squinted against the sun. "Do you recognise any of them?" he asked Ombarrago. "Fuck not talking to me. Just nod if you want, but tell me, do you recognise them? Because I can't let you get killed now."

Ombarrago nodded.

Martin sighed. "Then please go."

Ombarrago walked across the dirt. About halfway, he raised a hand in greeting to the men, and one returned the gesture. He stopped then, where he was, and began to tear

at his clothes. He pulled off the shirt, his fingers working desperately at the buttons, kicked the loose trousers down around his ankles, he wore nothing besides. He stepped out of the pile of clothes and stood there in the dirt, naked, turning in a slow circle, his arms outstretched to the sides, looking back at us, watching us, showing us. On his back was a loose crosshatching of scabs and dried blood, under his arms clusters of black bruises, and on his chest and around his nipples and on his stomach and on the inside of his thighs were many, many small round spots, some black, and some red and pus-yellow.

When he had finished turning, Ombarrago walked towards the car and the waiting men. He was almost upon them when he stopped again. He fell to his knees on the ground, bent over and thrust his fingers into the dirt, deeply, knuckle after knuckle into the red dirt. He let out a long, loud groan and snapped back up, pulling up great handfuls of soil and cascading dust. And the motion continued and his arms rose above his head, towards the sky, and he let go of the dirt and it burst from between his fingers, clouded over him and then fell about him, dust and pebbles and clods of earth covering his face and chest and shoulders. He knelt there, arms still held high as if in praise, face turned to the sun, still, so still, his chest moving, puffs of red dust from his nose as he breathed.

We stood there and watched him. No words seemed appropriate, no actions suitable, nothing to correspond with this, so we stood there and watched him. I looked over to Emma. I hoped she would say something that would bring this scene back from where it was, return it to our world. But she was only watching. I looked over at Martin. His cheeks were red, his jaw was set. But he saw me looking at him, and it seemed to be that moment, in which he realised I was wherever he was, that finally broke the spell.

“Let’s go—”

He almost said ‘home’.

11.

I feel I should congratulate you on reaching this point. You've struggled through a jungle of tremendously long-winded and self-obsessed rambling with nary a hint of a respite, nor reward. Ah, but what reward would befit the accomplishment? A medal, most probably, fashioned from a plectrum, and safety-pinned to your chest. By which I mean your shirt. It strikes me that I might have spared you several pages and saved myself several sheets if I had avoided tangents and side notes and had instead stuck to the main thread of discussion. It also strikes me that none of our correspondence appears to have actually had a main thread of discussion. What could that mean? Are you growing sick of these long, excited letters?

[It's been a week since we caught him. At night now there's the report of shots fired at us from across the fields behind the base, and then the alarm to rouse us, and then we're manning the walls and we watch and wait but we never see them and then the dawn comes. They are angry that we have their man and it seems they will not give up. If this is victory, it's a misshapen thing and definitely not the satisfying conclusion this year of fighting had promised. He waits in a prison cell somewhere and he doesn't know his fate and perhaps nobody does. We're all still waiting.]

Thank you for writing to me so often these last months. I haven't always received your letters in good time (or even in satisfactory time) because, as you know, we've been on tour around the country and I think the post has been having trouble catching up to us. I can't really tell you what your faithfulness means. Picture the look on my face when a much-delayed letter finally arrives- it's a look of excitement, of trepidation, but overall of happiness with a smile, perhaps a tear. That's what it means to me, that and more, things that leave no trace on the face. A-ha, me, a poet!

Likewise, please forgive me if my letters to you seem inconsistent. My life at present is a series of appointments and obligations. Yes, sometimes the obligations correspond fortuitously with my own desires (I am reminded every day that this is much more likely a consequence of good planning by my team, than of fate or my doing) and I hope you don't think I'm in a constant attitude of self-pity, because I'm not and I enjoy the job and I enjoy the rewards I receive. Life isn't hard for me, in the way that life was hard for my grandfather, or my dad, I suppose, before he became successful. I am neither ungrateful for

nor ignorant of the many ways in which my life is easy. The lady doth protest too much? I've had to defend myself a few times- the worst times are when it's somebody close to you who does the accusing; I'd take the opprobrium of a thousand strangers any day.

Last Tuesday was the fifth anniversary of my dad's death. That's a strange thing to write. Stranger still to write this: I wouldn't have remembered if somebody at the studio hadn't have remarked upon his chance encounter with an "actual first pressing of songs by Archie Anders". Not many people know he was a folk singer, before everything. My Granddad used to take him to pubs and men's clubs when he was a boy, taught him the tin whistle and the squeezebox. When he was older, he started off in the music halls, the Empire, the Gallant. Golden Dome. I guess he was doing musical bits, at first, probably something bawdy or racist, you know how it was back then. At some point he moved onto dramatic pieces- monologues. That's how he really got into the films, I guess, somebody seeing him and taking him seriously. It's the family business, this singing lark. Poetry and song, I suppose, both present life in a higher register, which is not really like living at all but is ever so pretty.

[They will not relent. Doubt has well and truly set in among us now. Was he the man? Who was the fool that said this would be the turning point? What a miscalculation. The optimists say this is the last hurrah and it will fade out and when it's out it will never be rekindled. Perhaps this was the plan all along? But so many shattered hopes as we hide in the base and listen to the gunfire, listen to the explosions in the town. Me, I think he was a poet, as good or bad as that is, but nothing more. The fact that we now have him means little to anyone but him.]

Thank you for the latest photograph, a lovely one of your platoon all turned out. Was this taken at your base? I fear your reply will be whisked away by the censor. But let me say you look very smart and your men look like a fun group of young lads. Is the woman a few places to your right Amanda? I can see what you mean about her smile but rather than haunted, I think she's merely showing one of those 'everything is well' smiles that we women adopt so people don't ask us what the matter is and why don't we just jolly well cheer up. She seems to have had a lot of practice, it's a beautiful specimen- it even fooled you! I kid, but only a little. She must be a tough old girl to get through a day with you- hat's off to her.

I've included a photo from the tour. That's me and Lucy, my manager, outside the

radio station where I did an interview. How do you like my new hair? They tried to talk me out of it ("maintain consistency with the promotional material" was one of their favourite warnings) but I insisted- it is my hair after all. We've learnt to change to suit the world. Women, I mean. We're very good at changing to accommodate. Two 'c's and two 'm's. Dictionary, mate.

[Now we're a month since the pickup and there is a sense that we have fallen down a hole. The Captain does his best to maintain morale, but when we patrol now it's not with determination or anxiety, it's with resentment. The men are growing angry that their ending hasn't come. Promises, promises. Out of everything, all they've been through in this place, this postponement feels unwarranted. They ask, Where's the pay off? I reply, Waiting makes it all the sweeter. I'm well aware they think, The sweetness doesn't matter if we don't live to take a taste. It is a similar situation in the mountains and at the coast. The Colony may be small but a single regiment is not enough to hold it. We ask for reinforcements and we are told there are none. There are too many colonies, too many emergencies. England doesn't appreciate the problem or doesn't care. If it weren't for the Home Guard I think we'd be in trouble.]

From your last letter (at least, the last letter I have received), I take it your situation is little improved? I'm glad to hear your wounds have healed so well - do they no longer give you discomfort? I've never spent more than a day in hospital. Lucky, eh? I'm sorry this thing with your nurse had to end so abruptly. The way you wrote about her was always so touching. I can't begin to imagine what it's like for you there. We have pictures in the paper and we have the newsreels and they show us the burning houses and the face-down bodies of poor victims. The narrative continues to switch. Crimes, excess, desperation. A problem exasperated by both sides. There are politicians spouting fighting words and there are marches for peace in the capital. Everything is different from how it was, but everything is normal. I suppose we grow accustomed to being haunted.

The other day, while I was waiting in the hall, I read a story about a father and his dying son. He was dying of scarlet fever because there was no safe way to reach the hospital. I was only able to read the first half of the story (we were waiting for a taxi that, though delayed, eventually arrived) and couldn't find the article when I returned later. Everything I see or read or hear is tinged by thoughts of you. This exchange of letters is, for me, a string threaded in and out of every day and it's taut enough to hang me from it. It

supports my weight, it gives my life a shape. I can't possibly tell you the shape yet, it's altogether an incomplete thing and probably nothing will come of it, but I can promise you that so much of who I am these days depends upon it. As the song goes, think what would happen to me if anything happened to you. It's enough to make a woman write, and I have written, here and there, sincere lyrics to songs I can't yet play on the piano.

["This thing with my nurse"? Oh dear, what thing? Perhaps I'd given you rather the wrong impression about certain things. I think I allowed it to run somewhat out of hand, in both reality and its retelling. She was lovely and full of care for me, but it was her job and her calling, and perhaps I let myself be distracted by other thoughts. It seems, now, a disservice to her to characterise her demeanour towards me as anything but professionalism, and I ought to apologise to you for that, and I wish I could apologise to her for it, too. I have not seen her since the last day of my convalescence and I doubt I shall see her again before we are done here. I left a message for her at the hospital but whether she received it I cannot say and no reply was forthcoming. Perhaps, stupidly, I have burned some bridges there. It is, as they say, what it is.]

Eric took me to a tea dance at his country house. The studio had arranged it primarily for a photography session but possibly they didn't communicate that to Eric. I say that, but please don't misunderstand, he is a thoroughly decent man. It was all very posh and completely not my scene, but I muddled through, as you do. Muddling through is much easier with champagne and platters of cured salmon. I got to wear my lovely new dress: a long, pleated skirt, pretty floral pattern (I'm not good with flowers!), white gloves, the shoes my sister got me for my birthday, the works. I suppose it is starting to become my scene, which (I think) scares me a little.

I've included a photo Marie took (our promotional photographer- she's a hoot) when I managed to get away from Eric for a few moments. He found me directly after and caught me in conversation out in the garden- we sat under a big tree (I'm not good with trees!) and he sat on my dress, so all I could think about while we were talking was that. And, of course, I couldn't mention it! You look very fetching in that tie ~~but you're on my dress~~. This has been a delightful afternoon ~~but you're on my dress~~. What a wonderful view you have from the house ~~but, oh my God, you're on my dress~~. I sat and smiled and chatted (I'm not good with confrontation!) but I could hardly bear it!

I should add that they tried to get me to sing Little Too Late and I gave them two

bars and that was their lot.

[Two months and they're still at it. You have to wonder what he is to them. You begin to believe it. Their poet-general, poet-bishop, poet-king, palladium, beating heart of all of them. They want him back and what does it serve us to keep him? They fight the harder to free him. Are we the executioner or the condemned? Does the guillotine bend around the neck? This is a boiling down. The incomprehensible general is reduced, as it is by trauma everywhere, to the individual. And I suspect it will be, right before the end, just me, disarmed and naked, inspecting myself. Who will I be then and where can I hide? These are the thoughts that terrors bring; is their poet-king naked now? Terrified, does he now know who he is? We stripped his land of its food and soil, we chose its names and named its people. What is this place, how does it translate us and why are we here? To be changed, is that the aim? Is that why we were told to come here? Why did we have to come here, to this place, to change it and to be changed?]

I finished that song. I may have mentioned it in my last letter. Please know that I've kept some of you and I'm keeping it safe in my song. It's a part that won't change. For better or worse, Martin, because I'm sure that while this experience is not a purification, it is equally not an annihilation, and there will be something good at the end of it. There must be something good left at the end. I don't know if this is a comfort to you, and how could it be a comfort to the body in fear of its destruction, but I kept some of your words and I'm recording the song in the studio next month. I hope- oh, I so dearly hope- that this brings you some happiness.

[Even the air doesn't want us here and makes itself hard to breathe. Everyone seems to be sniffing, sneezing. It's hard to tell if it's due to the cold or the smoke. The burn pit is bigger than I've ever seen it. They're burning night and day. Somebody must know what they're burning, but nobody I've talked to. Heaven knows what we're breathing in, carbon and chemicals and fumes from the petrol they pour on to sustain the fire. It's got so bad lately, the men walk around the base like bandits, masked and anonymous. The ash is sometimes black and sometimes grey and sometimes white, like snow or blossom, it can sometimes be beautiful, listless in the air.]

The country has changed. Is changing. The tide has definitely turned. Can you feel the change there yet? I suppose not. I was standing on the crammed platform at Euston the other day and you could feel it in the crowd. Waiting for the last train to the north-west that

evening, more than an hour late. You could feel it in the overcoats, wet from the rain. And in the suitcases straining at their zips and latches. And in the smell and noise of the train coming in, at last, coming out of the night, lights all on and golden faces at the windows, huffing up the glass. I don't know how to write it, I just felt it. And when the carriage door comes to a halt right in front of you, through no conscious arrangement, an arm hanging out to snatch at the slick handle, it can seem like a confirmation, don't you think? It's probably all dumb luck but it doesn't feel like that. Then the ritual of disembarking, of our swapping of worlds. It's interesting, I think, how we sit down in seats that are warm and travel in carriages that smell of passengers. How coincidence and imagination can solidify a notion, no matter how outlandish. And yet, I'm not wholly convinced. And never will be. And glad of it. An unset mind is an unstuck mind, as my old man used to say.

[It seems that they disagree with me. He isn't just a poet, or, rather, here a poet isn't just anything. Have you heard their solution? I'm sure you have. How long has it been? How long until this thing gets sorted? Years gone. Months still to come.]

12.

—Come all you.

The night before, I had lain awake on too much pot and on my too-hard mattress and on memories of sweeter days and then of days I'd sooner forget, and I had listened to them talking, and in the morning I wasn't certain I had ever slept at all. During the afternoon, the wind had shifted, wheeled around, attempting all the regions of the sky. By dusk it had settled on the angle it preferred, and proceeded to scoop up the burn pit's abundant smoke and deliver it through our open windows. Such generosity. The ceiling fan had recently rocked itself off-balance and now rattled against the beam from which it hung. Within her mosquito net, Emma slept easily in her bed. Perhaps it corresponded to periods of dreaming, perhaps not, but she would sometimes sleep with her mouth closed, and loudly grind her teeth, and sometimes with her mouth open. And when her mouth was open I would watch the shiny operation of her tongue between her teeth, her peeling lips recalling the day's routine. Once it seemed she had tried to say something, managed a sound or two, but if the sounds formed words they were too quiet to hear. Could sleep not fit through the windows, like smoke? Could it not navigate the air currents around the unbalanced fan? Could Emma, lying there, not spare some tiny breath of sleep? Could she not let a little slip through her teeth? Could sleep not come in like a magic trick, a cloth thrown over this night, two nights, many nights, and could it not as easily be pulled away to reveal, surprise, this year had vanished and, surprise, another year had taken its place? And all through it, lazing around on the domed top of the skunky smooth bell-end of a high, I had listened to them talking, outside the window.

—Come all you young folk.

"They finally found Gento, did you hear? This is what my man told me this morning, trying to sell me the usual. You know how he is, he'll hide every word behind another, like he's having two conversations with you at the same time. The price has increased- how many days has it gone up now? I can't remember the price before the war started. My man won't tell me the new price until I show him my money. It's good luck I had my wages from the army yesterday, and better luck my wife, God bless her, let me take the cash with me. And I show him half the notes and he still won't tell me, the trickster, and asks 'Is that all?' and I tell him 'Yes, sir, that's all, do you think the army makes me a rich man?' So, by little

steps, and very slow steps, he moves closer to the price but also begins telling me about what they found in the stream, down by Old Market Road. And what do you think that was? It was Gento's head."

Counter Castle, they called it. At the university, 1 Platoon and forty Home Guardsmen on security, with 2 Platoon making the snatch, heaven knows why. It was to be my very first door breach. Polley had the battering ram and was about to break the locks, was committed in his backswing, when the door opened inward to reveal a surprised student. Gripp made a grab for the door but the man slammed it shut in his face. We could hear shouting from within. Longman snapped, "Get it open now!"

—Come all you young folk and hearken.

As the damp when, mouldering for years in the attic forest of black spores, weeps down the walls and stains the cracked and stippled Artex ceiling with brown ulcers from the gaps in the roof, in such a way that the young daughter looks at it up in those corners worrying the stains herald the oncoming of nightmares and that the mother looks at it worrying for the health of the young daughter and the father looks at it worrying for the ceiling's threatened collapse, and confronts the family with their destruction whether creeping within or crushing without; so the fear comes in.

Polley once again hefted the ram and with a single swing sent the door slamming inward, the broken handle clattering across the floor, doorframe torn away from the wall. "Assault team two, go go go!" Jittery with the tiny shocks of fear, like razor nicks, a stippling all around my joints, pushed into the foyer, called the lift, jammed it on the ground floor. That thrill of being me and being nothing. Thoughts turned down, reduced to axiom, phrases the instructor used in training. Left a fire team at the foot of the staircase for security, pushed on, up the concrete stairs, up and up, nothing really human now, in this ever-forward movement, all our fear and hesitance discarded downstairs. Third floor, fourth floor, momentum fading, yet Longman shouting "push on push on", yet Ham saying "go on lads give it some".

—Come all you young folk and hearken to me:

—I sing of the people 'tween London and sea.

Fear rivers down your arms to your cold fingers, goes down your throat like ice water. The body doesn't want to die. While the mind is wondering why the fuck it's in this mess, the body in its stubbornness blindly presses on. You shan't die, the body says, you

haven't died so far, why do you think it is possible to die? Friends die, relatives die, but you're still here, invincible. This inculcation. Over and over. Immortal, beloved, set outside the span of death. Years and years. You haven't died. You haven't died. You cannot die. I'm half-dead and Feel it in my spine. Like bright sun through my eyelids.

"Contact!" Man's voice shouting ahead, sounds of violence, man's voice swore. Glass shattered. Breathing. Men's shouts from higher up the staircase, in another language. Polley rested on his knee, on the spine of another man. Plastic ties. Shoved downstairs. "Go go go," Longman urged. Breathing. Fifth floor, sixth. "One more!" said somebody on the radio. Seventh floor. Out of stairwell and onto landing. No talking. Remember to breathe. Polley indicated a door, Longman nodded. Not much room. Battering ram in the backswing hit Killen in the shin. Killen swore and automatic fire produced a flourish of holes in the locked door. "Cover!" cried Longman, splinters in the air.

—Kin.

The brown envelope, the insistent phone, the shadow at the door, the stifled breath and the quick-turned head. And the need to stay still and small and the longing for a self-willed death. It wasn't that fear. I'd had that fear. I think you had it too. Bills and taxes and worries you never let us know about. Recession, out of work, debts you took out loans to pay. It was when I was away at university that I realised your whole life you'd learned to cope with stress and fear by shifting it to anger.

"Shit door," Polley hissed.

"Fucking have it," Longman said and quickly, before anybody could protest, placed the muzzle of his rifle in the largest hole and fired. He took a step back and hit the door with a straight kick. It flung open and he took cover to avoid the return fire. Fire duly came, through the open doorway, a rushing and shattering sound, breath quick now, heart pounding, spots like gnats in the air, or dust in sun shafts, bullets barely a sense of movement before the eyes, glass and wood crackling behind us, a vocal demolition, like laughter, then the choral response of our own gunfire and in the din of battle you could feel it in the bones of your face.

—Kin of the soil.

You slapped Mum, I remember, after she threw the soap at you. You were both shouting so loudly, the neighbours were banging on the wall. I was thinking, What a stupid thing to do. I meant both of you. It hit you right on the side of your head. You were so angry,

your eyes were so angry. You probably saw nothing in that moment, not me on the settee, not the kitchen, not even Mum, it was all coming up from inside you. I don't know. You shouldn't have done it, perhaps your hand wasn't meant to land right there on her face, but for you it was probably the most fitting thing in the world right then. I've been that angry, Dad. Mum didn't deserve it, the bruises you brought up on her. I remember crying, at the blood from her nose. I think I thought she would have to go to the hospital and I would be alone that night and that was why I was crying. It was at teatime, there were fish fingers and oven chips and peas. Ketchup. I remember crying and holding the knees of my trousers so tightly that I tore a hole in them. She didn't slap you back that time, I think because she really hadn't expected you to hit her. Or because I was there. I don't know. But the other times she did hit you back, when I was a bit older, and I would just go to my room and read a book or something. You'd sleep on the settee, I'd hear her crying in the bedroom, and no one would talk about it in the morning. I don't know.

Polley tossed a stun grenade, loud it burst, knocked ceiling tiles to the ground, and "Go go go" and through the doorway piled Gripp and Drove, Knowles and Clarkey, then Longman then Polley then me. "Man mode, Andy," he said as he slipped in front of me. As we crashed along the ruined corridor beyond, the men ahead shouted warnings and instructions, "Get the fuck down!" and fired single shots through the murky air of plaster dust and flying chips of wood. I stepped over two bodies. One was a woman, the other a man who had been shot in the face. Clarkey was stamping out a small fire on the carpet where the grenade had exploded. As I pushed past, Longman held his hand in front of me: "Hang back. Clarkey, stick here with her." Fuck's sake. Beyond the corridor a flat opened out across a crowded floor to a wall of windows. From where I was, I could see that blinds had been pulled over most of the windows, but in the little sunlight that did enter, I could see a lounge with what looked like cabinets against the walls. There were several mismatched chairs and tables in the centre of the floor, a hastily assembled conference room. On the tables were maps, a large radio set, and piles and piles of papers. Shots in deeper rooms. Shouting.

—Kin of the soil and the stream.

Over the radio, "Target apprehended. Boss, we got'im."

I was walking home from Nan's house that day Mum called the police. That was the last time you slept in our house. Even going to my room and reading my books didn't work

that night. I think it must have been *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* that I was reading for school. I tried, I tried to read it. And after that I couldn't ever read it again and could never bring myself to finish it. She'd slammed the back door and shattered the window and cut herself on the broken glass and she'd left bloody footprints all over the house. I thought you'd go to prison but you didn't. They told you off, the usual thing. I think Mum was relieved. Just gone was good enough. I'm not sure. I wrote a lot of poems after that. I mean, a lot more. They filled four of those spiral-bound notebooks I bought from Smith's. Nobody's ever read them. Did you ever read my poems? Mum and you, neither had time for reading. The first thing that Nan asked when I saw her next was if you'd ever hit me. I told her you hadn't.

Stepping into the flat, I could see that the walls had been knocked through to neighbouring rooms to create a larger space. Through the untidy holes, past sheets of canvas hung to provide a sense of separation, ranks of bunkbeds were visible in the dimness. It was now obvious that what I had taken to be cabinets against the surviving walls were rather bookshelves, with each shelf so stuffed with books and boxes as to seem solid. In the closest corner was an armchair, corduroy fabric in orange and brown stripes. In the farthest, opposite corner was another armchair, this one upholstered in worn and cracked leather, red with grey patches. The maps on the tables showed the Colony at various scales; on some were highlighted roads or rivers, on others towns and villages with numbers written beside them. None of the writing was in English. A crumpled cigarette was still smoking on an ashtray. Next to the ash tray, beside the hot and humming radio set, was a collection of binders, one red, one blue, one a yellowy-green. The red binder lay unfolded, and on a sheet of paper therein were written names listed against numbers listed against times and either a cross or a circle.

Longman climbed back through one of the holes. "Counter Castle's conquered lads. Spectacular effort."

Following him through the hole was a man with his head bowed, his hands awkwardly behind his back. He wore an unbuttoned white shirt printed with pink flowers, sandals upon his feet, and three-quarter length trousers with many pockets on each leg. On each shoulder was a man's heavy gloved hand, one from Drove, the other from Clarkey. These two manipulators steered him in lurching locomotion into the centre of the room.

"Oi, you lucky bastard," Drove said, shoving the man from behind. "You've just won a nice old holiday to Bullwood, mate."

“They’re gonna hang your arse, you miserable cunt.” Clarkey punched the man in the back of the head. It made him stumble forward and fall heavily against the edge of the nearest table. He cried out.

“Fuck’s sake.” Longman hooked an arm under the fallen man’s shoulder and lifted him from the floor. “What did the Boss say about talking to him? Think. Take Gripp and Knowles and secure this floor.”

“Right away, Sergeant.”

“Budden,” he said to me, “go downstairs and fetch the Boss.”

—Kin of the soil and the stream and the tree

—And sure of God’s wish for man to be free.

But you didn’t hate her, that’s the thing. You loved her, I really think you did, at least at the beginning. From the stories Nan would tell, of your persistence, of the letters you would write her (and you never wrote letters), of the stupid little things you’d say. That’s a kind of love, isn’t it? And it’s been several years now, and you’re happy with your girlfriend I suppose. And Mum seems happy, I suppose, happier now that’s she alone. I suppose I’m happy about it. The strange thing, though, is I’m not certain about any of it, your marriage, my childhood. There’s what I think happened and there’s what really happened and I’ll never know. Because I’ll never ask you and I doubt you or Mum will ever tell. Nan’s dead now, of course. I suppose sometimes we have to live in the incompleteness.

Around the university grounds, around its twin tower block halls of residence, set ludicrously in the valley’s red dirt like a pair of dominoes too apart to topple, waited the concentric rings of soldiers and Home Guardsmen. Some two dozen men and women knelt in the sun, with their hands either clasped behind their head or tied behind their backs. They were watched in their discomfort by armed men in uniform who talked and joked and smoked cigarettes. An English medic was administering care to three injured men. One was moaning, had bandages around every limb. Another had blood bubbling from his nose and mouth and the medic worked on a gunshot wound to his abdomen. The medic said, “I’m fucking melting here,” to nobody in particular. I watched them for a moment from the shade inside the doorway. The sun felt hot enough to shuck the bark off trees and the outside air that came into this cooler space was ticklish in the lungs. Braving a sneeze, I took a breath before stepping out.

Dixson was waiting by the prisoners. He turned around at my approach.

“Sir,” I said, “Sergeant Longman needs you upstairs.”

“Right, lead the way.”

He followed me close by, but in silence, until the fifth floor.

“I’ve missed you lately.”

I stopped but he continued until he was standing on the step behind me, and I could feel him against my back, could feel his face as he talked, against my shoulder. I didn’t look at him. His hand was on my hip. “Don’t be daft,” I said.

“I have missed you.”

“We should go up.”

—*Oh, rustic then and rustic now,*

—*No rustic man shall ever plough*

I started walking again. At the landing, I turned and watched him. He climbed the staircase slowly, sliding his palm along the handrail, head down. He said nothing more as we climbed to the seventh floor, said nothing more as we stepped through the ruined passageway and over the bodies, said nothing more until we were standing in the flat.

“Well. Is this him?” Dixson asked.

The man in the white shirt now knelt on the floor, sitting on the backs of his legs. His hands were tied behind his back, his shoulders tense and pushed forward. His bottom lip had swollen to a ludicrous pout, his left eye forced closed by a welt the size of a chicken egg. His forehead was wet with sweat. There was blood around his hairline, painting lines down the side of his face, dripping from his jaw. He breathed shallowly through his open mouth, a hint of white teeth with red gums between. What a good idea, I thought, what a good idea to make him look less than human. With his right eye he looked at the soldiers standing around him, at Dixson, at me, and he did not speak.

“It’s him,” Longman said.

“Good. Bag him and take him downstairs.”

They slipped a cloth bag over the man’s head.

Dixson gestured towards me. “Budden,” he said. “Find Lieutenant Welles. His presence is requested.”

—*His Essex fields for London hoards*

—*For Essex men shan’t yield for lords.*

Martin was jogging up the staircase when I found him. He’d removed his helmet, it

was under his arm, and his weapon was low slung on its strap. His forehead was wet and he seemed crowned by red pressure marks. He looked up at me, stopped and smiled. "It's him, then?" he said, his breathing heavy after seven flights. "They caught him?"

"Dixson's convinced." I gestured for him to follow me. "You should see the room, sir."

Martin toed the dead man as we passed him. "Who's this?" he asked.

"No idea. Not your man, though."

As we entered the room, Polley was pulling the blinds from the windows and painfully hot sun fell into the room, unrestrained now and vigorously delving into every space and corner. Dust went up and filled the air and filled the mouth and I could feel it congealing in the wetness of my eyes. Polley fought with handles stiff from overpainting or rust, eventually able to push out the windows on their centre pivots. At this altitude there was a slight breeze to provide some relief from the heat of the day and I moved to stand close by.

Dixson took Martin aside, towards the windows. "What is useful here?"

Martin stared at Dixson. He turned slightly away from the room and lowered his voice when he said, "You want me to do it?"

"I've got no one else, Mary. A poet to strip search a poet. You want somebody to help? Use Budden. Use a couple of Guardsmen. I don't care, just get it done."

"What am I looking for?"

"Well, recorded communications, lists of names, telephone numbers, diaries, photographs of gatherings. I don't know, Mary, use your own judgement."

"And what about everything else?"

"Burn it."

"Is his poetry intelligence?"

"Christ, man, what was the job I just gave you to do?"

"Yes, sir."

"Let's get him in the van," Dixson said to Polley as he left. With an effort, Polley lifted the bound and beaten man to his feet and forced him out of the room. He gave a last look back at Martin and me, and blinked against the bright sunshine coming in, and then they were gone into the tower block's internal shadows.

"Do you want me to stay, sir?" I asked Martin.

“I don’t know how I’m supposed to do this on my own. Where would I begin?”

I took that as confirmation that yes, he did wish me to stay so, as Guardsmen busied themselves with the bodies in the corridor, I walked around the room, glancing at the books on the shelves. There were a lot of technical manuals and hard folders and box files. I pulled one of the boxes from the shelf and laid it on the table. Inside were typed letters and memoranda, in English, time tables and tally charts, a list of bullet points. The letters were all addressed to Bold.

“Do you mind if I smoke, sir?”

Martin drifted to the old armchair in the corner. He sat down, the wood skeleton creaking under his weight. “Go ahead.”

I lit a Churchman’s and returned the box file to the shelf, approximately where I’d found it, between this ledger and this pile of plastic files. I walked to the opposite arm chair and sat. The fabric was soft and the cushions firm but they gave dramatically at the back and funnelled me in such a way as to threaten to suck me down. I let out a sound of surprise and put out a hand to stop myself receding into the cushions, twisting at the hip. My fingers painfully jabbed against something hard and I swore. Deep between the seat and the inside back, amongst the dead skin and the nail clippings and food crumbs and where the dust and bits of humans had settled and stayed, was the white shape of a paperback. I grabbed it with my smarting fingers and removed it.

“Look.” I held up the book. “He had a copy of *Empire Day*.”

Martin sat back in the chair and stared at me. “Of course he did.” He tapped a rhythm on the armrest with his fingernails. “Is it annotated?”

I rubbed my thumb over the embossed letters on the cover, *Empire Day*, in gold relief, *CA Copyn*, gold flecking away. I flicked through. If there was a code in the book, in the number of cigarettes smoked, in the accumulation of dust, in the folding of page corners, in the staining by finger dirt, then it was a years-old code with a meaning exclusive to the owner. “None of his writing,” I said. I shrugged. “Well-loved. But used, not kept on the shelf.”

“Toss it in the pile for burning—no, wait, I’ll take it.”

“Spoils of war?” I tossed it to him and he caught it.

“Yeah. A trophy.” He riffled the pages until his thumb caught in an easy bend of the spine and he seemed, from his flickering eyes, to be reading. I watched his expression for a

moment, waited for him to expand on his statement. But he didn't. He closed the book and looked at me, then stood and quietly set to work.

13.

Amanda steps around the shaman, contemplating him from all angles. She is the last of the squad to look around. It's a strange tourism. The others have left but she makes several circuits. Perhaps it's curiosity that feeds her focus, or possibly a desire to record the experience with utmost fidelity. Her fingertips are black from pushing open the front door, itself a strange act of denial, for the wall around the door had collapsed in the heat, allowing access all along the bookshop's ruined frontage, a space through which I had entered. I had been dimly aware while doing so that a rule was being violated, and perhaps so too had Amanda and that was what stopped her. We wear rags on our faces to save us from the smell. It's the smell at first, that hits you, the smoke between every particle of air, it demands inhalation. You have to hold it in the nose and mouth, like alcohol on the tongue, delaying the tasting, just feeling the heat. Then you notice the body of the shaman, blackened and all over wrinkled and papery, and how awkward the pose into which the fire has fixed him, fastened him to the equally blackened floor, like to like. Hard to differentiate. And that's how he is now: if one didn't know—if one didn't know, one might think—one might think—

—Well our Captain was a lusty man, it came quite naturally

—To dally with a pretty Private, but to him said she, "No thanks!"

—So he loaded up his rifle with a cartridge full of blanks.

It can't be argued the fire has administered its destruction inequitably, for clearly it has ravaged both the man and his goods. Of the shelves which had once held his copies of *Empire Day*, little survives. The flames have eaten wood and paper; here and there an identifiable piece of spine or cover, from one edition or another, catches the eye amongst the ashes, but nothing legible remains.

"Do you think they burned him?"

"I don't know. It could have been a candle. It could have been a stray cigarette."

"But isn't it more likely?"

"Here? This place? How can we say what's likely?" But I think it too, that yes it's likely the rebels set him alight, alive or already dead.

I pull the mask down off my face, let it rest around my neck.

"We should leave. There's nothing to be done. The Home Guard can deal with the

clean-up.”

“Yes, sir,” Amanda says.

—Captain said to Private, “Come into my company”,

—And Private said to Captain, “Sir, now that would surely be

—A matter for the red hats from the blessed RMP!”

The street has been closed off at its far ends by Home Guardsmen, and it is midday and it is still quiet and the shutters in the surrounding buildings are all still closed. The rainwater from the early morning showers now comes in runlets down the road, and where it discovers the scattered ash from the fire it becomes thick and dark as coal tar, and in its fullness then flows lazily away from us along the downcurving street. It flows around the boots of Alcock and Stanton and White by the Land Rover, flows around my boots too as I step off the curb, an emulsion that rims each edge and puts a new skin on everything.

I’m blinking black spots in my vision as I walk over to White. “Nobody saw what happened? Not a single witness?”

“No sir, nobody. The Guardsman said they hit a tattoo parlour on the High Street, too.”

“On the High Street? And nobody saw anything?”

“No, sir, nothing out of the ordinary.”

We get back into the Land Rover, Stanton and Alcock in the rear, White at the wheel, Amanda beside him, me on the outside. She wears her lance corporal’s chevron and she watches the road. The sun has found an angle through the windscreen that wreathes Amanda’s head and, all around her, the brightness catches on specks of dust and loose strands of her hair and she seems set within a golden tableau, lit up by some indwelling fire. Light, as if not random, as if from all directions, has resolved to laud and affirm her.

—So he shipped her off up-up-upcountry, oh up-upcountry!

—Yes, he shipped her off up-up-upcountry, oh up-upcountry!

The first stone strikes the windscreen, sends cracks up and down the glass, makes White swear and snatch at the wheel. The second stone hits the bonnet, I see it, grey and sharp, bouncing off the metal. As they continue to hit the vehicle, I tell White to put his foot down and he does. The stones bang against the sides of the Land Rover, then the rear, and then there are no more.

“Sir?” White asks.

“Keep going, fast as you can.”

When we reach the Castle, minutes later, the sentry yells for the gate to be opened and it does, quickly. White takes the Land Rover over the threshold and into the yard.

“Drop me off here, would you, White?” I say, as we draw close to the administration building. “The Boss is giving a briefing.”

“Sir.”

He stops the Land Rover and I step out. There are scratches in the paint, and dents in the bodywork, the right-hand wing mirror has shattered, the rear lights are destroyed. Looking back in the cab, I see Amanda is all in shadow, now, flattened. She lacks all her sunlight brilliances. She stares at me and I notice there are black streaks of ash on her face. “Better get it over to the motor pool,” I say.

In the yard, a parade of men are engaged in drill, 3 platoon with a sergeant I haven't seen before. I realise I am caught then, as their manoeuvres draw to a close, foolishly out in the yard. The NCO glances around and he calls out officer on parade and I have to receive the salute as the thirty men dismiss. In the shade of the administration building stands Eseley, hidden from the parade, watching from the doorway. He has obviously seen everything; his smug smile says as much.

“Hospital's made you soft, Mary,” he says, as I approach.

—Well our Captain was a prideful man, to be spurned by such as she:

—A captain oughtn't be turned down by a lady in the ranks!

—So he loaded up his rifle and not this time with blanks.

We join Shaw in the ante-room. He is sitting in an armchair by the open window, smoking a cigarette. Sergeants Longman, Webb and Tyler stand to attention from where they were sitting, smoking, on couches around the low table at the centre of the room. “Is he still busy?” Eseley asks. Shaw nods.

“All right, Mary?” Shaw says.

I tell him I'm fine, thanks, you?

He flicks his cigarette out of the window. “Oh, everything's tickety-boo.”

“It's getting rougher out there,” I say and tell him about the fire and the murder, the stone-throwing.

Eseley grunts. “They're sensing a shift in power. They know we're growing weaker, they just need to keep up the pressure and something is going to snap. They have

Ombarrago leading the charge. Their new day is dawning. We've conceded whole tracts of the jungle, I hear. Miles and miles and miles where our patrols daren't go. We're losing it, lads, sorry to say. And the Boss has told me he thinks this is the shallow end."

"If Dixson thinks this is the shallow end," Shaw says, "I question his sense of inclination. I imagine he stumbles through life with one leg longer than the other. Without a spirit level, it's always an uphill struggle. We're already losing men, Robert, as we speak."

"We are losing men, that's certain. What's also certain is that the real fighting's being done at the coast and in the jungle. A Company, B Company, that's where the action is. We're stuck here in the middle, our job being to look after the Governor. C Company, we're babysitters. Why? Why are we the ones chosen to do this? I don't know. We send up reports, they send down orders. The people in charge, the people running all this, are back in England. They don't understand the situation here, they don't understand soldiering. They don't care about this place."

"Why are we here, then?" Shaw asks.

"We are here to be ground down. This country, its tropical sun, its palm trees, its twinkling melodies, its lovely girls, it's all just a pretty background for our self-destruction. The place doesn't matter to them, the people don't matter. The people are scenery, they have no meaning beyond how they look or how they smell. And we're in this place, this paradise, just to see what happens when we get broken apart, when we get burned up."

We stand in silence. The sergeants aren't talking, I realise, probably because they are listening to our conversation. Shaw lights another cigarette, offers one to me, I decline, offers one to Eseley, he declines. Shaw snaps shut the silver case. "Speaking of, why are you always at the burn pit, Robert?"

"I have my orders, Mike, like you, straight from the Boss."

I put my hand out, into the space between us. "Come on, gents."

"Whenever you get the chance, off you go to the pit—"

"Mike," I say. "Will you leave it?"

Again we're silent.

"You're second in command," I say, finally, to Eseley. "How's Dixson making out in there?"

"Well, let's say there's nothing like sleeping in another man's bed to bring you to a deeper understanding of him."

“And is this other man with you in his bed?” Shaw asks, blowing smoke upwards.

Eseley shrugs. “It may help. I suggest you try it.”

—Captain followed Private and espied her upcountry

—Carousing with a red hat from the blessed RMP-

—So up he raised his rifle and gave her two or three.

Of the Major’s office, Dixson has changed little, if anything. I suppose that is what Eseley meant. There is still a bookcase still filled with folders and files, field manuals, reference books. There is still a copy of *Empire Day* on the top shelf, and there is still the map on the wall, still with its preponderance of red. By the window there is still the bureau with its many little drawers and on it still the bottle of cognac, still the blotter, still the pens and ink. There is still a firmness to the carpet, there is still a crack in the window sill. Newspapers are still on the shelf beneath the coffee table, there is still a stain on the back cushion of the desk chair. There is still the smell of the man.

Dixson ushers us into the room. Shaw, Eseley and I take seats near the desk, the sergeants around the walls. As Dixson talks, we take notes. He tells us of orders he has received from Battalion and his conversation with the Governor, just ended, in which greater protection was requested for Government House. It’s going, like the ruined bookshop, like the thrown rocks, the country is falling away into vaporous night. A room of men trying to understand something we can’t touch or see. We’re trying to grab it, this thing we saw, saw only as a sudden shape in the dark. We don’t know what it is we’re reaching for, and nobody seems to care, we are simply told we must catch it. And I know that they are all aware, all the men here, but in this place and in these uniforms we have to keep on blindly groping.

Eseley tells us about a story he heard. How a boy from the town was playing at the wastewater treatment works and fell into the sewage tank. A squad of Home Guardsmen heard the boy’s screams and immediately rushed to help. “They jumped in and tried to save the boy, but they all died.”

Shaw frowns. “But what happened to the boy?”

“They all died.”

“God,” he says, staring past everyone, at the wall, the map there. “God, what a fucking world.”

Sergeant Webb speaks up. “Sir, the rebels have taken to wearing Home Army

uniforms when they commit their crimes. It makes it hard to tell the good chaps from the bad chaps.”

“They should have given them a different uniform,” Eseley says. “Something distinctive.”

Dixson nods. He is writing something on a piece of paper. “They missed a trick there.”

“I think,” says Shaw, “we’re getting close to the end.”

Eseley laughs. “You really think so? How on earth would we know if we were? Liver-divining, sortilege, the upward flight of birds? There’s a chap in town who you can pay for stuff like that.”

“No, there’s not,” I say.

“Yes, actually, there is—”

“He’s dead.”

Dixson puts down his pen. “You what?”

“Somebody murdered him. Burned down the bookshop. I was just there. The Home Guard are clearing it up.”

“Fucking hell,” Dixson says. We sit in silence as he reads from a note in front of him. I glance at Eseley, glance at Shaw, we all suffer from the same confusion of where to look. Suddenly, he speaks again and runs through a list of activities and exercises, of objectives and warnings, an overview of this or that cheerless business. He stops talking and looks directly at me. “Martin,” he says, then pauses, then continues, “tell us about Ombarrago.”

I stare at him. “You know as much as me. Sir.”

“He’s a, what, a shaman? To them, I mean.”

“You mean, they think he is. Sure. He makes them feel. His words transform the world, he changes little things in his written worlds, to elicit greater change. Well, you know, he writes in their language, not English. That’s important. It’s subversive. Passion is the main subversive element. You can’t control that. I mean, ‘This is the well the White Man made For he feared that we would die of thirst’. What’s the other one? ‘I am the freedom on wings, As I fly through your window, You have no nets to stop me’.”

Eseley rubs the armrest on his chair, as if removing a spot. “It sounds pretty ambiguous.”

“Yes, but ambiguity isn’t the same as ambivalence. Ambiguity means there are

spaces into which the reader can insert his or her own meaning. A text can't demand certainty or unity of meaning from—"

"But does it come from him or pass through him?" Dixon asks.

"That's a question you can't really answer. Or, you can, but it's both. He builds it, they build it. Interpretation imposes meaning, it means as much to them if not more. I don't know how to better explain it."

"What I think you're saying," Eseley says, gripping the armrest tightly, "is that we're fucked."

"No, it's true that different worlds and beliefs have been set against each other, there's conflict, but I don't think subversion necessarily has a lasting effect on a hierarchy—"

"But revolution does."

"Yes."

"So, if we remove him from his position of power—"

"I don't know. We've reached a point where the texts are out there and the readers are receptive and I think the message stands on its own."

Dixon sighs. "So you're saying we're fucked."

"I don't know. Maybe I'm saying it doesn't matter if we remove the writer, because he's already written what he needs to write."

"It's a waste of time?"

"Possibly."

"Well, it sounds like a lot of theory with very little fact. All I know is I'm getting it in the neck from the Governor," says Dixon, cracking his knuckles. "If he wants something doing, I think we ought to stop faffing about and take the chance. Ours be the danger, ours the sole renown."

—So he's now a-swinging up-up-a tree, oh up-up a tree!

—Yes, now he's a-swinging up-up-a tree, a tree upcountry!

14.

Afterwards we discussed the day and, in conference, we found a narrative.

We agreed it kicked-off just before they broke for lunch, just as the sun was at its highest. It was just as a billow of smoke from the burn pit drifted across the parade ground, bisecting the field from third man to long-on, thick and black as a swarm of insects, that the Colour Sergeant standing at mid-off, and Lieutenant Gordon at the bowling crease, and the Major, whose bowling arm was held high at the point of release, opened and unfolded outwards and vanished in a burst and a rosy smudge. And for a moment it might have been that they had been taken up into that smoke, or dissipated altogether in fumes and sound, but that in the next moment, as the other fielders threw themselves reflexively into the dirt and the receiving batsman, who was Dixson, took a step backwards to collect himself, there came raining down fragments of uniform and stumps and willow and their bodies. As the Major's hand fell into the dust, his fingers still holding the ball in his spin grip, Dixson's voice, inadequate and horrified, filled the silence after the blast, "Mortar!"

—Heed the tale of Captain True, that ill-fated Mutineer:

—He cursed the other Officers and did flatly engineer

—By villainy and mortar shell to make them disappear-

—In the morning, in the morning, they'll hang him in the morning.

We agreed it was as the assembled soldiers scattered for cover, that the second shell fell near deep point, beside the communications tent. It burst next to Piggott, who had started to run, and it blew him off his feet. I told them that he crumpled where he fell and I ran to him. He was badly injured, intact but bleeding from shrapnel wounds up and down his left side. Judging that safety from further injury was more important at that stage than tending to his wounds, I grabbed him by his wrists and dragged him, crying out and swearing, behind the closest blast wall, which was the gabions that formed a ring around the motor pool. It was then, as I let go of his wrists and looked at the trail of blood we had left, that the third shell exploded.

It was agreed that the third shell fell at the rear end of the water station, a direct hit on the bowser. Its impact transformed the bowser into a fountain fifteen feet high and it looked heavenly with a mist like the skirt of a waterfall. Almost simultaneously, the sound of small arms fire rattled around the base. This was Dixson and a section of men from 3

platoon. They had gathered their weapons and rushed to the walls, to sight the enemy in the fields, but hardly had they mounted the ramparts when they came under fire from within the perimeter.

—The Major and Lieutenant, they were blasted all away-

—We gathered far-flung body parts and by the end of day

—Every man was adamant that Captain True must pay-

—In the morning, in the morning, they'll hang him in the morning.

It was agreed that around that time, Home Army squads must have attacked the armoury, killing two staff officers and stealing weapons and ammunition. Each man, pregnant with arms, attacked the administration building but could not break down the barricaded door. They then stormed the Men's Barracks B, where thirteen men, mostly from 1 Platoon, were killed by small arms and grenade. The other occupants of the barracks escaped from the rear exit. It was reported afterwards that some of the men must have still been alive when the Home Army entered the building and they were found to have received multiple disfiguring wounds from bladed and blunt weapons. The surviving members of 1 Platoon ran to Men's Barracks C, where they raised the alarm.

Barracks A at this point was on fire from a single grenade thrown through the window. Two members of company headquarters, two privates from supply, had received minor wounds from shrapnel. Lieutenant Eseley was in the barracks at the time and, armed, was able to return fire and repulse the small Home Army squad that attempted entry. He killed three with his service pistol and the remaining attackers retreated.

—The Sergeant and the Lance Jack, oh they beat him black and blue-

—For treachery's a wicked crime and swinging's surely due

—But un-til then there's ample time for thrashing Captain True-

—In the morning, in the morning, they'll hang him in the morning.

I hadn't told anyone but Piggott was clutching his chest, panicking, crying, bleeding out. He was saying he was trying to keep his soul in. "I'm holding my soul in my hands," he said. "Oh God, I can feel it moving under them, it's pushing between my fingers. Oh God, oh God!" And I was doing my first-aid, and I was shouting for a medic but none were coming, and I was saying to him, "Alan, your soul's still inside you. You're not dead. You're still alive. Look, look, you're still alive."

He said, "It feels like it's bleeding out of me. God, is God taking my soul?"

And I said, “No, no, God isn't taking your soul. It's still in there. It's in you. That's where God wants it to stay. Pig, if God wanted to take your soul, you wouldn't be able to stop it from going to Him with your fucking hands.”

And I hadn't told anyone about that.

—That night he spent in suffering with neither food nor water-

—He pleaded through his broken teeth but none would give him quarter:

—Starving's such a petty price for such a wicked slaughter-

—In the morning, in the morning, they'll hang him in the morning.

Lucy, they told me, had been shot and killed, thank God, before they got to her body. Longman was the one who found her and they described in grisly detail what he and his section did to the Home Army men who were around her body. In fact, they took visible pleasure in telling the story, telling how one man was bayoneted in the stomach and had his guts pulled out across the ground, and how a man was shot multiple times in the groin and then twice in the screaming face, and how a man got stamped to death, his head toe-kicked off his body like a penalty shot. But, they said, if word gets out we never saw anything. We're joking of course. Of course it never happened. There were things that were said that could never be repeated.

Emma, thank God, was at the motor pool. They were working on the suspension of Land Rover fleet and they heard the alarm and they took up their weapons and secured the area. That was where she stayed throughout the incident and they weren't engaged by the enemy.

Martin and Shaw had been in the officer's bungalow when the mortars started falling. They evacuated and moved towards the yard, luckily not encountering the main force of Home Army insurgents, as they went around the base by the western wall. At the command tent they found Dixon and his men and together they moved through the yard towards the barracks. Here they engaged the enemy and managed to push them back towards the main gate. The main gate was secured by the sentries on duty, who put up a strong defence from the sentry post. Men from Barracks C engaged the enemy from the opposite side and, with sustained firepower, the enemy force was effectively neutralised in the area around the gatehouse and sentry post.

—They stripped and bound the Captain and they strung him at first light-

—The comp'ny all fell in to watch the hangman serve him right.

—The Sergeant tied the looping rope, the Lance Jack pulled it tight-

—In the morning, in the morning, they hanged him in the morning.

Piggott died. They said a piece of shrapnel, too small to mention, had entered through his chest and nicked his heart. Without immediate trauma care, without access to the hospital, and with all his other wounds, there wasn't much that could have been done, pericardial tamponade leading to cardiogenic shock leading to a sudden drop in blood pressure. That's when he fell unconscious. That's when I screamed for the medic but the mortar shells were still falling and the Home Army were killing Lucy and the lads in B, and no medic came. So Piggott died, so I guess he wasn't able to stop God from taking his soul.

—Sergeant said to Lance Jack, "Tom, let's take the time to savour

—If bastards must away to hell pray you'll take this wager:

—Dear Captain True is joining the Lieutenant and the Major"-

—In the morning, in the morning, they hanged him in the morning.

For all intents and purposes, Dixson was company commander, so we stood at attention and watched him stalk along the rows of dead Home Army men laid out in the sun, in their defeat. Thirty-six. Some had been covered with tarp or uniform, others lay open to the air, limbs at eccentric angles in the dirt, their wounds and mortifications visible to all. Flies gathered at ruptures and exsanguinations, black and crawling, and the dirt was turning brown all around the corpses.

Dixson knew the names and lives of all the dead men and like a quartermaster might read an inventory he recalled the details at length. He listed the battles and honours of the regiment. He recited these details for the benefit of, not God, but Kipchumba who, alone among the defeated, knelt before him in the dirt, his face unfamiliar with its new landscape of contusions. His jaw hung awkwardly, knocked out of place by a boot or rifle butt. He bled from a ragged wound to his temple and his shirt was torn open, ripped off his left shoulder. As he knelt, and groaned, Kipchumba held his left arm with his right, cradling a fracture.

"These Essexmen, these Pompadours," Dixson was saying. "You murdered them in cold blood. They came to this country to help you save it from murderers and terrorists. You were supposed to be the good ones, the ones who stood for law and order. You pledged yourself to the crown, to England. We were brothers—"

"Brothers?" Kipchumba said through his ruined lips, his broken jaw, spitting blood. "Do we look like brothers?"

—In the morning, in the morning, they'll hang him in the morning.

Dixson punched him in the arm, he knew the wounds as they were of his creation, and Kipchumba cried out. Dixson punched again and again, slapped away Kipchumba's warding hand, punched and punched, until Kipchumba fell face-first to the ground, sobbing, drooling. It was Shaw who first stepped forward, and he slipped his arm under Dixson's and pulled him away. Martin next stepped forward and looked at Kipchumba, then looked around at those of us assembled, perhaps twenty from various platoons. "John," he said, and Longman came to him. "Take him to the Medical Officer."

Longman stared at Martin and it was the first time I'd seen him hesitate. Martin stared back. "Yes, sir," the sergeant eventually said.

Martin turned away from Kipchumba. He spoke passionately to 2 platoon and picked men for a burial detail to dispose of the corpses of the rebels, outside the base. He emphasised the need for a respectful approach to this task, he reminded them they were Englishmen and Essexmen and there was an obligation on all of them to bury the enemy dead. "I know, it's all raw right now." Simple graves, simple markers, no fuss. He wanted their names, their full names, and their ranks recorded. No moaning, he said, no whinging, we were better than that. Show the same respect for their dead as we do for ours. "I understand how you feel." There were a few looks amongst the platoon, but he spoke passionately both his words and the reiterated words of Dixson, of tradition, of honour, and the names and lives of our dead comrades were still steaming about us like a haze. The names writhing on our skin like those flies. It would be hard, it would be painful, but he said we were equal to the task, he knew. And I thought, this is why they missed him when he was gone, and I thought, how much like Dixson he can be.

15.

The rain had come down all afternoon, rain and an edgeway wind, upsetting the furniture on the veranda and jostling the Tilley lamps. After an hour, the town apparently all caulked by the downpour, a river of overflowing water came sweeping through the hospital gates and along the drive and made of the gardens a lagoon. Deep and black and frothed, buoyant with a jumble of junk and waste, the front yard was all over rainbowed by a layer of oil, without a hint of lawn. Shrubbery like islands, cans and plastic bottles a colourful, bobbing navy.

The rain, I think, has now stopped. From his bed, Rickwood watches the movements of its silvery channels on the windows. On the next bed over, Lindsay reads Lilliput, adjusts his glasses, touches his moustache. Across the room from them, in the chair beside my bed, I stare at an empty page of my notebook and test the still-sharp point of the pencil on the flesh of my thumb. No one speaks and the wind has grown quiet now. The nurses offer up orchestral melodies from the radio and the music issues through the open doors, in and out of the wards and corridors. The storm clouds have ceded their darkness to the dusk and I can see from here that the lights are starting to come on in the town. The orderlies are outside on the veranda, righting the scattered tables and chairs, putting a match to the lamps, talking, and discussing, possibly, the difficulty of crossing the estuarine garden. There is a sound like a splash, then a complaint, then unkind laughter. Somewhere in the hospital, a cough that goes on and on.

Lindsay places his magazine, open, on the blanketed frame that covers his damaged legs. "Would you be a dear and close the bloody window, Welles?"

I look at the windows nearest me. "They're not open."

"They're not? I can feel a draft. Do you feel it? This net is moving, see? Can you see it moving?"

I look at the mosquito net above his bed. From here, it seems still. The room that takes its shape around these eight beds draws in at the corners, its sharp hospital lines weakening into a brown gloom, shrinking now that the light outside is failing, the lights inside yet to come on. I look at the net above my bed, the net above Rickwood's bed, the nets above the three empty beds to my right, the two empty beds beside Lindsay's, they are all still, gathered for the day like visiting spirits. Cording dead. Green dead. Pierce, Cottler,

Watkins, dead. Lovett, Rickwood, and Welles still living. Smaller now, this world of three.

"I don't, I'm sorry, the light-"

"Are we losing you soon, Lieutenant?" Lindsay asks.

"Probably."

"Well. We will miss you, won't we, David? But bloody good luck to you, chum." He turns the copy of Lilliput around so I can see the double page of legs and garters, a young woman in a leotard bending at the waist to touch her toes. He raises his eyebrows suggestively. "I'm only sorry you never had the chance to romance our mutual friend."

"Romance? Where did you get that idea?"

"Nurse!" Lindsay calls. "Nurse! We need some light in here! Nurse Bee!"

"Captain Lovett," Beloved says as she enters, and she enters with all the things about her (her flat shoes, her white apron, her cap, the way she moves) proclaiming her authority and with the ease of her knowledge that this is her space. Her space, a smaller space, a quieter and cleaner and easier space now, but a space only of three now. She looks at Rickwood lying on his side, many white sheets all over him like a snowdrift, then looks at me. I smile and nod. She smiles and nods and slides into place beside Lindsay's bed. "How may I help you? The lights, you say?"

"What are your plans tonight, Nurse Bee?"

"Tonight?" She lifts the fob watch on her dress. "Well, I shall be handing off to the evening shift girl in around an hour but until then I aim to be wholly attentive to your needs."

"No, no, after work, after work. Dancing? A little drink maybe?"

"Steady on, Captain Lovett, is this an invitation?"

"Oh, my dear, if only I were ten years younger, two legs richer, I might be able to teach you how an Englishman trips the light, as it were-"

"Well." Hands on hips, she raises an eyebrow, glances slyly at me. "I would, of course, love to experience this marvel - quite unique amongst the various nations, I've no doubt. You know, we've all heard so much."

"Ah, alas, you'll find me lately rather ill-equipped to conduct such an operation. But!" Lindsay claps his hands together and points towards me. "I'm certain my man Welles there would volunteer to be the instrument of your edification, my dear. Like a shot."

"Oh?" she says.

Before I can answer, Lindsay laughs. "Of course! I think the excision of that notebook would be your first priority."

"A doctor now, are you?"

"Oh, I wouldn't dare, this is simply my layman's opinion." He holds his hand towards me, palm out. "Look at the chap. Dehydrated, he is, positively desiccated. Fluids! Fluids, is what he needs, a reasonable dose regularly spaced throughout the evening. Plus exercise- what do you call it? Physical therapy. Keep him under close observation, be ready for sudden intervention. Maintain a nice, warm temperature. Hot compress. Plenty of pressure. I should say his prognosis is decidedly rosy-"

"Lindsay, give it a rest, would you?" Rickwood says.

"Oh, all right, chum, if you insist. Too effusive. Indeed." He makes a play of contrition, bows his head, folds his hands on his lap. "My apologies, Nurse."

"Quite all right, Captain," Beloved says. "Please excuse me."

She nods to Lindsay, switches on the lamp above his bed, then walks across the tiles towards me. I stand, dropping my notebook and pencil into the cushion of the chair. What is this, lifting me? Decorum or the wish to impress, or acting, but of all things it is a matter unshelved like a book about to be read for the first time, with all the unknowing and the overflowing wonder of how it might be. "I'm sorry about that." Yes, these seem to be the lines. "I didn't put him up to it, I swear."

"Don't mention it. I've grown quite accustomed to Captain Lovett's manner over the past few long, long... long weeks."

"A comedian he might be, but he touched on something with the talk of dancing-"

"Matron would not allow it, I'm afraid."

"Yeah, but Matron needn't know."

"I struggle to see how. I mean-"

"You'll be off duty in an hour? I have some clothes here- I would hardly look the part, but I might manage something respectable. I'll get past Matron-"

"And the sisters?"

I've seen this at the pictures, possibly, or am describing the plot, over-arching several chapters, of a thriller I once read. "Handover? That's what it's called? When the staff congregate in the nurses station?"

"Well, yes-"

“Then that’s the time to do it.” And these are somehow, miraculously, all the right words, a rambling long division that, against the odds, rewards a whole and pleasant answer.

She squints at me, brown eyes very dark in the half-light. “All this for a dance?”

“You know,” I say, copying her squint, “I think, I think I recall promising you a dance. It seems so long ago now, in another lifetime, but it can only have been, what, a fortnight? Three weeks, a month, perhaps. Didn’t I say something about taking you out? I suggested we get some drinks, you refused. Then I suggested a dance. We were in the garden? You showed me the beds of, I’m sorry I forget the name, the small yellow flowers. Wild flowers. I suggested a dance, and you said you’d consider it, and I told you to hold me to it. Didn’t I? Did I make that promise or is it my imagination?”

“It is, it is quite possible you did make such-and-such promise, but I can’t-”

“I know the unit will have me back next week. This might be my only chance.”

She turns her head slightly. “Well. If that is the case, I can hardly refuse. But, I fear I should warn you not to be under the same misapprehension as the Captain: this would not be my first time dancing with an Englishman and I must say that there was exceedingly little about that experience one might call ‘edifying’.”

“Oh, I didn’t, I don’t, I never thought, and I must warn you in turn: there’s probably very little more on that subject that I can offer in way of further education.”

Beloved looks at me, and I look down at myself, at my half-unbuttoned shirt, and am aware for the first time that the light is failing faster and we are both now shadows in this corner of the room. “How are you feeling this evening?”

“Quite well enough.”

She steps towards me, her arm outstretching and brushing past my arm. She is warm beside me and smells of the starch in her clothes and something floral about her skin. The glassy plink of the bulb then yellow light bursting from behind me, into the corners of my eyes, over the bed. “Many thanks,” I say, but it comes out as little more than a whisper. With her closeness it is enough, though, and she smiles and replies, “Quite all right. Lieutenant Rickwood?”

“Hmm?” comes his voice, reflected off the wall beside his bed.

“Would you like your lamp switched on?”

“No, thank you, Nurse.”

“Very well.”

“I’ll see you later, then?” I say as she turns to leave. “About eight?”

She replies, in a low voice, “A little later. I must change, but I will be down presently. Meet me at the rear gate, where the ambulance parks.”

“I’ll do my best.”

As she leaves the ward, Lindsay gives me a thumbs up. “The old must give way to the new,” he says.

—Sir,

—I write to you against the advice and the wishes of my superiors but find myself utterly shaken by the gravity of this situation (this matter of lives and recent deaths and deaths that may still come) and I must now be unconstrained by propriety. I owe as much to the memories of the men you have lost as to the young ladies whose lives, I feel, now are held in the most terrible balance. It is a balance I feel bound to do my utmost to tip towards the side of mercy.

—My nursing staff have been taken into custody. I have been told by a witness I am inclined to believe that they are held at the detention camp at Bullwood. I cannot think why they deserve such a punishment- it is wholly inappropriate for these young women to be confined in such a facility. Has it been proved that they are associated with the terrorist organisations threatening our security? Has their case been taken to a court? Is any judgement pending? I must insist on being allowed to give evidence at such a trial.

—These eight women are the most innocent creatures, wholly faultless in this matter; against it I can stake my word, my reputation, and my career of almost forty years. They have no quarrel with us or our administration here: they are native girls but their English is superior, they are intelligent and eager to learn, they are allegiant to the crown, and, above all, they hold fast to our values and their duty of care. They are, to a girl, champions of the humanity we all wish to embody. I cannot tell you the horror this hospital experienced. Please, any information you can provide me concerning these poor girls would be most gratefully received. Time is of the essence, sir.

—You will find me,

—Mrs Pamela V. Newton, Matron, No 1 General Hospital.

We meet at the cast iron gate at the rear of the hospital grounds. It is open, double leaf doors swung out to their widest, chained to concrete bollards, and the orderlies are not

in sight; it is less a check to egress than it is a borderline between the town and the hospital. She places her arm in mine and we walk along the avenue towards the High Street, stepping around standing water and other couples. The soft and balmy breeze cups our faces, warm as skin, trembles the palms above our heads, sets them loudly shushing in the red-yellow canopy of the lamp posts. I am wearing my smartest khaki trousers and shirt, my cap, pompadour stable belt, shoes an orderly polished weeks ago but which still have some degree of shine from lack of wear. Beloved walks in and out of the shadows in a dark blue circle dress, a black cardigan, inch-high heels bringing the top of her head slightly below mine. A gold chain and pendant around her neck, and swaying earrings of small blue stones, bound in gold wire like grapes on the vine. The traffic beside us is sparse and each car, as it comes out of the night, passes in a gentle buffeting of hotter air and sound. Clattering of engines, the damp applause of tyres through puddles, it rises with the exhaust, into the air about the shivering palms. A Bedford passes, a mottling of pale faces in the rear, staring out above the red tail lights. I don't recognise them, wonder if they can see me clearly enough.

When we reach the High Street, the pavements are so full of people that I suggest we unlock arms. I step down to the gutter and walk along as Beloved braves the very edge of the kerb. We make a game of it, she avoiding elbows and handbags, me the deeper puddles that have pooled, black and bubbling, around the too-full drains. The town, this evening, is full and alive with jazz and chatter, the neon signs of bars and clubs, perfume and alcohol and smoke from a thousand cigarettes.

A fair-skinned woman in a short skirt, too preoccupied with her gentleman, turns in a space too congested with the shuffling multitudes and bumps Beloved with her hip. There is an apology perhaps, a "terribly sorry", before the woman and her date are quickly lost in the crowd. Beloved gives a little gasp and manages to almost right herself, toes dancing on the concrete. I am close enough to take her hand and steady her.

"Oh," she says, "your hand is cold."

"I'm sorry."

"There's no need to be, of course."

She gives me a choice between the Theatre Royal and the Palais. I tell her I've seen the Royal at night and it will be full of soldiers and we'll barely be able to hear each other over the din. She agrees that, yes, perhaps the Palais would be calmer. And, sure enough, here we are outside the Royal with the impatient crowd, with the fresh couples eager to

enter, the sweating, laughing, an exchange in the street between pomaded, suited belligerent men, words between stumbling soldiers in shorts and open shirts and the doormen who ejected them. Beloved and I share a look and we continue on down the street towards the Palais.

“I sometimes try to guess,” she says, “how long certain people have been in-country. By their appearance, their demeanour, the manner of their speech. I suppose in the end it’s unlikely that I’ll ever know whether my guesses are correct, but it’s still amusing to create little stories of their lives.”

“Oh?”

“Take, for instance, these fellows.” And she means a quartet of sharply dressed young men walking towards us on the pavement, sporting fedoras and straw hats, smoking thin cigars. “Colonial administrative officers, of course. Only been in-country for a month. They already miss their wives immensely, but drink and dance with local girls each night. One of them, this one with the grey hat, has received news from his English wife that she has given birth to a baby girl, their first, and he has bought cigars for his colleagues to celebrate. Off they go to the Theatre Royal to wet the baby’s head and find unattached young ladies.”

The group passes us and we stop and turn to watch them go. “No, I’d guess colonial surveyors. Possibly been here half a year, in amongst the dirt and the rocks. As a result, they don’t get to wear their suits very often and a night on the town is a chance to dress up. They’ve recently discovered a large vein of some dull-coloured mineral- not gems or precious metals, something that nobody prizes for its looks. It’s no doubt an integral part of some industrial or agricultural process, perhaps involving fertilisers. Their supervisor is especially pleased with their unearthing of this stuff, and has given them cigars as a reward. One each and they’ve already smoked halfway through. The mineral will get back to England, and be processed, a long time before them.”

“Oh,” Beloved says, “I like that story.”

—Mrs Newton,

—As you are aware, the Home Army has been dissolved following revelations that it contained insurgent elements and terrorist sympathisers. I congratulate you on the smooth operation of your combined English, colonial and native nursing staff, but I cannot boast in a likewise manner that the introduction of native men into the apparatus of the Colony has

produced any kind of harmony or noticeable benefit. In the current climate, we have been forced to very quickly establish a replacement security force to handle matters of day-to-day policing, law and order. This new corps, called the Home Guard, is composed of, equally, loyal former members of the Home Army and volunteer members of the public. Due to the urgent need of an effective police force, we have been compelled to accept certain expediences in this recruitment process, i.e. the training of these new police officers has been, unfortunately, not as stringent as I personally would have liked and, also, the screening of local volunteers has been less than robust (I can tell you that 95% of the volunteers are from the native population, with fewer than 30 colonists coming forward). In this environment, I hope you can appreciate that pressures and circumstances lead to regrettable lapses and make some errors unavoidable. I do sincerely believe that in the case of your nursing staff, such an error has occurred. I have set my best to work on this issue and will endeavour to apprise you on the progress our investigation, as candidly as legal and operational restrictions allow.

—Sincerely,

—Capt. A/Maj. P. L. Dixon

—Commanding

Under the squared and sepulchral shapes of the Palais's white stone frontage, under the steel and glass marquee that announces PALAIS DE DANSE, the commissionaires study Beloved's identity card, and they nod and they direct us inside. In with a dozen happy couples, in with the bunting all around the golden coving, our flag and their flag which is still chiefly ours, in with the angels and rolled acanthus leaves, the art deco uprighters on all the walls like spearheads. In with golden vines and grapes in bunches and in with Dionysus looking down at us. In with the gentlemen and in with the ladies milling around the foyer, loitering on the steps of the arched walnut staircases leading to the upper floor.

We cross the foyer and, yes, there are fewer soldiers here by far, the occasional hint of khaki, the odd beret, mostly though the many surreptitious glances of the pinked and pale faces of farmers or bankers or clerks, perhaps. Functionaries in their dark suits with their wives or girlfriends, or in their best dresses with their husbands or their single colleagues or their supervisors. Beloved gives them barely a second look and I try as well but fail and feel the weight of transgression upon us, more a fear of being exposed as a fraud. I pay the attendant at the cloakroom a shilling and she takes my hat.

“Would you like to go up to the mezzanine?” I ask Beloved.

“Oh, Martin, I know what happens when a man takes a girl up to the mezzanine, up there in the dark.”

“What’s that?”

“He becomes very forward and lets his hands do the flirting.”

“No, no, no-”

“I’m joking, Martin, dear, I’m sorry. Come on, let’s have a dance first off.”

Beloved finds a girl waiting at the wall and asks if she’ll hold her purse.

“Oh, thanks ever so much!” she says and we go straight onto the dance floor. The maple shining, the floor has a cheerful spring to it, and we spin into the outer arm of the circling crowd, into a lively foxtrot and I remember the steps, I remember the steps from lessons at school and evenings at the Hippodrome. If not impressed, her face impassive but for a smile I can’t decipher, Beloved seems pleased with our progress around the floor. When the tune has finished, we separate and offer light applause, and some dancers depart for the lounge beneath the balcony and some erstwhile bystanders now join in, and we begin again to the bandmaster’s encore. The music is like the sparkling shapes of light on water, and the water is wider by far than a man might swim, but the light is on everything and it is everywhere, like the birth of a being. And now her eyes are happy and bright and she says a quiet, “Much better than some,” for which I thank her and then I tell her she should possibly reserve judgement until we’re a few dances in. She laughs and it’s a real laugh, as far as I can tell, and I can feel her fingers holding my arm tighter. We turn and bump our way through the encore and the other dancers, and I keep to the steps as best I can in the intervals between collisions and Beloved surprises me with variations and how many evenings has she spent at the Palais, at the Royal, dancing and dancing and dancing and-?

—Mrs Newton,

—Acting Major Dixson has directed me to contact you concerning the matter of the following eight missing nurses: Charge Nurses/Sisters (2) - Faith Alive Deska, Cynthia Matilda; Staff Nurses (6) - Goodcheer Jane Mugo, Faith Kume, Margaret Lighter, Anne Hope Forthright, Beloved Hirst, Constant Elizabeth Fall. I hope these details are correct. Please advise myself or this office straight away if there are errors. As the Regiment is currently under extreme strain, our duties now are many, and amongst my own I am now serving as

the Army's liaison to the detention facility Bullwood. However, I must point out that the daily management and discipline of detainees at Bullwood is the purview of the Home Guard and colonial administrators, and that my role is simply to communicate with the aforementioned authorities when the Army has carried out operations. I have been informed that you believe the missing nurses are currently at Bullwood. According to the records we hold, this cannot be the case. On your behalf, I have sent all the information I have to the new commanding officer of the Home Guard, Superintendent Verdure-Clark. He has an office at Government House and I am certain he will investigate this matter further.

—Yours,

—Lt. Robert Eseley, for OC

Beloved excuses herself, retrieves her purse, and disappears into the crowd near the ladies, while I go to find a table in the lounge beneath the mezzanine. The light here in the lower section of the hall comes from a few scattered downlights, coyly recessed into the underside of the balcony, and from red glass lamps on every table, each with a dull, sooty bulb inside. I pick one of the empty tables and sit. Away from the dance floor, the Palais is close and intimate, with thick crimson carpet underfoot, dark wood furniture, gold fittings, the air warm and murky. In the dim light, I can see a number of couples holding hands, leaning in and exchanging quick kisses in the shadows. Sometimes heads turn to complementary angles and I can spy flashes of teeth, flashes of tongue, a lasting embrace. At the next table, a young corporal sits by himself, smoking, with the neglected lower third of something brown and cloudy in a dimpled pint mug and a pack of Player's on the cloth before him. He has a very square jaw and very blond hair, cut short. He sees me looking and nods, blowing a curl of smoke out of the side of his thin-lipped mouth.

"Good evening, sir," he says, tapping his ash.

"Good evening."

He raises his cigarette, raises his eyebrows. "Would you care for one?"

Would I? "Thank you." I would? He shakes the pack and leans towards me. I take the offered cigarette and the corporal strikes a match from a matchbook. The smoke is harsh and hot and my throat too dry, too thirsty. The cough that escapes betrays my discomfort. I try to hide it, then try to laugh it away, but the act is ill-conceived and badly performed and ends up somewhere far beyond its original awkwardness.

"Not a smoker?" he asks, smiling.

“No, I suppose not.”

I order gin and tonics from a waiter wearing a red waistcoat that seems too big for him. He smiles, clasps his hands together and gives a little bow. He calls me sir before asking if there’s anything else he can do for me, and I say no. The corporal, watching the waiter leave, draws on his cigarette then blows the smoke to his side, away from me. “Are you out with a girl, sir?”

Nodding, I look over the room towards the ladies but I can’t make out individual faces in the crowd. The band speeds the dancers into a quickstep and the rhythm draws more couples onto the dance floor until the hall is swollen with spinning, bumping bodies. The corporal scoots his chair closer to me, close enough to rest his elbow on my table. “You?” I ask.

“Oh, yeah. One of the new lot just come in. She’s going upcountry with our mob. Thought I’d show her the city life before she gets lost with us in the jungle.”

“Are you A Company?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Right.”

“C Company, sir?”

“That’s right.”

“I’m glad the English birds are here now,” he says, tapping his cigarette into my ashtray. “Don’t get me wrong, the colonial girls are all right. It’s the accent funnily enough: our accents do for the local girls, and theirs does for our boys. You can’t really blame them, the lads who want a local girl, especially if she looks like a bird from home. I can understand them. But then you have these lads who go out with a native girl, they’re just after a bit of the exotic, aren’t they? And the native girls just want an English bloke to-”

“Oh dear, I could barely see you there.” Beloved stands behind us. She has not come from the direction of the dance floor, must have gone via the cloakroom and the foyer and come to the tables from the opposite side. “I looked from the floor but you seemed another person. But no, I misunderstood what I had seen, for here you are.”

I flick my head at the corporal. “Sling your hook.”

“Beg your pardon, sir.” He stands up, comes to attention, then breaks out of it and walks to the bar.

“Do you know him?” Beloved asks, as I pull her chair out.

“No, different company.”

She sits and I sit and she leans in close. “Oh,” she says, “I didn’t know you smoked.”

“Hmm.”

I take a final puff on the cigarette before stubbing it out in the ashtray. Beloved watches. She says, “Well, all right. You’re a strange one.”

“Oh yes, according to some.”

“Your friend, the fellow now at the bar, what is his story?”

“I really don’t know. Meant to be at the Royal, I think. Lost his way.”

We sit in silence, with little smiles at each other, as the waiter comes and sets our drinks before us. Beloved sips from her glass and, with an ‘mmm’ makes a face at odds with her spoken appreciation. She takes the lime wedge from the side of her glass and takes a small bite out of the flesh.

The silence lingers after the waiter has left. Our smiles buffet each other, eventually producing giggles. At last, she says, “Let me guess... he’s a young man from, oh, I don’t know any places in Essex. Let’s say London, a young man from London, son of a-” and she points, “car mechanic, he learned the trade from his father and works at the family business, a garage. He was conscripted, sent here, and he repairs Land Rovers for the army. He earns some extra money on the side by fixing the problems in the cars of locals and has fallen in love with a local girl. She’s a nice girl, of course, and reminds him of his other girl, back home in London. It’s not an issue of morality for him, you see, for his life here isn’t his real life and the things he does here aren’t real things. Do you think I’m right?”

“Oh quite possibly.”

“Don’t you have a girl at home?”

“No, there hasn’t been a girl for a good long while. A dance or two, a kiss, drinks, nothing serious. I’d almost forgotten it ever happened. This is all quite novel, you see. All this, tonight. A first time again.” I drink a sip of the gin. The tonic is powerful and bitter and my face probably mirrors Beloved’s. The lime wedge provided seems ill-advised. “Those times before, if nobody was keeping score, how can we say how many runs, how many overs there have already been? Maybe we can only know by how tired we feel.”

She gives a laugh, turns her head, looks up into the lights in the ceiling.

“I’m sorry. I suppose you hear that all the time, don’t you? Etherised musings.”

“Oh, I do,” she says, turning her face back to me, “but usually they’re more lucid.”

“Ah.” I chuckle, it seems correct. “You’ve told me about your birds, your flowers, the gods of the hills and streams, but you’ve hardly talked about yourself.”

She tips her head, purses her lips. “Oh, my life’s not really much of a tale.”

“I don’t believe that. Stories develop like those things, like flowers, like mountains and streams. They might start small but they grow.”

“But my life is hardly a story. It’s historical fact.”

“Are you playing?”

“Playing? Dear, I’m perfectly serious. The past is tied to me and I’m tied to it. My life spans generations. Who am I without my father, my grandfather? My mother and her mother? All those lives are also mine. My great grandmother was terrifically respected in her village, and in many villages around, all the way from the mountains to the far tablelands, the lakelands, all the way to the coast. Have I already told you this?”

I shake my head.

“Well, she was very important to many people. She was a wise woman. I know this because, decades ago, an Englishman came and took photographs of her. I have seen this, it’s in a book, at the library. They wrote beneath the picture that she was a witch. I share her eyes, her lips, this-” she slowly draws a finger along her jaw, from ear to chin, “this is hers too, just like this. But don’t misunderstand: I have no romantic delusions about it. I’ve never seen lives saved by banana wine and magic words. I have, however, seen many men and women, with complaints both serious and trivial, cured by modern medicine and the deep love of Christ. That is where I place my trust, gratefully and wholly into Him.”

—Madam,

—Please forgive the brevity of this message. I must inform you that I have only recently assumed this position- I was promoted to CO Home Guard three days ago. Up to this point, operations of both a law enforcement and military nature were conducted by authority of the Army, and arrests such as the one you describe would have been carried out specifically by a military unit or by Home Guards under the direct control of an Army officer. By which I mean that an Army officer would have been present at the scene. That being the case, the relevant documentation would be held by the Army; I have not set eyes upon any such information and believe no such has passed through this office. I find it inconceivable that the Army has no record of such an arrest, but must unfortunately tell you that my staff and I have, reviewing the documents we possess, been unable to verify the

detention of your eight nurses. I would suggest contacting the Army's top man locally, Officer Commanding C Coy, Maj. Dixson - I have included contact details if you require them.

—Respectfully,

—Supt. W. E. Verdure-Clark

—CO Home Guard

“Her son, my grandfather was a farmer, he had a vast upland farm. His son, my father, was a rural dean, upcountry. The colonists took his family's land and before he could become a tenant farmer on what had previously been his father's and his grandfather's property, the missionaries saw some wit or spark or, possibly, the flame of the Holy Spirit in him, and they took him to school in the city. He was very lucky to have been chosen but he had always been a hard worker and showed a keen understanding of the Bible and great love for the Lord. My mother told me he excelled at his studies there and the whole Colony was open to him. She said a lot of the men who went to the good secondary schools grew to love wealth too much and went into business or into criminal activities and were always taking the first opportunity that was presented to them to leave for England. But Father was a man of God from his first breath and God showed him that his place was here, among his own people, to spread God's Word.” She keeps my gaze, barely blinking, her head slightly tilted to the side, doesn't pause in her story. “So Father planted a church upcountry, it is probably still there, near the great forests below the mountain. I remember when I was little and my brothers and I, my younger brothers, we played in the flowers in the churchyard. It was quite beautiful. They built it to look like an English parish church, they used the local limestone and slate. Of course, that was its only really native quality, because the hymns were old and European, and the prayers were all in English, and any expression of worship that would not pass in-” she holds her hand out to me, palm upwards, “an Essex country church was banned.”

“How do you mean?”

“Dancing, chanting. Much too pagan, you realise.”

“I see.”

“It seems right and proper to follow the English ways, it makes the services more mysterious and exotic in a way, I think. And the people of the villages like that about it. It removes God from our world, one step out of our profane world, and moves Him into another. I'm probably not expressing myself particularly clearly.”

“No, no, I understand.”

“God is English and to speak to God and worship Him the congregation have to adopt the language and conduct themselves as Englishmen.” She smiles. “You probably find that quite naive, but my father was apparently a very powerful witness and a great fisher of men.”

“He died?”

“He died, yes, a few years ago when I was in school, boarding school.”

“I’m sorry.”

She sips her drink. “Quite all right, I’m sure. He is with God, in the place he wished to be.”

I nod. “Right.”

“There have been so many deaths here. In my country. Of my countrymen, my family. I don’t want anyone else to die. And your people, too. Mr Cording, Mr Pierce. Mr Watkins, God bless him. They found my father in the village stream. He had been bludgeoned to death. I don’t know who did it. The police investigated for a fortnight. That was the limit. An inspector came from the city, he was an Englishman. They said a wild man must have come from the jungle, accosted my father, and murdered him.” She touches her nose, the side. “There comes a point where one feels one must have committed some monstrous outrage against the world. And this is all a well-deserved punishment.”

And I don’t think about it before I say it, don’t weigh it or judge its delivery, don’t estimate its impact before it leaves, it comes from the piercing of a sudden deep shock and the melancholy that bubbles up out of it, and I say, “We’re none of us the people we’d like to think we are.” I finish my drink and, placing it down on the table, see there is a stubborn drop left in the bottom of the glass, next to the squeezed lime wedge. “I don’t call home as much as I should, I’m afraid.”

“Why ever not?”

“It’s silly, I suppose. You’d think it very silly.”

“I promise.”

“Well, if you promise!” I tip my glass up high and a little of the gin drops on my tongue, a few drops more fall to the table as I replace the glass. “Well, I suppose it’s a fear that one day I’ll call and nobody will answer.”

“Oh,” she says and I can tell she thinks I’m about to continue. She sits there and

watches me. "Oh, I see. I suppose I have the same fear, sometimes. But for different reasons, perhaps."

"Who's at home to answer the phone?"

"My husband-"

Well. "Oh. I had no idea." I look at her left hand. "I had no idea."

"No, but you see, he is dead. Long dead, if two years is a long time, which it can be, sometimes. I can make it a long time."

"I'm terribly sorry." I stare, can't avoid it, stare at her eyes that blink quickly, her eyes now staring at me. I turn away, look instead at the crumpled fag-end, bent like an elbow on a pile of its own ash and unburned tobacco.

"No, no, as I said, this is a well-deserved punishment." She finishes her drink in a final flourish, setting her empty glass down loudly on the tablecloth, next to the ashtray so that they clink together. "Shall we dance?"

"Well, isn't that why we're here?"

"Indeed."

We rise as the band finish a tune and the bandmaster takes up a microphone to address the crowd.

"It gives me great pleasure to introduce Miss Helen Goodwin, direct from the West End in London, England, to our lovely playhouse here, tonight, to perform for you. Please join me in welcoming her to the Palais de Danse."

He claps and the room applauds. The band is joined by a tall woman dressed in a long burgundy gown, lace makes uncertain the difference between fabric and skin, sequins from bust to hem reflect innumerable the lights on the proscenium arch, flutter sleeves bracing her generous black hair. She shares a word with the band leader and his nod starts the bassist plucking his strings and, in turn, the drummer finds a soft rhythm with his brushes and then the pianist's first notes are an invitation to the rest of the band to contribute, and the woman in burgundy sings *These Foolish Things* and the couples slow dance.

We find a place on the dance floor and dance away. This is new, feeling somebody warm against me, not a body brought into contact by accident or the huddle of an evening bus, but a body hot and sparkling and, yes, close enough to see the imperfections of the skin, for her to see the imperfections in me. Our hands are shut together tightly and her

fingers are fixed on my arm, to make me feel them. And she looks at me, all the things about her (her heeled shoes, her blue dress, her golden earrings, the way she moves) proclaiming her desire to be here, her knowledge that this is her space. Our space, a smaller space, a space only of two now. If I try her trick, if I write her story, I make her into a young woman who has suffered many losses, her father, her husband, spent years hurting in a world that is no longer hers, but she is making it hers again. Yes, the old things are giving way to the new.

—Mrs Newton,

—I would like to apologise if my words have caused you any offence. All I can offer are the facts as they appear in the documents of this office and of the Home Guard. There is no record of the alleged arrests, no memoranda, no transcripts of interviews or interrogations, no correspondence between this office and Bullwood, between Bullwood and the Home Guard, Home Guard and Army. The names of these eight women do not appear. No operation was carried out at No 1 General Hospital. I cannot imagine what further assistance I can offer in this matter. I leave the decision of whether or not to continue this line of enquiry with you, Madam, but I must caution that the Army has limited resources of late and my ability to participate in this correspondence may soon be compromised.

—Yours,

—Lt. Robert Eseley, for CO

Ah, a new world now. The lights around the vanity mirror. Ah, pushed against the black-veined marble. She sighs in my ear, my breath on her neck comes back to me warmer, all is alcohol and her scent, the heat, the sweat that drips from me onto her. Ah, she sighs, she sighs, ah. Her earring against my cheek is cold and trembling. My hand in her hair, and my other hand and hers are held together, fingers fastened between fingers, we cling. Ah, she speaks, words in her language, a whisper as she sighs, she sighs, and then in English, “My dear, my dear,” she sighs, “You fool, oh, you fool,” she sighs. And I cannot speak to her, between the striving and my lips on her neck there is no air to speak, other than to gasp out, other than to say, other than to tell her, “Yes soon, yes now.” And she urges, she urges, and my fingers tighten, and she speaks again, ah, so softly in the language I don’t know.

—Sir,

—If I had any hope left before your last letter, you have dashed it. I find myself

empty of everything. Your attempts to weasel out of responsibility are blatant and beneath your rank. You cannot convince me that those eight women were not in your custody or that it was not within your power to save their lives. It is clear that they have been pitched into the bowels of your institutions in this colony, you shall not shake me of this conviction. I can only conclude they have now passed into the darkest part and will never return and are now irrecoverably lost to the world. Eight young innocents lost. My heart is broken. There are no words to describe the blackness of this stain. I may only offer a curse of shame, sir. Shame on you.

—Mrs Pamela V. Newton

“Once more?” I ask Beloved.

She nods. “How sweet,” she says and takes my hand.

So now here comes the crisis of what it meant and what it meant to her. We dance and dance, and I am sweating, feel it down my face, feel my shirt sticking to my back, notice the growing spot on the front, and she is sweating, it drips from her chin and nose. Our hands together are hot and wet and we spin around and around as the bandmaster commands.

As the music subsides and the band begin another, perhaps the last, slow number, Beloved inclines her head to me. “I don’t think we’re in love. Are we? I really don’t think so.”

I look over the top of her head, at the other dancers hanging on each other in their respite. “Perhaps not,” I eventually answer.

“We can’t be like this. It isn’t me and it isn’t you, oh God, what a terrible mess this would be if it were.”

I nod.

“No explanations, no apologies, they’re not necessary,” she says. “There’s no harm done. We had those days in the hospital garden but, oh God bless you, may we never meet again.”

And I’m about to say something but the words and the thought itself are lost in a loud blast like sudden close thunder all around us.

At the same time it comes from beneath us, for all the world as if a great fist were pounding on the underside, something vile and gargantuan urgently attempting escape, and the supple maple heaves, gives a jolt like a hiccup, sending some to the ground, tripping Beloved onto my chest. The sound of breaking glass erupts from the lounge, bottles, having

leapt from their shelves, meeting hard ground. Spirals of plaster dust descend from the ceiling in unhurried choreography. There are screams and exclamations. The band stop playing and look at each other, look to the bandmaster, who looks worried. After a moment he takes the microphone and says, "Ladies and gentlemen, please remain calm. I think it's probably safer if we all stay here for a while. Let's have one more dance, shall we? Gentlemen? Something jaunty?"

The band obediently start up a loud, fast tune but few continue the dance. Some rush to the sides of the room, to partners or friends, others rush towards the lounge and the foyer. Beloved takes my hand and pulls me towards the exit. The cloakroom attendant is nowhere to be seen. Men and women enter the cloakroom and appear with their coats, hats, and purses, give me guilty looks. This is the new rule, it seems, and I abide by it and retrieve my own cap.

What is the world into which we are about to cross? The shock has shattered the glass doors and we crunch loudly through the slew of shards and spots of blood. Outside, in the night, the traffic is at a standstill, cars parked and empty, windowless. People are rushing in all directions. Down the road, the Royal is on fire, its frontage collapsed, upper floors on display through the smoke, like a diagram in a textbook, revealing the secrets of its construction. Furniture hangs from the ruptured storeys, grossly, the shock of inner things thrust outward. Several small cars have been overturned and tossed to the opposite side of the road. The blackened undercarriage of a Bedford sits burst and burning, in a hollow in the centre of the melting street. The smell of wood smoke and melting rubber, brick dust and sweat. My own sweat, I think. There is screaming, I realise, all around, it comes into my consciousness slowly, and shouting as people are pulled out of the wreckage. One limp man is hooked under his arms by several bleeding others and they are dragging him along the ground away from danger. His head lolls backwards, his eyes are closed.

A woman runs past, babbling something nonsensical. Her face is plaster-dusted to recall a ghost, with a stripe of red all down the middle like a ribboned sweet or another nation's flag. Holding her head with both hands, her fingertips plunged deep into her powdered hair and tearing down the bouffant, she scatters kirby grips in the road. She runs up the street away from us, and is soon gone in the darkness.

An officer's cap lies upturned on the tarmac. A pair of briefcases, placed neatly upright on the tarmac. Were they placed or did they land like that, amazingly? A motorcycle

has been dropped onto its side. Somebody lies in the road, close by, face down, with limbs awkwardly posed. A woman. Unlikely that she could have died here, too far from the blast, but possibly she too had been dragged away. Then, having shown no sign of life, she had been left here, in this incongruous state. No one stayed to kneel by her and mourn. All alone and dead.

A man running towards the Royal stops by the body and he must, in a matter of seconds, come to the same conclusion. He turns and shouts to me to join him. I start to follow but Beloved holds my hand firmly.

“No, please,” she says, “go back to the hospital before they see you’re missing! Please, Martin, go now, quickly, and be safe!”

No, this is all the same.

She says, “I must help.”

“Bee.” My hand in Beloved’s, her fingers sliding along mine to the tips and she pulls away and I am holding nothing. This is all the same world. I take a step to follow and my foot goes down into the gutter, into a cold puddle. “Shit.”

And she too, is gone, gone towards the disaster.

I cross the road and walk around the backs of buildings, roughly parallel with the High Street, returning to the junction with the avenue. The palms that line the road are, closest the explosion, blasted and shattered, their trunks split, some from root to crown, others laterally as if gripped by hands and torn; those farther away stand stooped and nudged, bark blown off and scattered about like sawdust. The traffic has all stopped and drivers and their passengers are standing outside their vehicles, hands on heads, looking down the street towards the swelling convolution of smoke. Their eyes, as I walk past, are hard and probing as if to discern whether I am victim or perpetrator. It feels something like shame to be neither.

Walking home alone, not for the first time. Home?

The siren of the ambulance rattles out of the night and the single blue rotating light pulses across the road, makes aquatic the tarmac, the palm trees suddenly like kelp or coral, my arms and legs a diver’s. It passes and must eventually be thwarted by the gridlocked traffic. The siren ceases and I can no longer see the light.

Four orderlies wait at the open gate. I watch for a moment. Beyond them, under the lamps at the hospital door, I see nurses and doctors waiting for the ambulance’s return,

orange faces looking out into the dark. Someone bites a fingernail. I cannot enter that way and must instead brave the lagoon of the front lawn. I nod to the orderlies as I pass through the gate, ignoring their confused looks. None confronts me. Then a sharp right, away from the door, past thick-leaved bushes and plump-berried shrubs in terracotta pots, under the swooping branches of young fruit trees, under metal arches wreathed with some foreign rose or creeping vine. Leaves like tongues with blade-sharp edges catch and cut my bare legs. All these plants and trees Beloved had named, those names now escaping me.

I walk around the side of the hospital building, wary of the brightness of the searchlight moon, and it is only the sheen of the moon upon the water that saves me from an unintended plunge. This far has the deluge reached. A long wading now. Frogs are clicking encouragements as I take off my shoes and stuff my socks inside them, then roll my trousers up past my knees as best I can. The flood is black and cold, it comes up to mid-calf. Off it rises the smell of pond sludge, or of the warm rotting heart of compost. It has a scummy film and is blistered all over with bubbles, big and shiny as coffee beans, an oily froth that itself seems to ache to be free of the water. It clings to my legs, the froth, thick as the skin on gravy, shifting against the water like something solid. Plastic bottles bob over and bump against my legs, they seem drawn to me as I go, as if urging me to rescue them from their predicament. The water is now up to my knees. Testing every footfall for hidden dangers, it takes a long time to skirt the hospital and reach the veranda. Luckily there are no orderlies or nurses at the front entrance. I step out of the water, it sucks at my feet, and I feel it fall away from me, hear it drip on the wooden boards, thick and heavy. I imagine black footprints following me through the main door into the lobby, but do not turn to investigate. Quickly across the lobby, quickly to the stairs. Quickly up the staircase, around these corners, softly past the nurses station - empty - and into the darkness of the officers' ward, all the lamps now switched off.

My eyes take a moment to adjust. There is the shape of Lindsay in his bed, there is the shape of the frame over the legs he'll never walk on, and, yes, that is the sound of his snoring, quiet, even. I walk forward, past the empty beds, then stop. Rickwood is standing at the window beside my bed. The clouded moonlight is coming in; everything in the room facing it is limned by the slightest blue. Dressed in blue pyjamas and a winceyette dressing gown, striped moon-blue and, possibly, genuine-blue, he blows his smoke against the window, it bundles out and rolls up the glass and down the glass and becomes the air.

Padding up to his side, I whisper, "Good evening."

He regards my rolled-up trousers, my wet feet, the shoes in my hand. He takes a long drag. "Been paddling, have we?"

"To the casual eye, perhaps."

"Hmm. It sounds like everyone's having a lot of fun down there."

"Bomb at the Royal."

"Our chaps?"

"Yes, and the locals. Just everyone. Everyone."

"Terrible. Bloody terrible." He offers me his cigarette and I shake my head. He sucks on it and the ember crackles, louder than our voices. "Matron received a telephone call while you were out. From Dixon."

"Oh?"

"The long and the short is the old man wants you to report to the Castle tomorrow."

I sigh. "Did they say what time?"

"Oh, crack of dawn, no doubt. We'll be glad to see the back of you." He grinds the fag end into the tiled windowsill, turns to me. "It has been a bit of a lark, here, hasn't it? Never really feels like it's ever been one thing or the other, and never feels like it's ever going to choose. I mean between life and death. This question of mortality. A bit like the old nerves, you see? One good shock sets it all a-quiver and I'm unsure if it's ever going to be still again. It might seem as if one has found a measure of balance, a little bit of bravery to try to walk a straight line, but wouldn't you bloody know it, the world tips you on your backside. Misery acquaints a man with strange bedfellows. I thought quite earnestly that I would die in here, and, call me barmy, but a little part of me still thinks I did."

"Funny how these things turn out."

"Isn't it? I expect I'll see Essex before you."

"I'm afraid you'll have many new friends here, before you go. They'll be up in a while, bits and pieces of them, stitched, pinned, glued. Or they'll be lucky, like me, with all the parts still present. Just not necessarily all in the right place, and coming away." I sit on the corner of my bed, place my shoes in my lap. "Fuck this shit."

"Oh, indeed, definitely."

And I want to cry, there in the dark. And I do, I think, remembering the way, as quietly as I can. Rickwood's hand is then on my shoulder, and he says, "The Lord shall

preserve you from all evil. He shall preserve your soul. God bless you, Martin, don't collapse now."

16.

—Dear Mandy,

“Say something lovely, now, before we start.”

“Darling—”

“Oh please. Not something romantic. Something lovely, something authentic. Tell me the truth. Can you?”

And he looked at me and he sighed and he began to tell me the story of his life to that point, what troubles had befallen him and what he had left behind.

—It’s easier to express yourself in a letter than face to face. I’m sorry this is the first letter I’ve written to you since I moved. I’m not very good at keeping track of things like that. It’s my fault. I just wanted to explain a few things: I don’t believe this will make everything right, I don’t even know if everything can or should be made right. What is right? I had to find myself. I married your dad at 21. You’re as old now as I was when I had you. When you went to uni, when you moved out, I was only 44 and I felt I’d lost myself being a wife and a mum. I didn’t feel whole- I didn’t feel really me. ~~Can you understand that?~~ Does that make sense?

Born and raised in Essex, the son of a civil servant, when he turned sixteen his father had been posted abroad, a country far away and tropical. He didn’t miss England, glad to be gone, though how they lived there was English enough. They put him in an academy alongside the sons of colonial officials and staff officers and he soon outshone them, head of year, head boy, captain of the first eleven, under officer in the cadet force. The weather didn’t wilt him. Apparently he scored a century on four separate occasions. His name above the door at the pavilion there. He always was so well turned out and his leadership skills the envy of his instructors. Great things were seen in his future and great things expected of him.

The first time was five days after we’d arrived incountry. I’d been to see the Medical Officer for the cold that wouldn’t budge. He looked at me and nodded and said, “Oh, it’s going around.” He gave me some pills for the fever and said the lethargy and weakness should pass in time. He asked me about my general health, sexual health, sexual activity. He asked if I had a cough. I responded mostly in the negative and tried to assure him that everything was how it should be. He told me to take the free condoms on the shelf over

there and I thought, Well, and I said, Yes Sir, and I took a handful because, well. I'd left the office and in the corridor was Captain Dixson. Holding the condoms in their bright wrappers, I'd stood to attention.

"Budden, a moment," Dixson had said. "I heard you know Lieutenant Welles."

I replied that yes, in a way, we had known each other at university.

"Indeed. Were you friends?"

I replied that, yes, I suppose, for my part.

"Oh, I see. I've been to see him at the General Hospital. I'm happy to say they think he'll pull through."

I replied that I was glad to hear it.

"He'll eventually reoccupy his place commanding 2 platoon. Mr Eseley will move on."

I replied, "Yes, Sir."

He'd dismissed me and I'd gone about my day.

—I'm not a perfect mum. I don't know how to be a perfect mum. I don't know if your failures are really my failures because I wasn't good enough. Or if I should have prepared you for more things. I tried. It's probably a bit rude to say when you're a mum you'll understand- I hope one day if you want to be a mum you can be and you'll muddle through like all the other mums. You don't need to be a mum. You should think about it a lot before you do anything.

They kept saying "Be good or they'll ship you off to the jungle". Spinney was transferred to Company A. For someone who didn't mind the prospect of biting insects and tropical heat the jungle began to seem like a pretty nice place. Indeed, more of a punishment for the jungle, to have another pair of boots trespass, to have another foreign asshole shitting in the undergrowth. Spinney was a tall girl with hair buzzed down and with muscular arms and she was probably a swimmer and she probably was a lesbian. I thought, if one of us can tough it in the jungle, Spinney's the one.

For two months, you were the topic of all their conversations. You and Ombarrago. Whenever I was in earshot of two officers, I would hear your name. If one alone, I would hear him muttering to himself about that "poor bastard Welles." A cautionary tale of the dangers outside the town, outside the Castle, the mention of your downfall sobered every meeting. They were confused as to why you had not been sent home, confused but also a little relieved, I gathered, for that would have surely been for them, as for you, a defeat. In a

similar way, Ombarrago's name had around the base the power to quash all triumphal sentiment, and security was the watchword. They'd discuss "that bastard Bold" and his band of terrorists and after two months it seemed that both of you were bastards to some degree or other and that the word had lost, or gained, meaning.

Around the base, I would often find myself in close proximity to Dixson. He would always tell me how you were, the prognosis, how things had started to go downhill, the sepsis, the men who had died around you. He would paint a picture of your days, the monotony of the hospital routine, the characters who populated your life there. And I would ask questions, as far as propriety would allow, general questions about your progress or your moods or when you were expected to be discharged. Your reported moods changed, your progress was sometimes rapid, sometimes stalled, sometimes even retrograde, and the chance of being discharged seemed like a hedged bet, hopefully soon, we'll see, fingers crossed. I began to look forward to the conversations, perhaps because I enjoyed his company or perhaps because I appreciated his concern for you. There was something endearing about it, his face when he said your name, his eyes when he told me you were close to death. I think, perhaps, we shared that look. It seemed that Dixson, also, found our frequent meetings pleasing, as even when it took on a darker tone it provided him some relief, and when I offered anecdotes about university or imitated some quirk or tic you have, something we had mutually observed, he would laugh and seem not like a superior at all, but a man, young and somewhere else.

—Do you remember when me and your dad separated? You were fifteen, I think. You'd been off school a lot and you'd read your books in your room. I was getting calls and angry letters because they thought you were skiving but I knew you needed time. There was one time when you were in tears and I held you on my lap as you cried and said you wanted to die. I held you on my lap like you were a toddler again.

When he turned eighteen he went back to England and promptly went up to Cambridge. He met her on his third day there, at a freshmen ball. She was, of course, the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, glamorous, achievable. He had bought her a drink and asked her to dance, and he was, obviously, a superior dancer and she was, obviously, swept off her feet. He was so in love with her. He had rolls and rolls of film developed, portraits that he'd taken of her. He used to write her poetry and send it to her in letters when they were apart. When they were together he was giddy and full of joy at every daily

triviality and everything in every day was her. He hung up his pads and left the cricket club for he had no time for sports or feats, and spent his terms in listlessness mooning over her. He would write her name on notebook pages, over and over, and his name write beside, looping both together. Rustication was always a danger for him, it seemed, the lengths he would go to be with her, the rules broken, the trespasses. Such was his love for her. A month before they graduated she told him she was pregnant.

On sentry duty one night, he announced himself and came up behind me, in the dark, and put his hands on my shoulders. And he'd whispered my name, my real name, Amanda, and I'd lowered my weapon and his arms had come around me and I'd accepted his closeness and it was easier to let it happen when I couldn't see him. I felt his face in my neck, his lips moving, and I said, "We shouldn't" and he said, "I know", but we did. I turned and we kissed, my eyes closed, and after the kiss he withdrew into the night, and I thought, fuck it, and I felt him still next to me, in a new way, like an awakening to freedom. It was not the last time. He found opportunities to be alone with me and we continued the kiss, and more, and he was burning, reckless like spitting coals, then I was burning, and we threatened a conflagration and it threatened to kill us both.

I told Emma and she said, "Well, shit. Have you tried to stop it?"

"I don't know if I could. I don't know if I want to."

"I mean, if you do it with anyone, the Captain's the one to do it with. But if you get found out, you'll be the one who gets in trouble, love."

And I said, "Isn't that always the way?"

I got the impression that, although she worried about me, she thought it would be fun or at least a pleasant distraction to watch the whole contrivance of parts from the outside, privy to its naked mechanism, its precarious spinning, whether it stood or whether it fell, to be a witness, at the end, to its resolution or ruin.

—There are a lot of things we've never talked about. Even when you were grown up. It's funny to think how far apart people in the same family can be. Maybe it's actually because they're in the same family that they can't be close. I think that's funny. You as a child were my greatest joy. I don't mean you were the easiest of kids, I don't think you were. It was hard when you were born, hard for me, like for lots of new mums. But we got through that. Your dad helped, he really did love our family at the beginning. I don't know if that's too harsh on him, he probably still loves this family, just not in the way I needed. Even when

I was feeling terrible, about life and everything, you were the best thing in the world. I really just wanted to tell you that, even if it's a stupid thing for a mum to say to her daughter. It's easier to say it in a letter.

They married too early, they were so young. She was pregnant but that wasn't the reason. They were in love. They bought a cottage in Thaxted, there was money enough in both families, and that was where she had the baby. In the airy living room, overlooking the rosy garden, they had an upright piano, and accompanied by black bird song she would play for him. They never looked at the clock on the wall. They'd sit side by side on the stool and sing together and he'd dandle the pretty baby on his knee. Very soon after the birth, he'd been sent on National Service, and it was what he'd always known, a regimented life with rules to follow and opportunities to excel, and afterwards he went to Sandhurst and then the army. He always was so well turned out. But it began to grow colder and they shut the windows to the garden and they no longer had time to sit together and sing. The baby did what babies do and grew and needed, and every day had its own unpleasant blend of ease and hardship. She found it difficult to be with him and he found it difficult to know where he should be. But he loved her and she loved him, they were in love, but they married too early, they were so young. She had been pregnant, but that wasn't the reason. They were just children finding themselves awake on the wrong side of midnight and suddenly being older and not knowing how to be. They began to notice that clock, with its unfamiliar time.

When most of the company were on patrol or on night manoeuvres, I found my way to his room and we stayed together until the morning. He didn't say much, his bed smelt of aftershave and spirits, and, as I moved my face against it, as I fell asleep, of sweat, the deep smell of sweat. He, probably, fell asleep beside me, around me, and when I woke, at two or three in the morning, he was there and his face was close to me and he didn't stir as I looked at him. And I was looking at him, thinking this is the face of a man and what is it and what does it mean? I tried to list his features, list them and describe them, and wondered if I were to write of him how I would word it, and it was the fear of being there and my awareness of the time and his small, soft way of breathing, the danger, the danger. How did these words describe him? How did words get us there? Things precipitated things precipitated things, that's sure.

—I'm very proud of you. You probably don't know that. I'm proud of what you're doing out there, even though I'm not entirely sure why you chose to do it. You probably

don't know much about your ancestors and my ancestors, but I've been researching them. They were obviously not lords or leaders, they were labourers and farmers and tradesmen. They weren't important to the world, really, if you catch my drift. They weren't bad people. Really the only things they did were carousing, brawling, petty theft and cheating, nothing major. They were normal people. When they were sent to war they went and died. Nobody made a big fuss for them. Their names are probably on monuments somewhere but I've never gone to look for them. I'm trying to say that you don't have to be a famous person or an important person like that, it's enough to be a farmer or a factory worker, for me anyway.

He came home from his first posting and knew things had changed. Through suspicion and through badgering, he had persuaded her to admit to him she'd spent some days and nights with another man, while the child was with her mother. He was furious and she was eager to place half the blame on him. He said, at last, he understood but he never could forgive her. She said she had felt a connection, or that there had been moments of connection more intimate, more fulfilling, more real, with this other man than a married couple could ever share. He went to stay with relatives in London. He spent his days in bars and lounges, he spent his nights in bed. He counted down the days until he was back incountry. They sent him ahead, a liaison officer, to facilitate the Pompadours' pending arrival. He had such an easy way with people. The Major took a shine to him, this Cambridge boy. The Governor, too, when they met. Respectable, well-spoken, there wasn't any Essex left on him. He understood the colonial population, the native population, the army. He alone, of all the men, seemed designed for this current, tailor-made for this socket. Only Dixson, three-cocked, could satisfy the land's tripartite holes. Easy with the men, easy with the locals, easy with the Home Army. Easy for him to be the man needed in the moment.

Somebody must have suspected or somebody had guessed, and Emma said I'd better be careful for the men were talking and men talking wasn't good for anybody. Dixson seemed to notice a change in the base's mood, too, so he'd engineered a rendezvous at the Royal, had issued passes. So there we were: I lay on the bed, comfortable with his nakedness and the warmth of him, and smoked a Churchman's as he talked. "And that," he said, as I stubbed out the dog-end in the ashtray on the duvet, "as they say, is the long and the short of it."

I lay there and looked at him. He stared at the ceiling, the fan above us turning

slowly.

“Martin will be back soon,” he said at last.

“Oh, let’s talk about that.”

“You don’t want to?”

“I don’t know.” It all depended on maintaining balance and a little tilt either way would cast the whole thing down, it would tip everything crashing to the ground. “Do we have to talk about anything anymore?”

“No, if that’s what you want.”

“I don’t know.”

“We have time.”

“Do we?”

“I’ll still be here,” he said. “After you’re gone and you’ve forgotten everything that happened here.”

“You could move on.”

“No. There’s not really anything beyond this.” He touched my arm. “Darling,” he said, “you are the only beautiful thing here in this place.”

—Please be small, Mandy. Please send me a letter when you can, it would mean a lot to me to know you’re all right. I love you.

—Mum

Dixson is a man of steel, they said. He is the army's cutting edge, the very elementary particle that separates one piece of matter from the next. The very line itself between Us and the Other. He is some kind of law, a principle. He’s the necessary sureness of a definition. He is the fucking force of God, they said, and he doesn't even know it. His life is a teleological certainty. He is 'I am', 'I do', 'I will'. What a man, nothing sticks to him, nothing stops him, he moves like a knife. The boys look to him- he is their king. A man through and through- no ambiguity. His virtues are clear to see, they hang from him like testicles, swollen. And in his testicles? Sperm like sharks. No children for him, they said.

I began to undress. “All right,” I said, “let’s be quick, before we spoil it.”

17.

At first light, when I wake, an overture
introducing, by degrees, the motifs of that month.
The coughing, crying, pleading with a nurse,
prayers at midnight, the raucous springs of mattresses,
metal arguing with metal, arguing with tile.
A distant siren, birds beyond the window,
and always coughing, followed by a curse,
and always apologising to a nurse.

At first light, another light, a loose day
among days cast out like dice, I wake
and find my pen and notebook on my chest,
with sentences scribbled in awkward prose
or in verse unindented- but who wrote it
when I haven't the strength to move?
If a nurse were attending I would ask her
but none appear and I, while waiting, fall asleep.

Six Knot sits beside me in the chair,
smoking from cracks in his shifting skin,
as the earth vents frothing poison
through the crust, miles down in oceans.
His ruined face is waterlogged,
his karstic features slick with gritty mucous
of industrial runoff; the holes that open,
his eyes, his mouth, seem all bunged with peat,

an awful hint of displaced brain or innards.
He is reading my notebook, silently; still,
something about him echoes sound back

as might a deep pit or distant cliffs- I can't
perceive the words, but they are thrilling
sharp and quiet as scurrilous whispers.
He discards the notebook, leaves it stained
with ink or with what oozes from him,

reaches craggy fingers towards my neck.
He grasps the tube there in his clay hands,
takes a breath for a wicked laugh
as he draws it from my throat.

Gagging, blood, the heat of wounds:
"Don't worry," he says, his voice so loud
it threatens ears with rupture, "don't cry,
I won't extract the one inside your cock.

"I read your work, I don't much rate it,
you try too hard to make it right.
Overwrought's the word, I looked it up.
Mate, you should take my sage advice
if what you want to be's an author."

"Poetry, it's poetry, the work in there,"
my voice comes, rough from underuse.

"Your poetry's shit- it barely rhymes, you couldn't keep a meter

"if you tied it to your wrist.
You should write prose, plain and ugly,
write plots and characters and all that shit,
to take your reader on a journey.
You should always give them what they want:
murders and puzzles and set it in the past,
where people feel safe, cos what's passed
is done and written down in history.

“Oh, whatever you do, fuck’s sake, son,
don’t make your main character a writer.
Nobody wants to read about a writer’s life
because they just don’t want to fucking know
a penman’s petty fucking preoccupations.
You’ve gotta have a strong beginning
and catch your reader’s attention
before they give up on you, son.

“They give up quick, mate, off they pop
to go and watch the telly or do one
of the many tasks that distract us
from the fucking chore of reading.
Write it all as clearly as you can-
don’t use long or ancient words and always
cut it down to the bare minimum.
And this here’s the most important thing:

“make it mostly about sex and death,
because what fucking else is real?
Mate, if only you could see your face-
lying there, the state of you! Looking at me
as a hooked fish looks back on the river
having absolutely no sense of it
but needing it, the two so deeply joined
as the word swim is to the word water.

It’s a connection unfathomable to you,
but so perfect and only possible
in the mind on the outside,
the mind of the fisher on the bank.

Fish you, river me, you don't even know,
hooked-mouth, why you can't breathe now.
You're wriggling on the poem's rod,
you gasp and know your life's soon over."

I try to find the inconsistencies,
the ways in which this dream's undone:
details of room, or bed, or quality of light
that must be wrong and prove this false.
"You think I'm a dream- son, you hope I'm a dream
but you're dead scared I'm memory.
I know what scares you, mate: I'm what scares you.
I know how much you masturbate and who

"you think about. I know where your head is.
I'm what you don't want me to be,
I'm your god, I'm your carnal origin,
progenitor of fucking Essex kings.
And you'd better proper fear your god,
else you'll get fucking lamped, mate."
"You're just a dream- nothing's real that's like you.
You're pale and flat and fizzling around the edges-"

It's then he pounces, disaster-fast,
dropped bowl, dropped glass, the sudden
rasp of breath, the heart's return,
the 'Oh God what have I done?'
and he's upon me, straddling, in my face
a screaming mouth of black teeth, black tongue,
his sore lips dripping warm black spit:
"Am I fucking fizzling, mate? Am I fizzling now?"

Awake. And there it is, the dream dispelled
by voice or sound, such things uncheatable:
real light, this ward, the touch of fabric.
Beyond the net, stately in the orange chair,
sits Beloved beveiled. Mosquito side,
she reads aloud from *Empire Day*.
I feel I know each much recited line,
his diction, his singular and profligate prose.

“A golden lapse in fields at home,
as tender boys, bound for school,
lark about on grass and daisies,
whooping, singing, in our valley
beneath a pink up-tilted sky.”
There is peace in her just being her
and comfort in her clear enunciation
and the soft slow turning of the pages.

“How then, over years, the generous
weight and span of early summer
has worn a hollow in the mind.
How now we spend the later days of June
comfortably recumbent, deep in its same-
shaped concavity.” They put a pipe
inside my throat to pump me full of food,
a catheter to pump out all the piss—

Cording groans in the bed beside mine.
Beloved calls his name and calms him,
calls, “Sister, please, help me with a patient!”
I hear her soles sharply on the tiles-
as she rushes to the nurses station,

poor Cording gives a groan in vain.
Pain enticing sleep upwelling, fades away-
then wakes to Six Knot's face again.

He sits, straight-spined, where she had sat:
Empire Day is foxing in his hands.

"Son, everybody here is on the make
and on a crusade to recreate this race,
compelling them to be a little more English.
English, you and yours belong to me,
come from me, you're nothing new
nor even slightly different to the ones I grew.

"What a terrible excuse you are, mate,
for a person. Not a person, not a soldier,
you're a story being told. Barely a Christian,
a pretty poor excuse for a man- who gave
you licence to be here in this land?
Self-centred, self-seeking celibate,
unfucked and unwilling to fuck,
unaware the war's not real.

"You wanker, jerking to unearned cliché:
will nothing original get you off?
You don't know what you stand for,
allegory. Spraying out a hero's virtues,
white boy wins the native girl;
she can't resist the English charm.
Magic words, waving wands, tricking time
that the answer's moving back to heartache.

"All the hope you place in Dixson,

you barely fucking know the cunt.
Fuckin'ell, all you know of anyone
is in the moments spent with them.
Budden, someone you've forgotten,
is a yearlong stranger to you now.
All she is, for you, is memory:
the halter top, that tight grey skirt,

“you could see the lines her knickers made
and, yes, you knew what colour knickers-
how the fuck did you know what colour?
Why would she wear those bright red knickers
unless she wanted you to see?
Four-inch heels that raised her arse right up,
her legs were tanned and smooth as fuck.
She tried to kick them off, in bed,

“but the straps got caught around her toes.
So you helped and took them off, remember?
You took them off, you touched her foot,
you saw the goose bumps on her calf.
Her skin was warm and slightly damp,
she tasted like the wine and ash.
How did you know the taste of her?
Was she asleep or just reposed?

“She was lying on her front, right there.
She'd flirted at the Students' Union
and held your hand the whole way home
to stop you or her from falling in the road.
She'd smiled and laughed and complimented
your shitty verse and prose.

How could that not mean she liked you?

What did you do? What did you do?

“Rolled up her skirt and bared her arse,
fucked her quickly while she slept-
you didn’t even use a rubber,
but you were drunk and she was drunker,
she was flirting after her eighth glass.
But she led you back to her room and you
fucked her on her bed. Is that what happened
or is that what you should have done?”

He’s gone by dawn; the ward still stinks of him.
Beloved reads me letters from abroad,
two from Elsie, one from home.
From time to time, she cleans and tends me:
washes where blood or sweat have crusted;
taps my hand and knee with gentle care;
makes cleaner this dirty thing and bed
and when she’s close I smell her instead.

Six Knot comes the next night too,
broken-winged, incontinent, a bird-
a sparrow- bletted brown and twitchy legged,
sitting where he has no right to sit:
on the shortened arm of Watkins,
on Cording’s bandaged face,
on the chart at the foot-end of my bed.
Black eyes open, his fan tail flicking,

shitting where he has no right to shit.
So I tell him straight, fuck you, fuck off.

He flies at me and speaks in shocking bass
that overwhelms the ward with words:
“Fuck me? No, mate, it’s me fucked you.
I’ve been all the way inside you, son,
up to my balls in your clammy guts.
I’ve been in your blood since your birth,

“in your dad, mate, in your mum,
in all their parents back to before
people were fucking west of the Channel.”
His clicking beak concedes his fetid breath,
he hops and leaps around my sweated bed,
a riot of wings and the gusty smell of feathers.
“I’m in your brain’s raisinwrinkles, son,
I’m in your heart and its struggling veins.

“And that’ll be me in the head of your prick
when you finally shunt that cunt beloved.
You want me to fuck off? Oh no, mate, no.
You hear? You’ve got no fucking chance, cock.”
He darts towards the window then, smacks
his head against the glass, once twice, hard,
leaving blood and ghost-lines of a bird,
before reeling up and out the open crack.

It’s dawn, or dusk, and doctors chat while
Dixson naps beside me in the orange chair.
“Paul.” He jumps to hear his name.
“Fuck me, you look the worse for wear,
all these tubes they’ve put inside you.”
“Oh Paul, I never knew you cared.”
Then there comes a pained man’s cry-

where I'm flatly sprawled I cannot see from whom-

Dixon's second jump betrays his lie:

"Well, I should be off, you need your rest;
we're not in any rush to have you back."

Oh you're afraid to stay, I want to say,
if you won't sit and gloat, I must be bad.

I must be doomed, I cannot move my arms
and my head's too heavy on this pillow.

"How bad is it, come on, don't lie:

"if you won't tell me how it is, who will?"

"If you insist- but how to phrase it?

I don't envy you, in here, like this,
with poor bastards dying left and right-

"Who died? Who's lost now?"

"They just wheeled out one poor sod,
someone Watkins, up from B, gone an hour ago.

"I couldn't tell you how he went, but quickly
and barely any fuss. The nurses seemed unnerved."

Yes, Watkins's bed is newly vacant,
clean sheets empty, untended now,
the mosquito net balled-up above it.

Dixon coughs, into fist, away from me.

"This is the livest you've been for days.

"Please do come back or we'll have to find another
girl to take your place. Plenty of girls are coming
but I dare say none as fine as you."

"Oh I think you'd rather like a woman on our team."

"Are you mad? Our team's already full of them."

“A real woman, you twit, stop being so obtuse.”

Dixson slightly smiles. “You’ve been half-

“then nearly fully dead and I waited

by the phone to hear you’d packed it in.

But they never called- I thought, perhaps, last night

would be the end of you. I came and sat for hours

and, yes, you seemed to pass away at times-

I watched to see you breathe, I willed

your chest to move when for all the world

“it looked to be forever stilled. But greedy you,

taking in this air like you were owed a debt of it.”

“Was it so stressful? You fell asleep.”

“Well, you know, I trusted you to keep it up

if you know what I mean. Stop keeping me.

Unlike you, I have responsibilities.”

All colours fade and I cannot hear his words.

The ward, as it darkens, bends in upon itself and me

and I see at the last Dixson standing, his grey face

fierce and miming cries of panicked urgency.

The drugs or pain are pushing me farther down

into a hole or negative, a black and thoughtless space.

It’s night again when I know again

and I think it’s Nurse Beloved who’s near to me.

She murmurs words that soon become my name.

“Don’t worry, Martin, you’re safe,” she says, and perhaps

she sees a brightness in my eyes, “Are you there

now? Martin, are you there? Can you speak?”

I try but find all things inside are set at odds

and not one inclined to speech. I succeed
in giving the briefest, most painful of nods.

“You’ve been calling out. I could not tell the words,
sometimes clear, but most times slurred, giving
the impression you were in pain and terror.”

She touches, for a moment, the skin above my brow,
touches, indirectly, the pain inside my head.

“I’ve given you some medicine- I hope it helps you rest.
Try to sleep now, it’s past midnight, two days

“after Mr Dixson came. A Tuesday, if you care. The best
thing, for now, is just to sleep and trust our work.

Mr Cording and Mr Pierce have just passed, but
we will bring you back, I promise, we will not
leave you in the dark to suffer here alone.”

When thoughts are straight and run in order
I count the bodies in the beds.

Three have gone, four remain, and me-
needled, tubed- in my place in the corner.

The empty beds have clean white sheets.

Times of nothingness multiply the days.
Sleep interrupts and cuts each moon and sun
and makes each new; those two suns twins.
Next he comes in as a hare,
comes bursting ward doors off their hinges.

Six Knot comes, screaming, on my bed,
comes with eyes black and bulging,
lips folded back, sharp rabbit teeth,

tongue raging with his cracking, awful voice:

“This is your fucking rebirth, you cunt.

“Why don't you get out of that fucking bed,
up and fucking leave this place.”

I stare at him, will not reply.

Let him spew his words, let them
empty and exhaust him. Ignore him.

Beloved brings the mail and laughs.

“Another letter from your sweetheart,
she seems to send at least two daily.

This girl must have an iron arm
to feel and write and post so much.”

She sits and leans towards me, sighs.

“Shall I read you what she writes?

‘Dear Martin,’ it starts, she has a lovely hand.

A fountain pen, I wouldn't wonder, such
graceful curves, these ribboned lines.

“‘Thank you,’ she writes, ‘for your letter of the 3rd.

It's embarrassing the giddiness I feel

each time I see that army postmark.

You simply have to tell me all about
this nurse, you say, who fancies you—’

“what's this? Perhaps I ought to stop.

Shall I send her something in reply? To reassure

her doubtful heart and mollify her worrying?

I joke, I'm sorry, I'll have them write a dozen words.

A little note, most brief and to the point:

“He lives tonight, his heart persists, his body presses on.”

“That would be fine,” I say, I think,
or maybe I say nothing. She nods, she smiles,
“I’ll type it up at once. We mustn’t let
such a tender heart linger in uncertainty.”

Six Knot does not come that night or the night
which follows. Cottler passed that day between,
and Green the morning after.

Rickwood and Lovett are asleep both times,
so lonely is the watch for them. My eyes,
the eyes of nurse and doctor. Their eyes

shut and always shut. Dixon doesn’t come again
but sends apologies, regards, and hopes
for present meeting.

Pleasant meetings. Beloved stays beside me,
reads another chapter, spends an extra moment.
Her hand touches just a little longer.

The doctor comes and looks me over,
says, “He’s improving, Sister. Mr Welles,
chin up, you’re improving. Very good news.

“Very good news.”

18.

—Mum,

—Well we're here. Don't have long to write this letter so I'll make it really short (hurray!) Amanda keeps saying the censor will blank out the bits I'm not allowed to tell you, so sorry if this gets to you covered in black marks or whatnot. Things have been really strange- it isn't really what I'd been expecting and not much like the old man's stories. They keep saying that we got the cushy job- there are parts of this country that are much more dangerous (in the jungles and stuff) so don't worry too much about me, all right? I'm Little Miss Lucky, me. You should hear the stories they tell of the ulcers and sores you get in the jungle- I saw one and they aren't pretty! Tell the old man I'm sorry I never believed him about training being easy compared to this. That's one thing he was right about. It's all rules and regulations and they have us doing drill in the yard every morning, just like at camp. But worse, though, because they keep telling us the rebels are right outside the gate. They aren't, but that's what they say (if you put routine next to safety, it starts to look like they're connected). The base is grotty like you wouldn't believe. They've got us in a new hut, just us girls, and it stinks like when they built the extension at your place: brick dust and concrete and paint. It's new and draughty and not much more than a shed, except with us instead of lawn mowers. At least there aren't sand flies and stuff inside- the bugs here are mad! The officers I've met are like you'd guess, ruperts the lot of them. Amanda says there's a couple of good ones but I haven't met them yet. I know you warned me that the local boys would be all over us, but it's really the Essex boys who take the liberties- I don't know if that's because they're not intimidated by us or what, I don't know what's going through their heads. Anyways, I've run out of time to write anyway, we're going on a run in a minute here (good as the gym!), so I'll end this quick. Give the old man a kiss from me, please. A big one that makes him swear. Tell him I expect him to put his feet up and keep them up!

—Lots of love,

—Ems

—xx

But this is where we're billeted. But they hadn't been expecting us. But the other buildings were all already occupied. But the Home Army must share the base for logistical reasons. But first come, first served. But there's only four of us. But there are very good

reasons for it. But they must be seen to be fair. But there are very good reasons.

The plane had been stifling and the turbulence unrelenting, and a headache, like a creature attempting escape from my skull, had spanned the flight, unremedied. "Ladies first," somebody had said when we landed, but I don't recall who said it, a man or a woman, or exactly how it was said, an offer or a command. But we had, fifteen young women in dry uniforms, debarked before the lads. Stepping down onto the uneven concrete apron, with the sun hot like standing too close to a hearth, with the breeze hot and bringing the smell of something I hadn't recognised, I had found the headache receding, leaving a skull perforated by claws scratching and the gnawing of desperate teeth. Silent now, the creature within suffocated and still. The women had looked green in that new sunlight. We hadn't waited for the men, had followed a corporal who looked sixteen to a one-roomed building away from the main airstrip. No windows, rough concrete walls and floor, a squeaking electric fan, and in that stifling air he took our names, marked us off against a list as the sweat ran down from my armpits.

"Where are you from?" he had asked me.

"Grays."

He squinted at the shine on my face. "I thought that was in London."

"Not yet," I had said.

We'd been separated then and the four of us for C Company ("Lucky you," the corporal said) took a thankfully short ride in a Bedford to the base, feeling, the whole time, that we were something apart, and special. From the air the land looked brown rolled upon red rolled upon brown, watery in the haze of heat, seeming like an organ suddenly ruptured, or the interior anatomy of something secret, opened up and spread out against its will, to leather in the sun. But from four feet away, from the back of a speeding Bedford, as we were blinking, weeping out the grit in our eyes, it could have been that an unlikely oven-hot summer had baked the marshes of the Crouch and left them tough and red as brick, and here we were amazingly back at home, driving across those Essex margins, familiar empty brown expanses full of sky. But for the heat, the heat and the flies, flies blue-sheened black and seeming big as eyeballs, flies delighting in our sweat or the quickness of our breath and choosing to accompany us on our ride, but for that, it might have been a misapprehended version of Essex.

Whilst the other three girls chatted, I sat in silence and tried to determine the

movement of a single fly amongst the multitude. The girls talked about the ludicrous heat and I observed a fly from its early biting of my hand, watched it in hopscotch congregation with others on the side of the truck, and its submission to a daft and twitching mating against the green canvas. I spent what was left of the journey imagining how many maggots she would eventually contain, and how much was owed to its bellyful of blood. The bite came up promptly on my skin, a full and shining blister with a single spot of red.

When we reached the town, we all looked out, with fear or wonder hushed, and watched the people about their daily normalities. The stalls set up beside the road, blankets with vegetables spread upon them, the concrete buildings with their bright painted signs. And the clothes, intricate patterns in brilliant fabrics,

“Palm trees,” said Kelly who had never been outside England. “Look at them.”

—Mum,

—Me again- who else? I wanted to let you know that I love you all and miss you loads. We had our first bit of combat yesterday- somebody took a shot at our patrol just outside of town. No one was hurt but we didn't find who was responsible. I thought I'd tell you a bit about life here. Life around the camp isn't so bad, really. We get to go out on the town at the weekend, as long as there haven't been any warnings about rebel activity. The town centre looks a lot like a town back home: there's shops and a cinema, pubs and dance halls, pretty much everything you need, really. The people are all generally really friendly- even the natives, who always seem to say hello or give you a smile. Frankly, I haven't seen any anti-English feelings. They transferred Spinney to A Company, but Amanda and Luce and me are still here.

—Lots of love,

—Ems

—xxxxx

We were all staring at the miles-high column of smoke rising out of the far side of the base. Kelly was wondering if there was an emergency, but none of the soldiers or Home Army men we could see were hurrying or seemed the least concerned. We stood there, with our gear, and it seemed the world had forgotten us and, for a while, that was fine. But after ten minutes or so, we were approached by a lieutenant holding a clipboard.

“Budden, Harris, Spinney and Cook? Is that right?” said the subaltern. Back home, with a real haircut, in real clothes, he might have been fit and fuckable, had he kept his

mouth shut or hidden that posh accent behind glottal stops or vodka shots. “Have you seen the Medical Officer yet?”

We replied that, no, sir, we had not. So the subaltern marched us across the yard to the command administration building, and told us to sit on plastic chairs in a corridor outside an office door. There was an air conditioning unit in the window at the end of the corridor, a great loud metal box with a huge hose attached to one end and a fan on the other, and its intention was no doubt to convey cooler air into the building’s interior, but not so much as a draft reached us where we were sitting. So we sat in the stuffy heat of the corridor and waited outside the Medical Officer’s consulting room and my plastic chair filled with sweat.

“Fuck me, this heat, mate,” Emma said.

The door opened and the Medical Officer, a man probably in his thirties, with reddish hair and patches of grey, with stubble on his jaw and chin, leaned out of the room. We stood quickly to attention, our chairs banging against the wall. “Oh, I see,” he said. “Right.”

He vanished back into the room. We looked at each other.

“Budden!” he called.

—Mum,

—Don’t tell George, but there are giant spiders under the rims of the toilets in the latrine and moths as big as two hands together and beetles that crawl over the walls at night and then scurry away when you switch on the light. Actually, do tell George. Tell me what he says! I’m sorry Ben’s been bothering you. I promise I told him what was what. I’ll write him another letter, but you can tell him that if he has something to say then he should say it to me, not you. As for leave, I’ve asked around and nobody seems to know what’s going on with it. Some of the lads haven’t been home for a year or more. It’s weird, right? But the good news is weekend leave to the town or to the coast seems easier to arrange.

—Dad wanted to know about the Home Army lads. They’re boys from the town and the farms around here, trained up by the army and now they’re like policemen I suppose. They have uniforms and guns and all that. Their boss here is our OC of course, but the highest ranking officer actually in the Home Army is Captain Kipchumba. They call him Captain True- True’s his Christian name. He’s the son of an administrator, they say. His father makes as much as some of the Englishmen. I didn’t think it would be that way here,

but maybe it's that way everywhere. We get to chat with the Home Army lads quite a lot, they're all over the base and they're all really friendly. Kipchumba too. He calls us buttercups, the girls I mean. I thought it was because he saw Amanda's tattoo (I don't think they do tattoos here, or at least their girls don't get them) but one of the younger lads said it's because our skin looks yellow to him, but whatever the reason is I think it's nice, and definitely better than what some of the English lads call us.

—I'll end this here because I've got to run.

—Love you all,

—Ems

—xx

The subaltern who had first greeted us was waiting outside the administration building. We all saluted and he dismissed the other three women, leaving me alone, standing to attention. "Stand easy," he said to me. "My name's Lieutenant Eseley, I'm your platoon commander. I'll be here until Lieutenant Welles returns to duty."

"Sorry, sir, is he ill?"

"So I'm led to believe. They have him at the General Hospital, in the town centre." Eseley glanced at his watch. "Okay," he said, "I'm after our platoon sergeant, Longman, so I'll give you the tour until we find him. Does that sound fine?"

"Yes, sir, thank you, sir."

"Right, let's crack on."

He brought me to the communications tent. On long tables were various radio sets and transmitters, telephones and typewriters. There were a dozen filing cabinets and as many desks along one side of the space and at each, men at work, writing, typing, sending messages. There was a jungle buzz of electrics and people's low voices, blinking lights and the crackle of static, electronic tones and beeps. "You had a bit of training in signals, is that right?" Eseley asked. I told him that yes, they rushed me through an electronics and signals course. I told him nobody had seemed very concerned about the level of training or the ultimate competency of the students. "That seems to be the way of things here." He looked me up and down. "You wouldn't have a problem carrying the radio pack? The weight, I mean."

"No, sir, of course. Anything a man can do."

"Right." He smiled on one side of his mouth. "Anything?"

We left the tent. "Sir, who's the OC?" I asked. "Things seem to change rapidly. My documents have names that I think are out of date."

"Well, you're right, things do change quickly here. And spaces aren't always filled. People get shuffled around."

He walked me around the yard, absently pointing out places of interest, the cookhouse, officer's bungalow, Home Army quarters. He found Longman near the ranks' latrines, checked his watch, introduced us, then left. Longman was less of a tour guide and he steered us directly towards my quarters, a steel and aluminium bunkhouse, called, expectantly, Women's Barracks A. He opened the metal door and we stepped inside, onto the bare plywood floor. There were four beds, two on each side of the room, and above them hung balled up mosquito nets.

"Stow your gear, Budden," he said. "Chop, chop."

—Mum,

—Thanks for the letter- love the story about Liam! He always was like that, for years, since we were kids. Just wanted to let you know what's going on on this side of the world. Dad wanted to know about the Major. We don't see much of the OC but the 2i/c Captain Dixson is a professional Pompadour. He went from straight National Service into the Army. He chose to be in the regiment, before conscription. He is hard. It's a bit weird. All the officers seem to think we're made of porcelain, I swear, although all the other ranks usually treat us like one of the lads. It's not a bad turn of events, really. I think they're worried that if a girl gets wounded it'll hurt morale for the whole company. So they've really put us on the top shelf. They have me in the motor pool, but I half expected that because of the driving and mechanic courses I did in training. Cookie (that's Lucy) is in supply, she's shuttling stuff from the airfield to the base and to the Governor's place and all over the shop. Boring, but when I get to talk to her she seems happy enough. Did I tell you that Spinney's gone? It's really sad. Amanda (they've started to call her Andy, the lads- she doesn't care) is in the comms tent most of the time. She's a sparky so they get her doing that kind of stuff, radios and things. She does get to go out on patrol a lot more than the rest of us, though, which I think she likes. And yours truly gets to give lifts to the ruperts when they need to be somewhere. A regular blooming chauffeur, me. It's good though, they've all taken a shine to me and I'm the first one they ask for. Is it because of my driving or because I smell better than a sweaty half-screw? Women's lib? Equality? I get the cushy

jobs- I've probably seen more of this country than any of the others (yeah, fair play, it's mostly the roads).

—Anyway, not much space left- I'll write again soon, Mum, promise.

—Love ya lots,

—Ems

—xxxxxxx

Our platoon went on parade as the sun was going down. There seemed no set time for any of the base's activities, for all the watch-checking and talk of schedules. We formed into lines in front of Longman as the shadows grew long around us, as our shadows became one shadow, and all the night sounds of the base and the smells of the cookhouse gathered on the breeze. Hints of the burn pit's glow between the buildings. The twilight was warm and the air was fragrant and full of particles, and my lungs felt varnished and my skin felt two-skins thick.

Longman raised his voice. "This arvo I was talking to one of the Home Army dogsbodies and you know what he said, he said that we, the English, are 'a warlike and longwinded people'. Can you lads believe that? 'Longwinded!' The bloody cheek, I thought." The parade laughed. "He said, 'the violence of the English man comes from an overfuelling of sexual desire'. I thought to myself, I thought, I know a few lads in this company who are overfuelled with sexual desire. I thought, actually, I'd say that all you lads have an overfuelling of sexual desire. So since there's no need for extreme violence right now, more's the pity, I thought let's work off some of that energy—and have a nice old march. All right, lads?" The parade groaned.

Longman then had us march in the yard for thirty minutes. He kept a particularly sharp eye on me, had us wheeling and dressing. He said that Eseley would be watching, but we did not see him. Longman himself seemed distracted, glancing across the yard as the light dimmed and the big floodlights started to come on, one at a time, as if reluctantly. But distracted as he might have, he didn't miss much. "Pick those legs up, Jonesey, you lazy sod! Cuppa, are you asleep, son, what the hell are you doing? Bratt, have a word with yourself, man, you're a fucking embarrassment." Snell got a bollocking, Swain got a bollocking, Knowles, Morling, Ham.

"Stand at ease! Stand easy." He walked up and down the lines. "Useless, absolutely fucking useless. That's the most piss-poor performance I have ever seen from you lads. I'll

tell you what, I fucking despair. I really do. I'm glad there wasn't an officer present to see this shit show. You're hot, you're tired, you got your knickers riding right up between your arse cheeks, I understand, but there's no fucking excuse for this travesty. I want you back here in the morning, bright and fucking early, that's eight hours from now, I'm giving you fair warning, and it had better be the best fucking parade I have ever witnessed or you'll all be in the shit. Understood? All right, off you pop, ladies."

The platoon hesitated, some looked at me.

"I meant all of you!" Longman shouted. "Get the fuck off my square!"

—Dear Mum,

—How's things? I hope Dad is doing all right, tell him that if I get back there and I find out he'd not been resting his back, we're going to be having some words, him and me. I hope you're all right, too, and keeping healthy. Give Georgie a big hug next time you see him, tell him his big sis is proud of him for working so hard. Tell Liam he's a right one and not to work Dad up, you know how he gets. How's the weather there? You'll be surprised to hear that the weather here is bloody hot.

—I was on patrol today and we lost two mates. Our squad was just outside of town, going towards the university here. It's about four miles out, give or take, to the north. So we were marching not all the way, but about halfway, to check on a farm they have out there, and we came up on these three blokes with rifles sitting in a Land Rover. Two of them were wearing Home Army uniforms and they were with another bloke who was in his civvies. So Sgt Webb went up to them and asked for their identity cards and yelled at the one in civvies that he had to wear his uniform at all times, otherwise how would anyone know he wasn't a rebel. Well, I guess as it turns out, they WERE rebels. Sgt Webb managed to get away from them before they started shooting but the two blokes behind him got shot. We had to return fire and it didn't last long. But like I said, the two guys who got shot unfortunately didn't make it.

—We're all feeling pretty low right now. The mood's gone way down and all of 1 platoon are sort of dragging their feet around the base. Sgt Webb does his best to keep morale up but it's difficult when something like that happens. It's the first real example of some of the dangers we're facing here, not really knowing who we're fighting. They're pretty devious, the rebels, getting friendly uniforms and pretending to be our people. It's definitely going to be scarier on the next patrol. It will probably be a while before I go out on

one, they keep me pretty busy in the motor pool, so I hope the lads who do go out take care.

—Anyway, I've written more than I meant to- I hope I didn't worry you too much. I'll stay safe!

—All my love,

—Ems

—xxxx

19.

Now in the shadow of the column, Dixon seems bemused. He stands against the wall, between the windows, his hands in the anatomical position, his square palms towards me, welcoming, unarmed. His pose brings to mind either martyr or corpse, although perhaps his smile suggests the former. From where I sit, he is the central part of the composition, but there are, of course, nurses and patients inside the hospital and I see them and their distracting movements through the windows. Yet, he is in the closer plane, he the seeming subject of my gaze. He looks out, cannot see them, sees only me and whatever lies unseen behind me, veranda and rose-garden and sky.

“There’s a nurse here who I think is sweet on me,” I say. “Although I have terrible form when it comes to misread signs.”

“Oh?” He raises his eyebrows. “Do tell.”

“Should I? You’ll probably think I’m mad.”

“Oh, just a touch.”

So I tell Dixon about Beloved.

—I write to you, Husband, but I don’t know why. Here I am at my lowest and here are my words at their most desperate: let this forever be the last communication between the living and the dead, for soon I will see you and I will finally be whatever it is you are. I am caught; their trap is about to snap across my neck. I am watching the thing I dropped fall away from me and it is entirely another thing now that it is out of my hands. I have dropped a stone down a well and the splash that replies is louder and farther away than I had imagined it would be. I am yet so torn. The land and body whisper, ‘Repay them blood for blood’, because the land desires nothing but balance and what does the body know but blood? The soul, on the other hand, surely knows the Lord will deliver His servants and none of them that trust in Him will be condemned. Why then fight? Why not suffer this and know there is a champion for me? My defender is watchful and I am always seen.

There is a spider on the wall beside my bed. It is about halfway up.

The nurses have rolled an overbed table across Lieutenant Cording’s middle so he can play patience. They gave him an extra pillow and helped him sit up and now he lifts the cards and lays them as I watch from my bed. The rules of this game appear different from any I have learned; he moves the cards and arranges and removes them from play and I

can't follow it. But I can understand his watery grey eyes in the slot between bandages, and I can see him wince even while unsure whether it's from pain or an unfortunate draw.

"Damn," he says quietly, after.

"Hard luck," I say.

His voice is weak, but there's something still in it. "I was never very good at the game." He manages a smile, framed by the white gauze as if to say here, consider this. "Oh well."

He brushes the cards into a pile, gathers them up into the deck and taps its edges and corners on the table, squaring them. Then he holds the cards in front of his face for a second, then he holds them out for me, over the space between our beds. "Oh, no thanks," I say. "It seems quite complicated, the way you play."

"Yes, I suppose, that's what I always thought. My mother taught me. Well, I used to watch as played at the table on Sundays, after service, while she was waiting for the roast to be done." And his voice seems stronger when he speaks of it. "I don't need to win the game," he says, "I just need to feel human again."

Lindsay, across the room, hisses and I look at him and I realise he meant the sound to draw my attention. He points surreptitiously towards the door, where in comes Beloved, pushing a wheelchair. It moves quietly, it moves with a rubbery thrum and the soft sound of Beloved's shoes on the tiles. "I don't need that," I tell her as she parks it beside my bed. "Honestly."

"Well, Mr Welles, the doctor said to use it and when it comes to your convalescence I trust the doctor, not you."

I say no more, but get myself out of bed before she can help, and sit in the chair. I give a slight shrug and she pushes the chair back across the tiles.

"Enjoy," Lindsay calls with a smile.

Cottler whistles loudly with his fingers in his mouth and I feel my cheeks growing pink.

Green, who is standing by the door, waves and says quietly, "Going down together?"

—Husband, at what point does a cut flower die? Is it the cutting that kills the flower or is it the week in the vase? When you came home that night, with their bullets in your body, I did not know that your dying had begun long before. There you lay, a bloodied ghost. I spent the night beside the bed, listening to your ghost pass away. The noises you

made, noises of liquid and struggle, were like an instrument slowly losing its tune. In the morning, when you were cold and still, I was finally able to sleep, my head beside your cold head on the pillow. I made a promise to you, do you remember? I realise now that, by that promise, I have been trapped inside someone else's mouth, with a floor and ceiling of teeth, with walls of cheek. I am caught on that tongue, tossed about in argument. We are caught in this exchange, this trade in atrocity, and the longer it goes on, the more it shifts our register of normality towards violence. The English do not see it and will not relent; they cannot lose this war, they must win. Bold does not see it; the world he imagines before us is a world already dead and lost. That world, that flower, was cut many many years ago. Here in the vase, look how we wilt. You foolish men who will not stop.

Beloved wheels my chair around the garden and tells me the local names of the infrequent flowers planted there.

"I believe it's a lotus, of some sort." She plucks a fruit from the lotus and hands it to me. "You can eat the flesh. It's just a little bitter."

I look it over, rub the smooth golden skin with my thumb. "Shouldn't I wash it first?"

Beloved blows air out the side of her mouth. "No, you fussy man," she says. "Eat it. Beware the stone."

I take a bite and yes, the bitterness nipping at the edges of the tongues. When there is nothing but the stone and its small attendant threads of pulp, Beloved holds her hand close to my face, cupped. I drop the stone into her palm and she tosses it carelessly into a bed of purple flowers.

She says, "Let's make something grow."

In the arbour, we pause a moment beneath a long-tasselled tree of ambitious height and of such dense foliage as to attenuate the sun. She reaches up and lets her hand play about the grey catkins that seem like rain fixed in the air. "How odd," she says, "that the catkins and the leaves have come at once." Perhaps, she suggests with a laugh, the garden now is void of time, or, equally, perhaps all time is now right here, at once. "They don't usually appear together?" I ask. She says not, as far as she knows and to the extent she has observed. "Well, that *is* odd," I agree, and offer that possibly the tree has grown confused, "an early summer, a warmer spring" or the result of chemical changes in the soil. She has come around, stands before me, and now nods slowly with widened eyes. "A soldier-botanist now, Mr Welles?" she says, not particularly unkindly. "Perhaps, perhaps," she says,

and a few more times, as she and I watch a billow of pollen wind its way out of the shade.

Beloved tells me details of where she was born, on the wooded foot of a mountain, in the interior of the Colony. "Oh, dear, you probably have a rather inaccurate image in your head. Not mud huts, not by the time I was born at least. Nice concrete buildings, quite neat and square I suppose, that glowed white in the sunshine. My father always had a pair of sunglasses and would put them on and joke about how bright it was. He would then look at me and take off the sunglasses, with a sigh, like I was not a particularly bright child. I suppose that was the joke. Mother would reprimand him and he would laugh and hug me. He liked his jokes, usually at my expense until my little brothers came along, when the honour passed to them. I had learnt the stare of my mother and perhaps by then I looked somewhat like her, too. Oh, I remember one day they came and painted all the concrete blue. A gentle blue that caught the light in different ways. There was a little school. Our little blue school, with the red door. A lovely teacher, foreign, English wasn't her first language. She tried to teach me to play the piano but I couldn't sit still. I don't remember if it was the piano stool or my own lack of patience, but I like to think it did not frustrate her and she enjoyed the challenge. That was our little village, when I was a child."

I sit and listen to her voice, the stories I can imagine and the ones that seem like dreams recounted, about the land and the names of things before they had names in English. The shape-shifting gods of fertility and storms, spirits who came in lightning bolts and down the waterfalls tucked into the creases of the mountains. How she listened at the door to her mother crying out in labour, how she whispered pleas and preserving charms to a variety of warding forces, her hopes in heaven and in dust and the village stream. She reveals the names of these powers, lists their personalities and dominions, and there's a distinct pleasure in listening to an expert's confidence. The vastness of her knowledge makes me smile, it is so unendingly deep I want to laugh. But it isn't funny that there are some who know so much. History and natural history, her wisdom so secure, there seems no way to enter into it or be a part of it. I can only smile and let her speak.

—Husband, I wish I could persuade time to run backwards and draw you back. A crime against heaven, stealing you, but I would dare to do it. I would forfeit this year of my life and all the things in it if unfurling time would oblige and roll back up. I thought I knew you and by knowing you, knew me. In this year without you, I have realised that I never actually was certain about a single thing, but never looked hard enough at any one thing to

see the doubt. You were and will always be as unknowable as one of those nights with smoke from the fire and the promise of rain in distant clouds and seeing the constellations your ancestors saw. I can't capture it in words, if I had a camera I wouldn't know where to point it, for the essence of the thing is all around and we, front-eyed and driven, can only ever face in one direction. Bold believes that removing the English will be a birth for our nation, that we will be new, but I think we are already old and even if, by our struggle, we can change our name, we will always be the same people. If the English leave we will be the nation the English left, we cannot ever be free of that. Even if we remove their language from our books and from our town signs and from our names, we will still think in their language, no matter how madly we wrestle with it.

So now, as the sun's earlier conviction seems dimmed by misgivings, Beloved returns and she tells Dixson that visiting time is surely over. He thanks her and he wishes me a speedy recovery and there is a wink before he turns to leave, subtle in a way I think I could never reproduce. Beloved asks me how I feel, she says I look a bit flushed, and I tell her that I feel fine. I'll take your temperature when we get back upstairs, she says.

We go up to the first floor in the lift. Through some quirk of awkwardness or small talk we have arrived through a chain of associations at a conversation about the Wars of the Roses. I begin to try to explain the conflict and its belligerents and Beloved laughs and places a hand on my shoulder. "Dear, I'm not entirely ignorant of the kings and battles of England," she says.

"Of course, I'm sorry."

"I suspect we both read Shakespeare at school. I can read, you know."

"Oh God, yes, I wasn't thinking—"

"Dear, don't mention it, please, it's heart-rending to see you struggle so."

I shake my head. "You make it quite difficult to feel sorry for myself."

"Perhaps," she says, "that is precisely my goal."

We pass the open door to the therapy room and there, under bright electric lights, are four slipper baths of bright enamel, with their golden taps and hoses, their golden feet upon the white tiles. In the nearest bath, I can see the head and upper body of Lieutenant Watkins. His head is tipped all the way back, against the side of the bath, until he realises he is being watched.

Beloved calls cheerily, "Good evening, Mr Watkins. Are you all alone? Where is Sister

Matilda?”

“Nurse, at last,” Watkins says. “Can you find the Sister? I would like to get out now.”

“Of course, right away.” She engages the brake on the chair.

“Wait, I could walk from here,” I tell her.

“Don’t you dare. I’ll return to fetch you in a second.”

She leaves me outside the door and hurries across the landing to the nurses station. I watch her go for a moment, then turn to look at Watkins, soaking. “How’s the water?” I ask.

He laughs. “It’s not quite the public baths, is it? We used to go swimming at the lido near my aunt’s house. My brother, the eldest, and my sister who’s a few years older than me, we used to go there, in our late teens I suppose. I remember how cold it used to be. I remember standing on the side and watching them swimming and I remember that the water always made them look shorter, smaller, like children again.” He stares down into the water around his body, looks at the bandage around his shortened arm. “That’s strange, the things you thought you’d forgotten.”

Beloved returns a minute later, with Sister Matilda beside her.

“I’m very sorry, Mr Watkins,” the Sister says, taking a large towel from the back of the door, “Mr Green was suddenly rather unwell.”

She approaches Watkins with the towel and he waves his hand at me and says, with a smile, “A little privacy?”

—Husband, for the longest time I believed you had died for a cause for which I too could give my life. I told you I was so-willing on our last day together, I remember. I told you that if I had to be hard to prove my love to you, then I could be that hard. You laughed at me and thought me a fantasist, albeit a good-intentioned one, and you told me that I was too soft for that. Soft as I am, downed as I am, your dove, I can be hard, how a feather aligned is stiff against the wind. I have proved it. If I can be vengeful, it’s from you I learned it. The results, oh the results are so clear to see. Husband, oh Husband, I have done things in your memory I fear can never be forgiven. I don’t deny the crime. Let the punishment come, for I am guilty. But let me be remembered for the other things I did, which are mine and mine alone, for I desired them and I strove and I believed I was right. Let those things live where so much has died.

Pierce sits on his bed by the door to the ward. He grins as Beloved wheels my chair past him. “Have fun?” he asks, raising his eyebrows. I give him two fingers and he laughs.

A screen has been placed around Green's bed and I can see the silhouettes of standing figures against the fabric. There is a moan and a quiet whisper. I cannot tell what they are saying. Beloved's hand is on my shoulder and I don't know why, but it feels warm and her touch is firm and I could have her hand there forever. She pushes me back into the space between my bed and Cording's. The overbed table has been removed from across his body and he lies on his back, staring at the ceiling. I quickly stand and climb into bed before Beloved can help me. She tuts switches on the lamp beside my pillow.

There is a slight noise from Cording. "I think you have an admirer," he says, though I don't know to whom he says it.

Beloved shakes her head and straightens the sheets over me. "You boys," she says quietly. "Always teasing each other."

"I think it's because I'm the youngest," I tell her.

"It's definitely because you're the youngest," says Cording.

The Padre is attending Rickwood's bed and they are in conversation. Lindsay pretends not to listen, pretends he is only interested in the magazine open before him. He sees me, sees Beloved, and eavesdropping forgotten, calls over, "The poor lad! Go on, Nurse, give him a kiss goodnight."

"Oh," says Beloved, ignoring him. She takes a glass thermometer from her pocket.

I wave her away. "I told you, I feel fine."

She slides it between my lips. Sister Matilda has come back into the room, helping Watkins, now in his pyjamas, into his bed. It looks painful, every movement for him, and I feel my frown, feel it all over me, this empathy for him. And it almost makes me gasp, brings me suddenly back to my own body, when Beloved pulls the thermometer from my mouth.

She places the thermometer against the bulb in the bedside lamp.

"What are you doing?" I whisper.

She places a finger on her lips. She removes the thermometer, checks the reading.

"Sister!" she calls. "Mr Welles has a fever and is complaining of chills."

Sister Matilda walks quickly over, her shoes tapping on the floor. I am looking at Beloved and she has fixed me with a stare and she doesn't blink and I have never before seen this expression on her face but it's an expression that, upon my death, I hope is on the face of my soul's advocate. The Sister looks at the thermometer, looks at me, then leans closer to Beloved.

“I’m worried it’s sepsis,” I hear her whisper. “Like Mr Green. We’d better start him on penicillin.”

“Right away?”

“Yes, right away.”

“Shall I tell the doctor?”

“Please.”

Beloved’s last look. Her eyes the colour of the lotus fruit. Her hands, as if someone had painted her. And there is a rose garden and there is a rose she has picked for me.

“Sorry, Mr Welles,” the Sister says, leaning down. “It looks like we’ll have to give you a drip. You’re a brave young man, you won’t blink at a little prick, will you?”

I wait for one of the men to laugh, but none does.

—Husband, I write to you, but I don’t know why. Let this forever be the last communication between the living and the dead.

I look for the spider on the wall beside my bed. For a while I cannot find it, I search, I search, and then see it near the ceiling. It is still and small against the ridge of the cornice. Perhaps it has eaten something, perhaps it is dead. I see a leg twitch, it is not dead yet.

And there’s a thing that comes when the others sleep, comes in when it’s dark. It’s mostly a man, one would guess, but with mud instead of skin and clothed in fur like a quilt of scalps. He stinks like a low tide, leaves black footprints on the hospital tiles. His features are hard to see for he keeps his face averted. He haunts the ward and I know he’s here for me. But he doesn’t speak. I try to talk but I have a tube in my mouth. I have tubes in my arms now, I don’t remember how they got there. Some nights he stops at the foot of my bed and in the shadows I can see his face is pitted, hollows instead of cheeks, his eyes are cavities, all his face sunken in as if there are no bones to hold it up. But even with his deformities there is something familiar about him, as inspecting photographs of ancestors might yield a glimpse of a common nose or chin, something in his face that reminds me of me. Still, the most terrifying aspect of the creature’s appearance is the grotesque thing between his legs, thick and oily, recalling meat or muscle or a deep-sea eel, which he drags along the floor like a tail but which comes from the front.

I am beginning to feel it, I think.

Beloved’s eyes. She is beside me and she is holding my hand. She is shocked and there are streaks upon her face.

And I'm thinking dear, don't cry and I'm thinking Christ, save me.

And I am thinking of how my mother cried when she found out I was going to war.

And I wish she were here.

20.

—Pubs & Churches - Essex - August, Summer Holiday

Emma had asked me if I wanted to go for a drive with her and her boyfriend. She'd seemed pretty insistent about it and her boyfriend, Ben, had had a put-upon look, but I told her if the choice was between going for a drive in the sunshine and staying in with a book and a cup of tea then, yes, please, I would like to impose. I had already spent two days at their flat, with my notebook and a cup of tea, sitting on the plastic chair out on the balcony, while they were away and enjoying their togetherness, and I didn't resent them for it, for they had each other and they had time. And we would soon be back in khaki and preparing to leave the country, for God knew how long, so yes, while there was a chance, I would choose to ride in a car in the sun with the windows down. So she put on her tightest black-and-white striped dress and did her makeup and Ben put on his best pink button-down shirt and slicked his hair back and I, too, put on a dress because I didn't know when I'd next get to wear one, but I didn't put on makeup and didn't do my hair, for it was short enough now not to need much, most of its length gone at the beginning of training. We were not the same anymore.

—A church steeple against the sky; a neat wooden belfry, with dust or a bird in the upper-left whiteness, or damage to the print. A weather vane on the peak of the spire. Dad standing in the porch, ornamental ironwork on the door. The pulpit. Amanda, aged six or seven, leaning on the lychgate, arms crossed, bored or posing. A yew tree. Mossy gravestones with illegible epitaphs, an accidental thumb on the right-hand side. Dad and Amanda in front of a monumental brass, reading an inscription. Sky through branches, possibly the same yew tree. Squirrel in the grass, foraging, at the foot of the same tree.

Emma drove her Austin while Ben rolled a spliff in his lap and we passed it around. The late summer was hot and dry and Essex felt charged and we were an electrode passing through fields and it felt as if the energy we generated had form and we were spitting it out like sparks and current. Emma's little car and we three, alive, coursing on weed along minor roads, music thumping from the small speakers in dashboard and door, and Emma loudly singing the words she remembered. We were bursting, bursting, laden with everything and feeling strong enough to bear it all. We'd been remade stronger. She seemed to know the way, or she didn't and it was no matter. "There'll always be a signpost," she said, "or

somebody to ask for directions.”

—Car in the gravel car park. Cows in a field across the road, behind a wire fence. The large pub, white, a long sloping roof to the left-hand side. The pillory pub sign on a white pole in a scrubby patch of grass by the road, The White Horse in golden capitals, a white horse upon a grey hill against a grey sky, one front hoof raised. An arch shape of gauged brick in an otherwise plain wall, suggesting a bricked-up entrance into the courtyard of a coaching inn. Amanda running across the car park, made blurry and two-bodied by movement. Amanda sitting at a table in the pub garden watching Dad approaching from the pub’s rear door, other people at other tables, talking. Dad drinking his half, eyes screwed up, Amanda laughing, as if they were sharing a joke.

The dial showed the engine boiling, the warning lights began to flicker behind the steering wheel, a new sound amongst all the sounds of the car, somewhere in the front, and puffs of steam out of the sides of the bonnet and a smell of burning, rubber or oil. Emma swore and pulled the Austin over to the side of the road. The fields of Essex, flat around us, drifted off into the farthest and bluest of green spaces, distant hedgerows, horizon. Beside us was a field of rape, brilliant yellow translated into tears by the brightness of the sun. We stepped out and stood on the grass beside the road. The car ticked and clucked and oily water wept onto the road beneath it. Emma opened the bonnet and a billow of steam enveloped her, for a second, before revealing her and becoming nothing.

“What’s the problem?” Ben asked her.

“I’ll take a shufti in a moment,” she said, wiping her face with the back of her hand.
“Let it cool off a bit.”

“Want me to have a look?” he asked.

She laughed. “Why?”

“I might—”

“Nah, mate.”

He sighed and turned away, saying under his breath, “Whatever, fuck off why don’t ya.” He walked away from the car, across the grassy verge to the edge of the rape field and stood with his hands in his pockets, staring out over the flowers. I looked from him up to the sky, saw a plane so far away, so silent and slight, that it might not have been there at all. There was the stirring of the plants in the breeze and the song of birds I didn’t know. Hadn’t we been heading to a pub for lunch? Hadn’t the drive been so much fun? The heat, the

weed, the movement of the car that I could still feel inside me. The forecast had been for rain, but it hadn't rained. We'd arrived somewhere.

I walked back to the car and took my purse from the backseat. "Want a smoke?" I asked Emma. She had a cloth in her fingers and was gingerly inspecting the engine. She had a streak of dirt across her forehead from wiping her face and she looked a little bit like how she had looked on the steeplechase, in the mud, as she was pulling me through the tunnel shouting "Come on, you cow!" and the corporal was screaming unsweetened encouragements and it sounded like all the rest of the army were firing their weapons over our heads.

"Yes, please." I tapped a cigarette from the pack and she took it. "Ta."

I noticed as I offered her a light that there was also a smear of grease on her dress. "Oh, your dress," I said, pointing it out. She looked down, blew out a mouthful of smoke, and swore under her breath. "Don't worry, it'll probably come out."

"Sod it, who cares, it's not like I'm ever going to wear it again." She came over and we leaned back against the side of the car and smoked. "It's the radiator fluid," she said, after a while. "I need to wait till it's cooled all the way down, I'll give it half an hour, then put some more in. Hopefully there's no leak."

"Do you have any spare?"

"I probably have a bottle, in the boot." We stood and smoked and watched Ben stalking the edge of the field. "I think I hurt his feelings."

The tattoo was burning on my neck, had been hurting since I got it, the yellow flowers rimmed by red, the day after passing out. Emma had looked at it yesterday, had said she didn't think it was infected, as far as she could tell, but the stinging like insect bites suggested otherwise. A constant pricking behind me. Although it wasn't particularly painful, it was hard to disregard it, hard to shut it out entirely, it demanded a space in every minute and every other thought had its flavour on it, and I was not allowed to completely forget it, could not outrun it. The spot where I was fastened to the world, and the measure of our relationship was pain.

—A ford in a village, the water in the sun veined with white. Ducks in the grass. Amanda splashing in the water by the road, one leg kicked high, drops sparkling in the air. Amanda, without shoes, standing on the dark grass, small bright flowers around her feet. Mum, Dad and Amanda standing together, smiling, Mum's hand on Amanda's shoulder. Dad

and Amanda with ice cream cones.

“Come on,” I said, and took Emma’s arm. I pulled her over to the grass verge and lay down under the sun.

“What are you doing, you silly cow?”

“Lie down here with me.”

“You’re fucking bonkers, mate.” But she did, she lay next to me in the grass.

Sometimes it was hard to say this happened then this happened then this happened. Because that was not how the mind ordered things. Like the smells of the hot car with the windows down, rumble of tyres on the motorway. And lunch on the way, when Dad parked at the side of the road and Mum put out a blanket on the grass and I was picking daisies and slitting their stems with my nails. Dad opened the coolbox and the cold ice-pack air exhaled like the release of something held captive, and the release was the death of it. Mum and Dad lay side by side on the blanket and smoked, and looking back perhaps they were probably growing out of love, while I ran down the slope to the hedge at the bottom and picked blackberries and ate them. I came back to them with red fingers and I sat and didn’t listen to their muted conversation and I sat and nibbled the warm cheese sandwiches that had been flattened from the morning in the box. Mum sat up and took a picture of me. I was holding my hands out to show him the blackberry stains but in the photograph it looked as if I was grabbing for the camera or something behind it. And the sun was hot and the bees were out and the traffic was rushing past on the road across the way, and soon we’d have to pack everything up and get back in the car and carry on.

A place nobody aimed for, a place none would recognise driving past, and yet there we were. A middle place made there for us, laid out there for us as for a half-unexpected party. A white butterfly, a bee, clouds in the sky exactly as they should have been. The past was forgotten, the future seemed contingent and unreliable, and there, that happy present, was where we burned, that late summer with its hot sun and things that were green and packed with meaning, and Emma’s tight dress and her hair and my dress and my stinging neck, we were unafraid and unseen and nothing was expected of us. We flopped on the grass, amongst the daisies and buttercups, and there we were, regarding the world as children again. We were not the same anymore. We had been given the world new and unexplained one more time.

—Amanda asleep in the back seat, her mouth is open, her head tipped back. Dad’s

head in profile before the side window, looking to the left, presumably at traffic as he drives. Dad's hands on the steering wheel. Bright white spots against darkness, inside of the car limned with white, headlights at night. Very dark, difficult to judge, perhaps Dad carrying a sleeping Amanda, her head on his shoulder. Also very dark, a sleeping face against vague patterns, eyes closed, presumably Amanda asleep on a pillow.

Ben sat down beside Emma and rolled another spliff.

"Are you going to share?" Emma asked.

"Nah, mate," he said.

She laughed. "Fucking hell." She groaned and rose onto her elbows. "All right, the engine's probably cool enough now. Let me see if I can find that bottle."

She stood and walked away. Between thumb and forefinger, I pinched the spliff that Ben offered and took a hit, handed it back to him. He began to tell me about his sister who grew cannabis plants in her attic, about the heat lamps she used and the extension cords she and her boyfriend used to power it all, and about how he always thought it was an incredible fire hazard and how he was always somewhat surprised she'd not been burnt up along with her farm. He said something about heat rising and maybe she would be fine if the fire was in the attic and I wasn't really listening any longer. I pulled up daisies and slit them with my fingernail.

Emma swore. "Typical," came her voice from the car. "Radiator's bone-dry and I've got no fucking antifreeze."

"Can you use water?" Ben asked.

"Do you have any water?"

"No."

"Then no." Her voice was then right behind me and I jumped. "Hold on, there's a car coming."

I twisted onto my front and over the ridge of the verge I could see, along the lane, a small red MG coupe coming quickly towards us. Emma ran over to her car and waved. There was a quick peel of the brakes and the coupe came to a stop alongside the broken-down Austin. A middle-aged man in suit and hat stepped out of the car. "Afternoon," he said. "Car trouble?"

"Nothing major," Emma replied. "We just overheated."

"Ah, this blasted weather, eh? Hot enough for you?"

Emma laughed politely. "You wouldn't have any antifreeze by chance?"

The man looked to the side for a moment. "Hmm, I'm afraid not. But would you like a lift? To a phone?"

Ben stepped forward and said, "No thanks, mate, we're all right."

The man looked at Ben, then said to Emma, "Well, there's an old pub up the road, that way, about a mile and a half, if you feel the need."

Ben nodded. "Cheers."

"That's quite all right." The man smiled, tipped his hat.

With a look at Ben and me, he returned to his car and promptly drove away in the direction of the indicated pub.

"We'd better get walking, then," said Ben.

I would look through the photo albums when I was alone, when I'd get home from school and Mum was still at work. Mum kept them in the cabinet by the stairs, behind her old records and all her out-of-date Ordnance Survey maps and the recorders she'd kept from when I was in juniors. I liked to look at the older ones, from when Mum was young, my age possibly, with her two brothers, Uncle Dan and Uncle Colin who died in his twenties, in the back garden at their parents' house in Southend. And I liked to look at the albums from when I was a kid, when Mum and Dad in their stillness seemed happy, when Dad's hair was longer, when Mum wore dresses and boots, when they held me as a baby, tossed me in the air, when I hung in the air, when they pushed me, as a toddler, on my trike, on the swings at the playground by the house, when I could be suspended at the end of the swing's arc, forever. I remembered the photos but I didn't remember the moments they had captured. I was too young perhaps. After Dad left I never saw Mum looking at her photographs. Had she thrown them away, with all the books?

Emma said something under her breath. I put my daisy crown on my hair and put my purse over my shoulder. Ben led the way along the road, some twelve or so yards ahead, kicking at stones. We followed him. Emma told me she thought they would break up. "He can't handle his girlfriend being a soldier," she said. And it was probably the heat or the weed, but I was immensely sad for her. And it was probably the heat or the weed, or the stinging of my neck, but there was, in me, a clear and full feeling that we had stumbled accidentally upon the edge of the world and for our transgression we have been cursed to see places where we cannot exist. Beyond death, or the past, or thought. Wherever Nan is,

or the place where Mum and Dad are still smiling, or the place where, did it ever happen, I was reaching for the thing behind the camera. We were not the same anymore.

21.

—Paul,

—Congratulations on your appointment- best man for the job!

—Major Guthrie requested a narrative report of the Faulkbourne engagement to pass on to the Secretary. As Martin is still very unwell, Plt Sgt J. Longman provided most of the details. I thought you might like to peruse this before I send it up. The Major expects it to be clear and to-the-point, so it would also be especially useful to me if you could point out opportunities to simplify the language or identify any particulars I should remove, bearing in mind the report's intended recipients. Report begins:

The Boss says A Company has a problem and they've called on us to solve it. There's a stationary troop-train somewhere in the jungle, the usual boys, stalled on the tracks, rails unpinned from the earth by torrential storms. Storms! Rain, even a drizzle, the lads say they can't remember it. Like all the birds in the sky are pissing, one says. Birds don't piss, says another. The Boss wants troop movements concealed, so we fix the bows and the canvas covers to our three allotted Bedfords. The men are quick and keen about their work, and mount the tailgate as if for the first time, pricked into action by that excitement that feeds on and outlasts trepidation. The Boss says this will not be our usual patrol. The Boss says this will be farther than we've ever ranged. Fully to the ends of the farmlands, to the frills of the jungle's skirt, to the point where the human will to partition nature is exhausted. The men aren't so keen when the curtains are drawn and they are forced to sit in the heat and the darkness. When we are a mile out of the town, I give the order to draw back the curtains and roll up the side canvas.

—At ##:## on ##/##, A Company received notice from battalion that the Secretary's niece, The Lady Isabel Mallory-Levett, and her husband, Mr Kenneth Levett, were still residing at Faulkbourne, and that intelligence suggested rebel action in that area would be imminent and intense. Due to a fortnight-long storm, common in that region at this time of year, A Company were not able to provide protection and relief to the farms in the vicinity of Faulkbourne, and plans were put in place to have C Company fill that role. At ##:## on ##/##, C Company 2 Platoon, under Lt Martin Welles, were dispatched with light support weapons, 1 mortar, 1 heavy machine gun. The unit strength had been previously depleted by casualties and illness, with 23 fit soldiers remaining. Resupply has been an issue. Due to

ongoing lack of provision, there was no fire support available. The entire Colony is served by a single quick response helicopter, Jackdaw, stationed at the coast, 250 miles from Faulkbourne, with over an hour response time. During the Faulkbourne engagement, Jackdaw was responding to an evacuation request from B Company.

Four hours in a lorry, on washboard roads that squeeze tightly in around villages and farmsteads, watching labourers working fields that don't belong to them. The soils darken here, there is water, much water, black rivers flaunting their breadth across these plains. The clouds grow wide and pile upon each other, inventing new shapes. Bird song and the sawing of innumerable insects, the land is alive with them. School children in their uniforms play in puddles at the side of the road. They splash the muddy water in their shorts and blazers, and shout and wave when they see us, and chase the lorries until their legs grow tired. Their small lively bodies become flickering specks on the road behind us. At last, in the early afternoon, we spot the first green fringe of jungle in the distance, a taste before that endless tangle gropes away into the hills and mountains of the interior, back and back and denser and denser, humping the border and crossing the continent. I have seen it on a map and on a map it should be a nation, greater in size than England, its green as dark hued as ocean-trench blue.

—On arrival at Faulkbourne, at ##:## on ##/##, Lt Welles and 2 platoon helped the Lady Isabel prepare to evacuate the farm. As logistical problems and delays pushed the estimated time of departure past sunset, it was decided and communicated to company headquarters that the evacuation would be postponed until the morning. Company headquarters communicated to Lt Welles that further intelligence suggested a rebel attack was extremely likely within the next 8 hours and all precautions and should be taken to protect the Lady Isabel's person and property. Sentries were posted around the farmstead, sangars constructed at the front and rear of the house, and the VIPs relocated to the house's cellar.

"It's forty-four hectares," she says. "We have about fifty locals come up from the village every day, mostly women. We have eight permanent workers who live on the estate, including Power, my manager, and the foreman Sure. It's not a hobby farm, this is an industry, one of which we're extremely proud. We've laboured day and night to make this estate work for us and work for the local population."

She shows me, on a map of the local area, how the plantation sits upon a high

plateau above the plains and below the mountains, and she assures me this is optimal for the cultivation of such a high-quality crop. She points out the boundaries of the estate, a large, almost completely square area near the middle of the map, a stream running through it and down into the adjacent village. I can see the buildings of the plantation on the map, these four main structures here, the farmhouse, the factory, one of the many warehouses, a storage shed.

I look out of the study's window, down at the cobbled courtyard between the farmhouse and the factory. "I understand your reluctance, but the fact remains you need to evacuate."

"No, I don't think you do understand, Lieutenant. My mother's family has owned this estate for generations, I'm not about to surrender it to a bunch of thieves, murderous thieves." She places her hand palm down on the window sill. "We'll wait it out. We have shotguns, of course, and Sure can bring up some men from the village. We can house them in the storage shed. Or the warehouse, over there. We can set a watch, around the clock. They won't dare attack—"

"My orders—"

"Oh, damn your orders, man!"

—At approximately ###:## the sentries returned to the farmhouse with two rebel prisoners, an advance scouting element of the main rebel force. Only limited intelligence was able to be extracted from the prisoners: they reported that four farmhands, one male, three female, had been snatched from a warehouse at the far end of the estate. It was during this interrogation that the remaining sentry reported via radio the appearance of a 50+ force of rebels some 200 yards from the farm buildings. The platoon prepared their defences, the sentry withdrew. At ##:##, a small squad of rebels including one who took on the role of spokesman entered the rear courtyard and demanded the immediate surrender of the Lady Isabel. Lt Welles agreed to speak with the spokesman and he entered the rear courtyard via the farmhouse's rear door.

Stay out of our arcs, sir. We'll catch them in the crossfire.

"Give me some time," I say quietly into the mic.

He has a shaved head, a blue bandanna around his brow. He is wearing the dark green uniform of the Home Army. Are these the stolen uniforms? He holds an old rifle in his hand and I see a machete in a sheath at his waist. In the darkness behind him, just before

the thick undergrowth, four similarly armed men stand over the four hostages, on their knees. I walk up to the man, until there are possibly ten paces between us, and hold up my hands.

“Hello,” I say to him. “Would you like to talk?”

—It quickly became apparent that the four farmhands were being used as hostages by the rebels and they were forced to kneel in the courtyard during this time. The rebel spokesman demanded the return of his two detained comrades and the handing over of the Lady Isabel and her husband. Lt Welles could only refuse the demands and, attempting to avoid loss of life and to secure the release of the enemy’s hostages, urged the spokesman to back down and give up their arms. It was then that the rebels savagely murdered one of their hostages.

“If you don’t let them go, we’ll open fire.”

“We want the Lady and the Lady’s husband,” he shouts, waving his rifle.

“Let’s discuss what we can do.”

“No discussion!” The man turns sharply to look at his comrades standing above the hostages. “Kill that one.”

“No, wait—”

No. The male? The male? My heart feels like it has stopped, everything is suddenly cold. The male? One of the men lifts his machete and brings it down on the head of the closest woman, once, twice. She screams and struggles to defend herself. Not now, not now. The blows keep coming and she screams and the other women scream and she is beaten and slashed over and over until her warding arms drop and she lies, still and ruined, on the cobbles. Not now, later, later. The man with the blade is covered in blood, he is darkened, his face shines in the dim light, her blood pools around the body, searches out along the gaps between the stones. So much later. Put it off. The screaming. There’s a voice somewhere.

Fuck, somebody is saying over the radio. It’s Longman, he says, It’s all going to shit—get out of there, sir. Run.

—Showing great restraint, Lt Welles attempted once more to negotiate the rebels’ surrender. At approximately ###:## a shot was fired at close range, missing Welles by inches. The other three hostages were then also killed. At this point the order was given for suppressive fire to allow Welles to retreat to the farmhouse. However, the enemy’s

positions were more dispersed than assumed and return fire heavier, which was sufficient to prevent Welles from reaching safety. He sought cover at one of the sangars the platoon had constructed before the engagement. As the platoon's fire was currently proving capable of defending the farmhouse, Sgt Longman decided he must make the safety of his platoon leader his highest priority. At ###:## he took four men from their positions at the first floor rear windows and attempted to leave the house through the side entrance (patio). This manoeuvre was checked, however, by a hitherto unengaged enemy element which opened fire and forced the five men to retreat back into the farmhouse. Additionally, two rebels attempted to gain entrance to the farmhouse through the front door, but these were shot dead by soldiers positioned in the front ground floor windows. During the engagement, the enemy made no further attempt to assault the front of the house.

“Let ‘em have it!” I hear Longman shout.

Time, time. The night is alive with metal, loud as machinery. I can feel them shunting the air around me, the bullets, heavy and seeming big as cricket balls. They bounce up off the cobbles, obliquely, try to bite at my legs. Windows are shattering in the farmhouse, I see the glass collapsing all along the wall. I need more time. Draw it out. It's then I accept I cannot go in that direction, the way my body wants me to go, to the farmhouse and safety, and I am forced to move away, to escape the crossfire. I am almost at the sangar. I need so much more time. I heave myself forward, behind the wall, and end sprawling on my back as bullets tear into the sandbags by my head, snapping, sending up spray. Draw out the time. How many more chances can I have? I just need a little more time.

—By this point, the removal of the four men from the rear of the house and the resultant slackening of the suppressive fire had allowed the main element of the enemy force to advance to such a degree that Lt Welles's defensive position behind the sangar would be imminently compromised and overrun. At ###:## Welles gave 2 orders over his radio: first, for the heavy machine gun to open fire into the rear courtyard, to destroy the threatening force with concentrated fire; second, he ordered smoke deployed on his location. This order was immediately carried out but before Welles could fall back under cover of the smoke, the enemy had reached his position. A fierce close combat ensued.

The smoke grenade hisses out its hiding place and there is just time before the white mist envelops me to see the courtyard illuminated by the muzzle flash of the heavy gun as it shrieks shells across the space. I hear them tearing into the undergrowth beyond the

cobbles, branches breaking, falling to the ground, into the wall of the factory, it sounds as if an animal is attempting entry into our world, as if this world is safe. An animal's desperate escape from a place of terror, unable to understand it, but that instinct, that roaring instinct. I get to my feet, prepared to run in a straight line away from the sangar, but I see him a moment too late. He stands above the sangar, a sharpened metal pole, like a javelin, in his right hand. His eyes are wide and his mouth is open. He has such white teeth. But he is empty. I have seen a person angry before, I have seen all expressions of rage, during training, incountry, but I have never before seen this strange vacancy and I can only assume it means he intends no less than to kill me and kill my soul, if he can. I draw my service pistol and he thrusts the spear towards me.

—Lt Welles received wounds but shot one attacker on the sangar. He was forced to give ground and moved backwards, under fire, from the sangar to the smallest of the storage sheds on the far edge of the courtyard. He was set upon by four further attackers inside this building. Armed with machetes and various bladed weapons, two were wounded by Welles with his pistol but the others managed to disarm him and it is then that he received his most serious wounds. Simultaneously, Sgt Longman had destroyed the flanking enemy with grenades and he proceeded to lead his small force across the patio to the rear of the storage shed. The heavy machine gun fire had turned around the enemy advance towards the rear of the farmhouse and at ###:## Cpl Polley reported that he believed the remaining rebels had fled. Sgt Longman then entered the storage shed containing Lt Welles and the two remaining combatants. Longman killed these two with his bayonet and provided combat triage to the seriously wounded officer.

Here is a moment like a pause, take a breath, take a breath, but it can hardly be true, can it? Can time have held off? Which prayer can do it? Say it again. One of the men is no longer moving, perhaps dead, perhaps, the other rolls on the ground, crying out. No, time is passing, movement, heartbeat. I have shot him through the foot, it seems. I am still alive. Thoughts. Think. It's adrenalin, allow it. Think. The last man recovers, lifts his machete for another strike. He is slow. I can't feel my right arm, but it is still there, it is still there, the pistol is now lying somewhere about, there is blood, warm on my fingers, on my face, I know it is dripping all around my feet but I can't look down at it. I can barely move my eyes, I must have lost a lot of blood. You have enough. Please, a sliver more time. I have not known enough. A minute. One minute. How long a minute now seems, how greedy I feel for

asking. How many seconds is that? Can it be bargained down? But you are not dead yet, a small voice says. Just a little time more, if it pleases Thee. You still have enough blood. Before the man can bring his blade down, I step forward, towards him, inside the arc of his swing and put all my weight into his chest, shoulder first, my head hitting his chin, it is a steered falling. You are still here, the voice says, fight. We collapse to the floor and I see the blade come around as we lie there and it disappears into my side.

—Five soldiers of 2 platoon received wounds during the engagement. Aside from Lt Welles, these were walking wounded who required minimal medical intervention. Lt Welles was stabilised and a medevac request was sent to Jackdaw. Unfortunately, the helicopter was not available to extract the wounded and the platoon had to evacuate the casualties by road. The Lady Isabel, her husband, her general manager and her foreman were escorted safely from Faulkbourne in their vehicle. The two rebel prisoners were handed over to members of the Home Army.

I think it is Dixson who is talking to me. Sir, he says, sir, stay awake. Why is Dixson calling me sir? Get him over here, now. Did I receive a promotion? I can picture his face, his eyes. Is that Dixson? Sir, you're going to be okay, do you hear me? I promise. Fucking hell, another voice says, but I can't place it. Christ. I can feel my body moving from side to side. "Are we landing?" I ask. What's he talking about? No, sir, you're going to be fine, all right? "Are we there?" Sir, try to keep your eyes open, sir. I try to open them, I do, but it is difficult, but I don't want to disappoint Dixson.

—How is that? Any amendments, let me know ASAP. Cheers, lad.

22.

—Dear Dad,

—I think this is the first letter I've ever written to you. I haven't written to Mum lately, because I don't know where she is. Do you? I know she moved to Walton. I went up to talk to her because she wanted to say something to me, but she wasn't there. I don't know what's going on with her. That probably makes it sound like I'm only writing to you because I can't write to her, but that's not really the case. When was the last time we talked? At least two years. But we haven't actually talked about anything, ever, have we? Anything real, I mean. Maybe this can be the first and the last time I say something about me.

I had thought, wrongly, that deciding while high would make the decision easier. The forms on the kitchen table, pink and white, were kept from blowing away by a glass coaster placed over one corner. Pink and white, black and grey and the blue ink I'd used to write BUDDEN AMANDA C. then nothing, except a single, meaningless blue mark where my hand had hesitated and the pen had left the paper. The pen now lay on the speckled plastic, pointing towards the open window, beyond which the sun was setting between the roofs across the street. High streaks of purpling cloud. A train clattered in the distance, the wind carried it, and somewhere, close by, bassy music rumbled through the walls and floor.

What can happen in a moment when nothing happens? When the book is laid aside, there is a division between what has been read—which is now also in the reader's mind, perhaps forever, and is undeniably changed on the page and is irretrievably of the past for it cannot be read for the first time twice—and what is still to be read—which is of the reader's future and the author's past and has no place in the reader's mind except in terms of what may be imagined or estimated to come by consideration of what has already occurred, an imagined future that may never be a part of the reader if the reader does not continue to read. A new ending only in the mind of the reader, this transformation of the text, this mangling exchange from author to reader. This potential for many endings. This story that can have no real ending and no real meaning, except that these words were written, once. And there was a point, there had to have been a point. Everything is broken apart. The text has complicated. The world has steepened.

—I know you probably don't want to hear it, but I've been thinking about when I

went off to uni. You were angry when I went because you didn't want me to study literature and creative writing. Remember on the phone how much I shouted at you and then you demanded to talk to Mum and then you shouted at her, because she took my side? You thought they were pointless subjects and I'd never get a job and it would be a waste of time and money. I suppose, in an ideal world, this would be the place to say, ha, see, look at me now! But really, if you look at me now, you'd feel vindicated. I've pretty much given up with poetry, I tried to make a go of it, but it never seemed to work out. So I got a job with a packaging company as an office administrator, on the strength of just being able to read and pick things up, and that was just paperwork and answering the phone. I had another job doing filing stuff and sales. Then I got a job with the GPO, working at the exchange, and that was good because it was interesting and because I know that's the kind of stuff you used to do. I only got that job because the lads had been sent away. Creative writing didn't factor into it. So yeah, you were right: writing is pointless, like you've always said.

I had written my name and my details so many times that week that they had become detached from the self. What words, what collections of letters, suggested that? Amanda Budden. Me and the Amanda character who I sometimes played, sometimes attempted to escape, the character into whom I fell back when I wasn't thinking. Shadower; as I changed myself, I found that the Amanda character had also changed. What would Amanda do in this situation? What was natural for it? And, equally, what was best for it in terms of the plot? If characters were simply constructs of traits that had continuity, the same traits repeated throughout a text and then given a name, then what was this one, called Amanda? Typical Amanda, that group term for multiple traits. Lazy, good-for-nothing, head in the clouds, gobby, poet, blonde, Essex girl. A successful character had space for development, change, as long as the change seemed natural. Never as real as the self, but perhaps as real as a friend from the past or somebody you knew who lived far away. Those little things you knew about them, their features, their accent, the way they might move, the way they would react, an approximation.

Amanda stood and placed herself against the kitchen wall, leaning against the tiles, her head resting on the shelf which kept the biscuit tin, and stared at the form. Beside it, on the coffee-stained surface, was her student records, her provisional driving license, a telephone bill, evidence that she was Amanda. Numbers, names, her photo from long ago: her hair dyed slightly darker, more brown like her father's, and the rings in her ears which

were no longer there. Just red dots on her lobes, holes unfilled, wanting to close forever. Undecorated Amanda, this Amanda, blindly ran her fingertips through the chamfered grooves between the tiles, nails scratching the mouldering grout: left, up, right, down, around one single square, silence, scratch, silence, scratch, over and over.

I stepped back to the table, picked up the pen and put a cross in the box marked F.

The breeze blew a blade of blonde hair over her left eye but she made no attempt to remove it. A siren, a police car or an ambulance, a few streets away, a seesaw of frequency and then quiet again. Unlike anything she had ever felt before, her heartbeat seemed to fade—one second—two—three—then back and faster, and she struggled to breathe. When the air entered, it came sharply into her lungs and she almost choked. She took in everything, the scent of her hair, the smell of the paper, the sudden stench of burning rubber blown in through the window. Her frown bit deeper as the telly began chatting away in the living room.

—But the fact remains, since school, it is the thing I am best at. And if, as the world seems to think, all things about me are relatively poor, then let it be my pride in it that makes it special rather than its quality. That is its success. Because I know I am a poet and the things I write have substance, at least now and again and sometimes that's all I need. Nobody's bought them, I've made no money from it, I frankly have nothing to show for it, but it is something I have made. What useless feelings, right Dad? What pointless triumphalism. Look at my life, look where I am. But you were right.

I pushed myself back against the wall, bruising hard, why were the tiles resisting, same to same, coldness to coldness, where was the kinship? And how much easier this must have been for Martin. How fucking easy it would have been for that smug sod. All Martin could do was take up the pen and fill in the form.

Amanda swung her head from side to side, popping the bones in her neck, one socked foot slowly rising up the wall until her knee stuck out in front and nudged the edge of the table. After a moment, Amanda had gathered enough strength to detach herself from the wall, her palms flat against the cold tiles, wrists cracking as she pushed hard away, both feet hitting the floor, hands swinging forward and clamping onto the chipped edge of the table. "What do I do?" she asked herself, each word a puff of air between her wet lips, the question mark a little bubble of spit. I hate you Martin. Why do I have to make this choice? Why am I forced to decide? Why can't someone just do this for me? Why can't someone

else just tick one of these two boxes?

—You know, while I'm burning bridges, while this match is still lit and before it starts to burn my fingers, I should tell you I signed up to join the army. Training starts soon, it lasts about six months and then they have a passing out parade. You can come if you like. It's a formal thing, you'd have to dress up. I'll send another letter or give you a call closer to the time. I'll send a letter to Mum too, but I don't know if she'll get it. I just want to make it clear that it's entirely up to you, I have no expectations either way, and I have no hopes left to be dashed. I'll be marching whether you're watching or not.

What holds this all together? What has the strength to resist these splitting forces?

My skin prickled in the cold breeze through the window. I could smell the Thames, its odour rising in the warming night. Possibly thunder would come. Everything seemed smaller, lower. Between Grays and Purfleet, submerged beneath the Thames, there lay a yew forest. I didn't remember the first time I'd heard about it. I had a dozen childish fantasies, little images or visions of a forest, waterlogged, skeletal yew trees thrusting out of the river bed like fingers flayed of skin. Brown and black bark peeling from the petrified husks, coming away. At school they'd told ghost stories about the forest and all the spirits that lived there and all the people who'd seen them, or been killed by them, or been seduced by them. I used to be scared, a long time ago, but now all that was ended. Even if I stood on the bank and watched the murderous Thames rolling in, storming drunk and head full of nightmares. It was all ended.

The things that Amanda thought. The things she did. There was a moment, possibly now, possibly gone, and she was in that moment, and in that moment she, I, was a switch, on and off, off and on, like the switch on the kettle, just a decision, a moment of judgement. Why do I feel like this? A simple choice. I don't want to die but what am I now, what really am I? I'm already dead, I am buried by this moment. How can I feel alive and not prove it? Like the yew trees, all life gone, all vitality, all vestige of nature, all juice and flesh and singing vibrancy of being, flushed, buried under a hundred billion tonnes of sea water and mud and the ghosts of cave-people. Liquid life pouring down the family tree, blood flowing with the double-X, down into me, drowning me.

—I hope in the future we will be able to be friends, you and me and Mum, and we can sit down together and remember all the lovely things we did, the things I remember. Because I still remember them and I like to remember them and if I could live in one of

those memories forever, I would be happier than I could ever be in this world. I've probably had too much to drink. I probably drink too much. There are things in my life I can't tell you about. There are things we wish we'd never said and I've said my share and there are things we never said that should have been and I'll never know how many of those there were. Nan, before she died, it must have actually been the morning before she died, told me that she saw a bright and blooming light in me and that people would hold their hands up to me like I was a fire. And I've tried to be that light and all I've really done is burn people.

Amanda looked around the kitchen for somewhere to hide. Under the table, inside the cupboard, inside the oven with the gas, in the drawers with the forks and the knives. "I can't do this," she murmured, hoping someone would hear but no-one stood there. "I want to die." She took up the pen, slipped it under her blouse and pressed the metal tip hard inside her navel. She pushed until the pain was too much to bear, then relented, dropping it onto the table top. It bounced, rolled and fell to the floor. Shaking, Amanda slowly dropped to her haunches and picked the pen up.

If nothing happened, if the Amanda character did and said and thought nothing, it might not exist. It might be able to just stay there, crouched, hidden by the table, hidden by that kitchen and the night that was falling outside, hidden by the stillness and the quiet and the lack of action, and just not be. For a while, at least, until another actor appeared in the text and forced an interaction. Perhaps that would not happen, perhaps all other characters, the character Darren, would hold off. Shut up, don't wake the neighbours. If it, the Amanda, had no traits, had nothing about it to distinguish it from all the other words, then it might lose all significance, the text become decentred from the character, returned to simple description of how things were, and then nothing. Nothing. If. Please.

There was a noise somewhere, behind the tiles, of pipes or people. There was the siren again, a sense of urgency.

—Please remember I loved being your daughter.

—Amanda

23.

On Sundays the helicopter brings the Padre to our base for his weekly service. Just after dawn, he comes out of the sky, lands amidst a swirling of dust in the yard. Every week, his schedule identical: he ministers, he shares a lunch with the men, perhaps he plays a game of garden cricket with the officers, and then, in the early afternoon, when the sun is at its brightest and the base listless from the heat, he is readmitted to the sky via the helicopter's urgent, choppy ascent. For those few moments, everybody averts their eyes.

I overhear, over the months, talk that the Padre hails from a parish in Essex, Little something, but has spent many years a missionary around the globe. He seems from other people's opinions to be a decent man and a strong advocate for the men against the army's rigidity when they are in need or distress. They speak well of him, in familiar terms, though for the most part as if he were an uncle or a brother who held rather peculiar views. From my brief chats with him I had come to a very similar conclusion, that he is a man who by his grace and goodwill it is impossible not to respect, and it was probably that appraisal that overrode my initial reluctance the previous Sunday when he asked if I would read a few chapters of a memoir he was writing.

—Dear Mr Welles,

—It was recently brought to my attention that you used a number of lyrics from my song 'Little Too Late' in your poem 'In Strange Vastness'. I was told the lines were little changed and that their use was egregious- I had to look up the word. My manager had her finger on the button, ready to launch her lawyers, but I pride myself on the swiftness of my dictionary rummaging, and I found the word just in time (E, as it happens, exists in the extraordinarily expansive environs enclosed by D and F). I told my manager to read me your poem and she did, from a telephone box outside a London bookshop, and upon hearing it I told her that I didn't think the use was egregious and couldn't we call off this legal fight? She said, ultimately, as I had written the lyrics it was my prerogative (incidentally, P is between O and Q). Lucy, I said to her, let's take this as a warning against rushing to judgement and a valuable lesson about the insensible machinations of law. She said that was all right, who reads poetry anyway?

They are singing hymns now, in the tent that passes for a church. Through the opening I can see the Padre and his congregation, some dozen men standing, their hands

behind their backs. Pakes sits at the church's small upright piano, its dark walnut case shining with a satin finish, he has some skill, obvious to me, and his playing has a rich tone. It's a hymn I recognise, I can remember the way it urges my lips to move, and as they sing "we'll join the everlasting song" the hairs go up on my neck and arms and is this sentiment or is this spirit? After they have sung again, after world without end, and after amen, amen, amen and also with you, go in peace, I step into the church and, avoiding the departing worshippers, make my way to the folding table at the front, with its cross and its cloth and its candles. The missal lies on the cloth, with ribbons of red and yellow and green between the pages. Plain, this table, the same sort we eat our meals off in the cookhouse.

"Mr Welles," the Padre says. "What a pity, you're just a minute too late."

"Sorry, I had some errands." It's then I sneeze, apologise.

"Under the weather?"

"Just a cold, I hope."

He looks entirely unconvinced. "Did you have a chance to read the chapters I gave you?"

"I did. The writing's fine," I tell him. "Tone, diction, I couldn't fault it."

"Ah, I thank you for that, but still there's something unsaid."

"Well."

"Martin, really, neither of us has the time to beat around the bush."

"If it were me, I'd move away from mere chronology and try to delve into reasons, like what was the impulse that set you on this course. The inclusion and exclusion of events is important because we understand cause and effect by means of juxtaposition. Here." I hand him the typewritten manuscript, curled into a scroll, held by an elastic band. "I made some notes, I hope that's all right."

"Of course, thank you," he says. He removes the band and looks through the pages, nods. "'Mere chronology'. Well, you've given me something to think about."

I check his face, can feel my teeth biting the inside of my cheek. "That wasn't too harsh, was it?"

The Padre laughs, dropping the manuscript onto the table and reaching out his hand to me. "Not at all, not at all, I can take it."

"I should be off," I say. "I've got an appointment with the doctor."

—I should apologise for the words I've said out loud. I have cursed you a good many

hours in the past few days. I won't write down the words I used (I fear they would be censored) but believe me they were on the strong side. My neighbours would probably attest to that. I do feel silly now as the anger was rather out of character for me and seems now to have been unwarranted. Don't worry, though, objects were definitely not thrown and doors definitely not slammed and voices were definitely not made hoarse through screamed vulgarity. No harm done.

I meet Shaw on the way to the Medical Officer. I tell him about my cold and he responds with only a little sympathy. When I sneeze, I turn away from him.

"What did I do to deserve this?"

He frowns. "Kindness, wasn't it?"

The Medical Officer is equally unmoved. "It's going around," he says. "Fever?"

"Yes, a mild one."

"Right." He makes me fill out a form and then prescribes me a month's regimen of pills and tells me to come back if I develop a cough. "Fetch them from the Quartermaster," he commands. He tells me, as I'm leaving, to help myself to the complimentary condoms.

"I don't think that's how one catches a cold," I say.

—Forgive me if this all reads awkwardly. Most of the letters I write are responses to fans and for the most part I try to be chummy and I like to let them know a few things about me, especially the younger fans. Of course, it's easiest when they only want an autographed photo, because obviously that's just me putting my squiggle on a picture on which many people have spent much money and plenty of time to make me look pretty. I have included one of these photographs with this letter- there's no need to thank me. It seems you get to have the best of both worlds, my defaced portrait and a couple of pages of my scrawly writing, generally friendly and allowing a little insight into my life. Lucky you, eh?

I have written in the small times, in the quiet behind-the-back, around-the-corner times, with a notebook open on my desk as I write reports and draft tomorrow's briefing, with a notebook open on my chest as I lie in bed at midnight and write when I cannot sleep. There are times, little times, infrequent times, when the vision comes, the rush of words, the order and flow, and a scrap of paper is enough, the sunbrowned skin on the back of my hand is enough, to catch them, to catch a splash of them, the last gasp of them, before the hush and silence. And slowly they come together, the little parts, until they look like something, until they suggest something greater, and I put the pen down and I think, That,

in the end, was worth it.

“I’d like to send this package to England, please.”

A young staff sergeant works on my request as I stand at his window. His pen loops and jumps on the numerous duplicate forms, pink, white and yellow, he stamps the package three times with red ink. I watch him wrinkle his peeling nose and cheeks. “Army-issue sun cream?” I ask.

He replies, without looking up, “Yes, sir.”

“I’d use aloe,” I say as the sergeant passes me back the forms to sign.

“Twice on each, please,” he tells me, pushing his biro across the counter.

I sign the forms, thank the sergeant and I am finished. It is a quick walk through the administration building from the post room to the office shared by the platoon commanders and sergeants. I find Longman standing outside the office door. He holds a sheet of paper against the wall and is, with some difficulty, writing a long paragraph with a short pencil.

“Afternoon, Sergeant. Somebody in there?”

“Afternoon, sir. Yes, Lieutenant Dixson’s got company.”

“Company?”

“Having a meeting.”

“Who with?”

“Captain Kipchumba of the Home Army.”

“Private meeting?”

“That’s what I was told, sir.”

“Do you think he’d mind if I went in?”

“I’d knock first, sir.”

I do so. There’s silence for a moment, then, “Come in.” I try the handle, but it fails to turn. “It’s locked,” I say, loudly against the wooden door. “Just a second,” comes the reply. I hear the key turning in the lock and then the handle moves in my hand and the door opens inwards. Dixson stands there, smiling.

“Ecce homo,” he says.

“Do you mind if I come in? I have some plans and briefings in the filing cabinet.”

“Of course not.” He takes several small steps backwards, his arm trailing through the air. The room is hot and smells of people contained, the one window is shut and the small fan on the desk is not switched on. As I enter, I notice Kipchumba sitting on the rattan sofa

in the corner, wearing the dark green uniform of the Home Army, relaxing with one leg crossed over the other. I notice his trousers have sharp pleats and they seem pulled too tight in the crotch, and his shirt is open, from the heat, and he is absently playing with a gold cross on a gold chain around his neck, and behind the cross, behind the cross is the man's hairless chest, toned, slick with sweat, a small dark nipple visible as the movements of his arm move his shirt, and these are all the things I'm noticing. Upon his knee he rests a snifter, its bulb half-full of a swirling pinchbeck liquid. He smiles when our eyes meet and I raise a hand.

"Don't mean to intrude," I say. "I'll just collect my things and be out of your hair."

Dixson pushes the door shut. "No, no, you're more than welcome to stay." In one hand he picks up an empty glass from the campaign desk, in the other a dark brown bottle. "Won't you have a drink?"

"No, no, thank you. It's a bit early, for me."

Dixson looks at Kipchumba in a familiar way. "Have you met Captain Kipchumba?" he asks.

"No, no we haven't, well, we've been in briefings together but—" I hold out my hand and he stands up and takes it. He smells of aftershave and spirits. His grip is warm and dry and strong and he moves my hand up and down several times. "Pleased to meet you. Martin Welles."

"True Kipchumba."

"True blue," Dixson says. "This is Mary."

"Ah."

I look at Dixson. "Actually, I will have a drink, a small one."

"Very good." Dixson pours and I take the offered glass. "Mary here studied literature at university, too."

"English literature."

Kipchumba laughs. "What other kind is there?" he says.

"Oh, well, we have that in common."

"Ah, we probably read the same books."

"The same words," I agree, "in the same order, but not the same books."

"Ah!" he says, with a smile. He shakes his finger. "Ah ha! Brilliant. You sound exactly like my professor."

“Don’t mind Mary,” Dixon says, touching Kipchumba on the arm above the elbow. “I suppose we’ll have to get used to this one.”

—I should probably tell you that I have read your book all the way through. I read it in one night. I read it every night. I’m embarrassed to admit that on my bookshelf in my flat there are exactly two volumes of poetry. Well, that’s a bit of a misrepresentation, as one of the books is an anthology of poems I’m told I should know. As I’m writing this sentence, I realise that the statement I made (that there are two poetry books on my shelf) is almost 100% unreliable, as the other book is yours, and it isn’t currently on the bookshelf. It’s in my handbag when I’m out and it’s on my bedside table when I’m at home. It hasn’t actually sat on the bookshelf yet. I retract the statement.

On another Sunday the Padre finds me at breakfast in the cookhouse. “Do you mind if I sit by you?” he asks. I stand and say, please. He places his tray on the table, next to mine, bacon, eggs, triangles of fried bread. He has a cup of milky tea that he blows into and sips.

“How’s the writing coming along?” I ask.

“Oh, I honestly haven’t found time for it this month. But, you know, one fine day I’ll have a moment to get out the old typewriter.” He places his cup on the table. “Funnily enough, I was speaking with Major Guthrie, earlier.”

“Oh yes?”

“It’s always a bit of an exercise in biting my lip, really. He regards what I do as a sort of shuttle diplomacy, I think. But, never mind that, today we were discussing pastoral care and working out whether there are any special considerations for this company.”

“Oh.” I push the bacon around on the plate for a second. “You don’t mean me, do you?”

“No, no need for alarm. We did discuss the possibility of your helping with a service or two each month.”

The bacon, when I eat it, is cold. “Am I missing something?”

“Would you be happy to do it?”

“Has this already been decided?”

“Oh no, of course not. It’s entirely up to you.” He begins to eat his own breakfast, takes a bite of his bread, makes a face and returns it to the plate.

“I was never much for church,” I tell him.

“No? I thought you might be receptive, after reading some of those notes you wrote

on those chapters, and your poetry, I thought—have I made an awful mistake?”

“It’s only poetry. But I mean, I liked to sing the hymns in school. I remember I was up in front of the assembly one morning, we were acting out the parable of the talents. I forget which role I played.” I put my fork down. There is an engine running somewhere nearby. The kitchen staff are talking loudly, pots are hitting pots and ringing, and the last of the men are leaving the cookhouse to begin their duties. We sit there in an almost empty space, side by side, and there’s a crawling insect on the table before us, wings pulled up, legs in silky motion. “And I always liked the readings from the King James.”

“Yes, there’s something rustless about it.”

I nod. “When I have a spare Sunday, I would be happy to help.”

“Excellent. I’ll let the Major know.” The Padre holds up his hands. “I’m sorry to pressure you, I don’t mean to be pushy, but the Major was not entirely wrong about my work. I’m often required to move around at very short notice. The sheer number of funerals—” He stops. I look away. “Well, I’m stretched. Some days I’m needed by one company commander, the next day another, and I’m pushed and pulled all over the Colony. I go to local churches and talk to the parishioners there. They have me speaking at town halls. It is, thank you Major Guthrie, really rather a diplomatic mission. Any help you can give me, even once a month, would be a great relief and a weight taken off.”

“Well, I’d be happy to.”

“Even being a light for Christ when you’re on patrol or talking to your men. Ah, I say ‘even’. As it says in Matthew, Let your light so shine before men. Perhaps you can’t see it directly in your life, in your own experience, but perhaps you’ve seen it in those around you. The holiness of other people. I believe He sometimes finds an askew way into the world and works through everybody to find the one struggling person. As He works through them to find you, He also works through you to find others, for a Christian shines, calling others to Christ.”

—I should like to hear from you, if you should wish to correspond and have the chance to write back.

—Sincerely,

—Ms Elsie Anders

“I had an aunt,” I tell the Padre. “We used to go around her house for tea some weekends. Egg sandwiches and pickled onions and more types of cheese than we ever had

at home. My uncle had died several years before. She had a wooden plaque above the mantelpiece, it said 'As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord'."

"That's what I like about you, Martin. You're not afraid to talk about yourself."

"Well."

"Oh, I only meant that certain people, Lieutenant Dixson for example, well, you'd hardly think he had a past. Of course, there's nothing wrong with being circumspect, I suppose, but there's a difference between being circumspect and being a person entirely without a past. People are always very complicated; even when we wish they'd be simple or fool ourselves that they are. You haven't noticed that about the man, have you?"

"Yes," I say, drinking the last of my coffee, "I have. It's odd."

"I get the impression he flits through life without leaving a trace. Collecting nothing, remembering nothing, but then having nothing to come back to. Perhaps that's one way to lead a life. Somebody once commented on the number of books I had in my office. I forget who it was, some young chap just arrived from home, it must have seemed a lot to him, but there's only one bookcase. I don't know, four foot wide, six high. Rather on the large side, perhaps, but his sheer astonishment was peculiar. I think the chap meant it as a compliment, not an accusation, as if to say 'Cor, you must be wise with all these books', and I think that's how I took it at the time. But I've thought about it afterwards, this observation of having many books, too many books. We hold on to them, sometimes, even if, objectively, their usefulness has run out. Sentimentality? Nostalgia? You can't find a house or a room in this country without a copy of *Empire Day* in it."

"Courage Copyn is like a saint here, to them."

"Yes, exactly. His book means something special to people here. Its meaning is quite powerful, spiritual, it's very precious to them, in a very different way to people back home." He drinks his tea and we sit silently together for a short while. "Perhaps Mr Dixson doesn't need to hold on to anything, but I believe that most of us need things to carry, to hold on to, sacramentals, in which a spirit or a power or a quality inheres. It could be a prayer, or a book or it could be this—" He hands me a small silver cross, lets the chain spill out, soft as water, into my palm. "You don't need to wear it," he says hurriedly. "But I thought perhaps you might appreciate having something like this, an object you can come back to when you're in a dark place."

"Thank you."

24.

—Dear Amanda,

—I'm sorry I haven't kept in touch. I don't know quite what to blame for that—perhaps business or personal reasons, or that I thought that the end of university was the end of all that. I hope life's treating you well and you've been happy and keeping busy. Are you still writing? Did you hear back from the publisher you contacted?

The old boys came to listen to the folk songs. With whiskers and flat caps and noses over their pints, they tapped their feet to the folk band's music, singing the words they knew quietly to themselves and their neighbours. After each song they gave subdued applause, turned to their friends and nodded. They smoked from pipes, rolled their cigarettes, tobacco was scattered on the tables in and out of the wet circles left by glasses. I sat by the stage, saw the angles at which the fiddler bowed, could feel, perhaps, the catching of every horsehair on the strings, could see the rosin dust rising in the spotlights. I watched the stage shuddering as they stomped their feet to the beat.

Why does an Essex Girl wear underestimation like a smock? And a smile always undergirt by disappointment? She wears discouragements like glitter in her hair, judgements predetermined what she is and what she can or cannot be. She twitches with each worry and rankle, a detonation undefused. Another thing she cannot wear with pride. "I can't wait to get outside," she says. She's spent too long becoming the person expectation pressured her to either be or hate, a life made too old and brim-full of Essex, leaving nothing between her years. Perhaps she's learned to speak in different modes at different times, her 'posh' is pretty good but on the phone she still hesitates between her 'effs' and their 'tea aitches'.

—My agent says the publisher would appreciate it if I could ensure there would be no further confusion about the providence of various poems. I can't recall if there were specific instances where I borrowed a phrase or line from you. I remember in workshop and in the seminars we would throw out lines and use them in brain-storming verse. I know there'd probably no recourse to copyright in this regard, but, on a personal level, I wanted to be sure that you wouldn't be offended if you read the piece and happened to recognise some word or phrase—frankly, they don't want me to be sued.

When they had finished their set they received their applause, thanked the audience

and the publican, promised they would be back at the earliest opportunity. They placed their instruments back in their cases and stepped down from the stage. The students had come mob-handed, the poets and their friends, and they took the tables nearest the front and they moved chairs around so they could sit together. They chatted and joked and I saw that some had notebooks, large bound notebooks with ribboned bookmarks. And I thought, this is a mistake. What am I doing here? There is nothing, nothing good that can come from this.

What's the first thing an Essex Girl does in the morning, before she makes up her face and puts up her defences, before she puts her armour on three layers thick? What's the first thing she does when she wakes to the sound of the milk float, an hour before her alarm goes off, before the day has risen to oppose her, set its guard and laid its traps for her? She kindles, yet again, the fire she needs to move. She waits for them to see that there is a bright and blooming light inside her and she tries to keep it from dying, that light inside.

Their poems were bold and loud and confessional and they spoke them clearly and moved their hands in rehearsed signals. A first date. The feathers of a starling. A flower and how the sunlight fell on it. How this girl enjoyed exploring her own body. How this boy decided that exploring his body was a way to avoid his girlfriend. The death of a mother. The death of a child. Confrontational delivery, spitting words as if the object of their hate was in front of them, the audience. "Every little outside sound is like the sound of children," she said, "the sudden need to puke or piss or fetch a drink of water, Too hot, Daddy, too cold, Daddy, two more minutes Daddy please- the shrieking of cats fucking is so like the sound of children, that you listen closely for a minute, to hear again, to hope for another queen cat's scream." A narrative poem, telling the story of an artist who spent his days in his studio painting women from the Bible and spent his nights at home with his wife. A pregnant woman who, after many losses, reflected on how she had not bought any clothes for her new baby because she feared another stillbirth. Tangential, impressionist observations on sculpture. I listened and I drank my beer and how are they all so sure?

What's the difference between an Essex girl and who she wants to be? She'd be complete if she were only allowed to be that shape, if she hadn't been denied an innocence. She's not been allowed her own life, her choices are never her choices, her actions must follow a form, a pattern, in the knowledge that men mock what it means to live here. She belongs to the jokes and anecdotes, she's written in them, she's written by them, she has

written them.

—It strikes me that I never really appreciated that workshop business. I assumed, I think, that it was simply a way for the tutor to spread the load around a little. I don't recall the work I submitted for that, nor anyone else's in the group, but curiously I still have a copy of yours. It was one of the only ones I really read, probably. I made a lot of notes but I don't remember relating them to you in the seminar. There is little reason to bring it up now, as I'm sure my thoughts on it were probably unhelpfully superficial, and any insight slight. It hardly matters what I thought of it then (or now if we're honest) but I suppose I simply wanted to tell you that I did read it and that it inspired me.

I read the poems I had brought with me and I was thinking about the songs they had sung, of soldiers and sailors and their dead loves and gold in great store. I read the poems that I had brought with me and I was thinking about the mother and the artist and the baby and the body and the death. I read the poems that I had brought with me and I was thinking that maybe there had been a better poem at some point, hadn't there, a poem I felt was more successful. I was thinking as I was reading them that, no, I have tried and failed, the thing I aimed for is still farther off. So far off, I don't know if I can reach.

There was, at last, polite applause.

What do you call an Essex girl when you're talking to her face to face? If her name is known, say it. She is reading the signs of identity through the narrative features, she can tell by the sneer and the mocking laugh that it is not by name you know her. Now it's a fact that a woman changes better than a man, but it's a fact that a woman has had more practice. She is made of the same stuff as Essex, mud and sky and grasslands. She is the shore and the river wilderness. She can be everywhere and everything in it, but the city has begun to eat it and what makes her her, this infrangible centre, is fleeing to the edgeplace, where overwhelmingly, no one is able to remain.

In the ladies, I listened to a student in the cubicle next to mine. She threw up, moaned, made a fake-crying sound. "I fucking hate this," she said to her friend, apparently in the cubicle with her. I heard her spitting. "Then don't fucking do it," her friend told her. The backwash from her vomit must have hit her then, for she threw up again, this time in an almost continuous stream. Five or six seconds. She coughed up the last of the vomit, fake-cried again, sounding more sincere. "Why did you drink so much?" her friend asked. "I don't know, I thought I could hold it." Her friend laughed. "Cosi fan tutte," she said. Did she?

That's what it sounded like.

I waited for them to leave, waited with the smell of her vomit in the air, then finished up and washed my hands and checked my face in the mirror behind the sink. As I stepped out of the ladies, an elderly man, one of those I'd seen earlier at a nearby table, listening to the music, came quickly over to me.

"Excuse me, love. I hope you don't think I'm being out of order, I didn't mean to wait for you here, like this. I just wanted to say I liked your stuff, the old poems. I thought you were the best one, no lie. I'm not much of a one for poems, usually, but I enjoyed your ones. Funny and everything."

"Ta," I said. "I appreciate it."

"Just, you know, just one thing I'd say, if you don't mind, but I reckon you can't just read it, love, like you'd read a book or something, I reckon you need to have the right voice."

—I have a single vivid memory of when we were in uni, it has stayed with me and I've held on to it. It must have been the first seminar of the first term of the first year. You were there, it was all the creative writing students, our names on cards in front of us, and the tutor as an ice-breaker asked us all where we were from. I remember, of us two, you were the first to say "Essex" and you didn't care if the others laughed. Amanda from Essex. I remember thinking you were so brave while I wanted nothing more than to vanish. I was so in awe of you, you made me realise I could be proud of something of which I'd up to then been ashamed. I suppose this is a rambling way of thanking you. There are better ways of doing things, and there are always better words in better orders. Who knows, maybe I will never get to say another word to you, so let my last words be this: you are as fierce as a lioness and you need nobody and nothing to make you better.

Where do Essex girls go with a canny mouth and a chance to prove themselves? She may ever roam but she will remember Essex. She is so much more than her county but everything she is has Essex in it. This is her experience, for her, but she must always share it with the other Girl, it is always only half hers. Her work, her mind, the best in the county, all the potentialities of life in front of her and she knows the names of all the seas of the moon. This is her experience, this life, and it's only through time spent here that she perceives the permanent, indivisible power of human happiness. No time's redeemable until the end. And at the end she's beyond every influence, but love is in everything.

The rain was cold and came sidewise on the walk home. The traffic was heavy and anxious, horns were sounded repeatedly, nobody seemed willing to give way, puddles were splashed onto the pavement. There had been another poetry reading and another walk home but that was long ago. I hadn't brought an umbrella and was very quickly soaked, mainly on one side, could feel the division between warm and cold along the centre of my body like a surgical incision. Darren was probably back at the flat by now. The rain grew heavier, the droplets larger, more forceful, the angle shifting to the vertical, and I thought, although one side of me is already wet I should probably try to keep the other side dry, as much as I can, as much as rain and wind allow. So I stepped off the pavement, into the nearest doorway, and waited for the rain to ease. I would get back to the flat later, possibly Darren would be asleep. There was laundry to do there, there was always laundry, and dishes in the sink and groceries to buy. And in the morning telephone calls to make, made countless times already in the mind and each time ending in disaster.

—Thank you, Amanda. I'm sorry for the sentiment, if it came across badly. We are catching a train tomorrow, going south, and then it's off to the other side of the world. Things to do, things to write about. Wish me luck?

—Yours sincerely, Martin.

25.

Dixson approaches me while I'm walking out of the Castle, cap held under his arm. He emerges from the shade of a palm, the sunlight all at once illuminating him like a sudden, uncompromising realisation, as if he was until then forgotten in shadow. Wearing long khaki shorts and a loose bush shirt bloused over his belt, fawn plimsolls and brown socks, he seems comfortable in the heat and comes on quickly. I notice, as he moves, that Dixson's tanned legs are long convolutions of shocking musculature, with restrained doodles of light hair that end mid-calf under the cuffs of his high-pulled socks. As he reaches me, the light comes down on us with a gentleness that speaks of a delighted surprise, surprise perhaps that we should be walking out in it, especially me, so pale and unsunned.

—Pamela Graham: Tell us about Elsie Anders.

—Elsie Anders: Oh, there's not much to tell. I think my life's pretty boring, really.

—PG: No, no, no, come on. Tell us about Elsie. Let's say, look, what's a normal day for you?

—EA: Ugh. I don't know. Oh. Well, lately I've been reading some poetry by a chap called Martin Welles.

"Hot enough for you?" Dixson looks at my trousers and boots, and nods to himself. "You off to see the town, then?"

"The Captain recommended it."

"Well, it's good to see a bit of local colour." I feel my face pinking. The sun grows sharper, its angles more wicked, coming down hard now, on our bare skin now, with a desire to burn us. Dixson smartly settles his cap on his hair within a second or two. "Well, in that case, do you mind if I join you?"

"Of course, be my guest."

The high green gates of the Castle are closed, but an armed sentry stands in the open wicket gate, talking to a passer-by. As we approach, the sentry stands aside, comes to attention. "Good morning, sir!" he calls, I suppose, to Dixson. "Morning, Clarkey," Dixson replies as we pass through the narrow space.

It's easy to fall back into old ways. It feels empowering to walk beside him, as if no entry into any part of the world, no matter how private or guarded, could be prosecuted as a trespass. With Dixson, everything is open to you, his closeness grants limitless admission.

It's his confidence, his confidence in his own worth, I tell myself. The road is rough here, just outside the town, hard-packed with macadam but shapeless, as the loose dirt is forever drifting over its edges. A man on a racing green bicycle passes us, ringing his bell.

Dixson yells to him and he squeezes the brakes, his body shifting with the exchange of forces. We reach the man and Dixson demands to see his identity card. It is duly produced from a jacket pocket and Dixson spends drawn out seconds inspecting it. "All right," he says at last and gestures for the man to continue his journey. The road is raised here, above the surrounding wasteland. Out in the scrub, movements like the scuttlings of small creatures or the shivering of the earth. Every so often we walk over culverts through which no obvious streams flow. I ask Dixson if it floods much. He says he's never known it to flood. He says the rebels used to secrete explosives in culverts until the Home Army concreted them all shut. He isn't sure, he adds, what effect this had on local irrigation. He invites me to jump down off the road and have a look, but I decline and tell him I believe him.

—PG: Oh yes? Welles? I can't say I've heard of him.

—EA: To tell you the truth, I hadn't either until last week. Amusingly, I sent him a letter the other day. A very angry letter.

—PG: Well, this is interesting! Why were you angry?

—EA: Oh, no, I can't say— no, I couldn't possibly. To be honest, it wasn't a completely horrible letter.

A young woman in a vivid blue headscarf calls something to us as we pass her cottage. She waves and Dixson waves back. She smiles and goes into her small house. I ask Dixson if he knows the woman and he shakes his head, "Never seen her before," and yes, I can believe, that just seems a typical response to the man. In front of the cottage is a short tree with black shiny fruit and in the tree's shade a small puppy, more head than body, begins to bark at us, jumping forward in order to, I assume, ward us away, and then jumping almost immediately back, never leaving its circle of shadow. Dixson laughs, says, "What ferocity," and then, "Maybe she was telling us to beware of the dog."

Eventually there is a concrete bridge and here, at last, a small stream passes beneath the road. I stop for a moment and look down into it, leaning over the metal barrier. There are no fish, an occasional rusted tin can, a floating plastic bottle brittled by the sun. In the weeds on the bank tangled with fish line, a gallon drum that had once contained cooking oil,

a scrap of orange plastic sheeting, the rusted spelter snaking of a rusted coil spring. "What were you expecting?" Dixon asks. I reply, "I don't know. I don't know."

Beyond the bridge, the town begins. These little houses, concrete blocks connected to each other, with barely a gap between, bleached by sun or whitewash, with bright awnings and painted doors. Built all at once and quickly to satisfy the needs of growing population, to take advantage of this intersection between industries and government. Electricity and telephone wires lace the street above us, a cross-hatching of black lines, and we are looking through triangles at the sky. The traffic now is surging from the town centre, bicycles and motorbikes and small vans, horns are sounding, metal rubs against metal.

"So much concrete. You wouldn't have thought."

"No."

We pass fruit sellers at their stalls, where the air is suddenly sweet and full of their languid voices, calling out for trade. From a high window comes a woman's voice, singing in her native tongue, a melody recalling something I have heard elsewhere. Home Army policemen patrol in pairs, their truncheons clasped behind their backs, casting suspicious glances at every sack of produce, every crate that might hide contraband. An officer with a red cap band and a red sash across his chest salutes Dixon as we pass each other on the pavement.

We wait at the edge of the pavement. A single decker approaches, a sight-seeing bus with row after row of company men behind gaping panoramic windows. Its white bodywork spotted brown by the dusty roads, but with chromework glaring through, the bus pitches forward on a rush of smog and the din of its engine. The headsign says, conclusively, PRIVATE. Along the side, below all the pale and staring faces, large blue letters spell BRITISH ALKALI INDUSTRIES. Dixon watches it pass, keeps watching it as it goes, growing smaller, growing quieter. "There's a plant ten miles north," he explains, at last. "There's the quarry and the refineries to the south. You'll see a great deal of company traffic through here. When they don't take the railway, we're the main thoroughfare from the interior to the coast."

"I studied the atlas," I say.

"Indeed you did."

"Do they ever stop here? For leisure, I mean."

"Oh of course. Leisure. Pleasure." He sculls his hand. "But, you know, change of pace

and all that. When one has spent enough time incountry, one longs desperately to break the monotony.”

“How long have you been here, incountry?”

“Oh, the good part of a year, I should say.”

“Have you grown desperate yet?”

“I manage.” He clicks his fingers in front of us, as if, with striking his fingers, he might excite the air to flame. “It helps to adopt an expansive attitude, you see. A perspective open to possibility. In life, one’s outlook can draw in until its grown ever so close. Myopic, I suppose. If one starts to disbelieve the presence of possibility, one can fail to recognise possibility when it appears.”

“You sound like you’ve read a book about it.”

“Well, you’re right, in a manner of speaking. I had a book I carried with me everywhere. Read it all the time.”

“Did you bring the book from home?” I ask him.

“No, I bought it here. There’s a little bookshop here. Say, would you care to see it? It might interest somebody like you.”

“Oh? Well.”

“A poet.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that. I didn’t realise anybody here really knew.”

“Forces Radio. Pathé. You’d be surprised. Perhaps you wouldn’t.”

“I see.”

—PG: A disagreement?

—EA: Er, yeah, of sorts.

—PG: Oh, you’ve intrigued us now, you can’t not tell us.

—EA: Well, it’s really— no, look, you’re trying to get me in trouble now!

Dixson tells me what it is that keeps people in this country immortal. The proximity of little things, precious things, secrets, like a locket or a lighter or a poem recited to oneself twenty times in the mirror every morning. It’s a book that keeps Dixson alive, or rather something that was written in a book. He used to carry the book around with him, rolled up in his pocket, but it proved too bulky and, against whatever librarian reservations he might have had, eventually he ripped out the specific page. Page 23 did not last long but by then he had it memorised. I have no idea of the book’s title and I have no idea what was written

on page 23 and I have no idea why it sustains Dixon and Dixon assures me that that is the point. So be it.

It seems to me that this esoteric philosophy concerned knowledge's absolute denial of its own immateriality. In his view, knowledge would not allow itself to be extinguished, not by the destruction of documents, not by the death of the knower, and if it should be that within the knower's memory was its sole hiding place then so be it, the knower must not and could not perish. I try to explain it back to him in similar words, but he simply shrugs and says, "That sounds like the gist of it, yes."

I wipe my brow. "Did you know that Shaw's running a pool on how long we'll be here?"

"Did you put something on?"

"I can't remember what I said. Eight months? Something like that."

"Eight months? We should be so lucky. I suppose if we smash them. Or they smash us."

"I didn't put a lot of thought into it."

"Well. What do you stand to lose?" I hold up my left wrist. He looks at the watch there, nods. "And if you're right?"

"I didn't think to ask."

"Well, you'll be able to tell the time at least."

He points out a slick issuing from a wastewater pipe so I can avoid it. Flies, disturbed, fuss around and visit. I swat at one, feel it against my hand hard as a stone. Warmer air buffets us as we pass a laundrette, the senses are confused by the heat, by the perfumed detergent equal parts flower and chemical, by the throbbing drone of the washing machines. An older man naked but for a towel wrapped around his waist watches us from the doorstep.

"Here we are," Dixon says. The bookshop is, like all the other buildings in the area, of simple concrete construction, two storeys with a wooden panelled frontage and a hand-painted sign that reads simply in golden letters BOOKS. Flags hang behind the windows on the first floor, red cross on white, something with blue, something all red. The overhanging terne-metal roof is stained brown from the weather, and from it hangs a broken length of guttering which shifts and creaks in a little breeze. "Don't let him convince you to spend more than ten shillings. On anything. Trust me, I know this one."

—PG: No, no, never. Are you generally an angry person?

—EA: Oh, you, that's so rude! No, no I'm not. No, I'm quite shy, I think. Most of the time when things get under my skin I'll turn it inwards and feel really bad about myself. Then I'll write a song or just, you know, play some guitar or violin or something and I'll be back to old cheery me.

—PG: So did the poet reply to your letter?

—EA: I haven't heard back from him yet, no. I'm a little bit worried I might have scared him off.

Dixson lights a cigarette, tips his head to the side. I follow him to the door, he opens it for me, sets a bell tinkling. The smell of paper, of glue, of time and warm dust. A fan chops the air. Bare bulbs of low wattage glow above us, make gentle shadows roam around the open room as they swing from their ceiling roses. A man, presumably the owner, stands in the gloom at the rear.

"Good morning," Dixson calls out.

The owner comes on. "Out!" he snaps. A small man, he wears a Prussian blue frock coat which reaches past his knees. Wisps of grey hair emerge from beneath a faded, battered forage cap. His face is ragged with beard, half-beard, in the bristles flakes of food or dead skin. He snaps again, "Out!"

"I say, steady on."

"That cigarette, man, out!"

"Oh." Dixson takes the cigarette from his mouth, looks at it for a second. "I'll wait outside, then," he says to me. He raises his voice for the bookseller, repeats, "I'll wait outside."

"That man," the bookseller says, shaking his head, watching Dixson go. "Every time he comes here, smoking, smoking, always smoking, I say to him, this smoke doesn't even smell nice. These cigarettes you Brits bring."

"You don't rate them?"

The old man comes up to me, stands barely a foot in front of me, looks up at me. He blows air out his mouth. The inside of him smells of greenwood and clay. "Just in from England?"

"That's right."

"What are you looking for, sir?"

“Well, frankly, I’m not sure. I was following my friend’s lead.”

“You know your own mind?”

“I should hope so. May I browse?”

“By all means, sir.”

He bows slightly, trails his arm through the air as he turns. I take a step forwards and the man stays close. It seems to be a very supervised browsing. The room is longer than it is wide, its walls unparallel, pressing in at an angle away from the front door. Along all the walls the shelves contain textbooks in their hundreds, on chemistry, geography, philosophy, logic, a lot with titles suggesting various branches of mathematics of which I have no knowledge. On tables the length of the room, at least twenty feet from door to rear wall, piles of books form an unbroken rectilinear landscape, its thousand-volume contours recalling terraced hillsides or the striations of exposed rock. Along the farthest, shortest wall, right at the back where the shop narrows like the neck of a bottle, is a single bookcase. Above the shelves is a sign, reading simply C A Copyn. I point at it. “You have a lot of Copyn. I didn’t know he wrote more than *Empire Day*.”

“Oh, not a great deal, an essay or two I believe, but not a word after he left for England. In fact, these are all *Empire Day*. I even have some first editions, printed in London, hard cover, beautiful binding. Fifty years old and still very good quality, a little worn perhaps, but what isn’t after half a century?”

“No no,” I say. “I couldn’t possibly afford that.”

“I’ve yet to tell you the price.”

“I doubt my knowing the price would help.”

“You’ve come to his home, this is his land—”

“Oh I know, I know.” I tapped my finger on one of the thickest textbooks, a compendium of literary theory, four editors credited on the cover. “Do you supply books for the university?”

“Yes, from time to time. There are cheaper bookshops in other towns, but if a student prefers an older edition or perhaps more specialist knowledge, perhaps he will find what he is looking for here.”

I have, without realising, stopped beneath the ceiling fan and despite its plodding rotation its downdraft provides a momentary quenching.

The bookseller must notice my relief as he asks, “How are you finding the heat, sir?”

“It’s not quite like the hot summer back home,” and I search for the quotation, “‘where all the green is upheld by sound’.”

He smiles. “We have our own greenery, but not here, not here.” Looking past me, to the front door, he raises a finger and points to the ceiling. “Would you care to follow me?”

“There are more books?”

—PG: Do you read a lot of poetry?

—EA: Nah, not really. I mean, after school, no one really reads poetry much, do they? It’s a shame really, but I think with all the other stuff going on in people’s lives, you know, work and— there’s so many things people do in their leisure time, I think poetry probably is too much trouble when all you want to do is relax. But I mean school is a really good place to read it.

—PG: Would you say that your songs are a kind of poetry?

—EA: Oh God, I don’t know. It’s different, though, isn’t it? But yeah, it’s interesting how they are similar, sometimes very similar. There’s more money in music, I suppose. I guess I picked the right side.

He leads me to the rear wall where, quite invisible from the front of the shop, a curtained alcove reveals a steep dark staircase. Smells of spices, of oils, smells of the larder, waft around in this unventilated space and I am suddenly hungry, suddenly extremely thirsty. He mounts the tiny wooden steps and climbs quickly despite his age, despite his long coat, and I am holding the spindly handrail and judging my steps and I am watching the tiny brass screws that support everything rattle in their untight holes. The steps creak under my weight, they are silent under his. Just before my eyes top the stairwell I wonder if perhaps I have wandered into this situation ill-prepared for trouble, whether my name will feature in tomorrow’s casualty list. There’s a twist in my gut and I am thinking of my boot knife in its sheath beneath my trousers.

We come up into a narrow room, sunlight comes through a window at the end, illuminates a central table. He signals for me to approach and I do, his fluttering hands indicating a collection of chapbooks and pamphlets stapled together. Most of them are in a language I don’t know, long words with consonants in unfamiliar combinations, peculiar patterns of vowels and punctuation, but one or two are in English. “Who’s Bold Ombarrago?” I ask, picking up one of the pamphlets. My fingertip plays on the sharp ends of the staples as I read the title, “*A Call for Courage.*”

“A local poet.”

“I see that.”

“He’s very popular.”

“Is he a nationalist?”

“Does that make a difference?”

I flick through the pages, thirty or so, typewritten on an old machine with an old ribbon. “Not to the quality.”

“Sir, if we were you and you were us, would any of this be different?”

I laugh, smile at him. “I defer to your experience. I don’t think you’re necessarily wrong—”

“Two shillings for this one. Three for the chapbook.”

“Well. It’s in English?”

“Of course.”

“Well,” I say again and rap the papers against my hand. “It looks good. But just this one, and only a shilling.”

“That seems fair.”

“Thanks. I’d better go, now, my friend is probably growing impatient.”

“Fine, fine,” he says. I hand him the single shilling and roll the pamphlet into a cylinder. He gives a little bow and I give a little nod in return. “You return to your fortress with its walls and guns, and we return to our ‘fastness of words and memories’.”

“Exactly,” I say, recognising the quotation.

—PG: Has success changed who Elsie Anders is?

—EA: Fame? Oh definitely. Well, changed? But, you know, my dad was kind of famous so it’s always been factor in my life, I suppose. I wasn’t suddenly famous, if you like. So not changed, but it determined some things.

—PG: Do you regret that? Would you rather have had a normal life? Would it have been easier?

—EA: A normal life? What is that? I don’t know. You know, sometimes none of it seems real. Me, I mean, I don’t know, maybe I have too much time on my hands, sometimes it feels like everyone’s in on this big inside joke, about me, and you’re always worried that at some point the end’s going to come, you know, the illusion’s going to break and everyone will see you’re, you know, just Cinderella, naked without her gown. I don’t know. I’m lucky, I

can't deny it, but we've all got to do some suffering, and sometimes the suffering's the sort that even money and fame can't ease. Then it's only you and you take your knocks and you try to survive it.

26.

“When we’re older,” you had said, back then, “I suppose we’ll miss all this.” Do you remember? That future you had imagined: I don’t suppose you meant yet, though we’re older, that’s true. This contemporary after-something was still another scene in the same act. Six months or a year or two years of a timid life was too soon- we were still those people thinking forwards.

Then. When the day had washed out into a deep orange light to the west and when it seemed thus a memory just on the verge of recollection, but fading every moment, then. When the seagulls circled and when, with their clamorous screeching as if from panic, they came down upon the land, at first in ones or twos, but then in great numbers, to peck the ragged turf and gather white wings on the green like hawthorn blossom. When the now-deserted sky could still be called blue, at half past four, albeit a blue January-dark and tending to brown, like paints unintentionally mixed, then. And when I blew cigarette smoke up into it. When I was sitting on the concrete step of Mum’s caravan, I watched the twilight approaching, saw the clouds above the North Sea flattening into depthless grey. The smell of burning somewhere, a chimney sending up wood smoke, and diesel from the road. The air was cold and wet, with a bit of the sea and a hint, perhaps, of snow. I had left my notebook at the flat and I knew these thoughts and images would soon be lost, like sudden sounds, muddles in the air, once and gone, unrecorded.

“Life will be a war,” you once had said, half-cut and trying to hide it, and I had written it down in my notebook, stolen it I supposed, without attestation or quotation marks, “against parts of us we won’t acknowledge as self,” but I remembered it was you who had said it. Do you remember? I may have used it in an essay, or in a short piece of prose, and that was both theft from you and a gift to you, or so I told myself at the time, and again and again.

When I woke this morning, this Friday. When I could have spent the day until noon at the table, cutting jobs ads from the paper. Or when I could have gone into town and watched Elsie’s latest picture at the State, for the second time, which was fine apart from the musical episodes. When I reached the station, I could have got sucked down to London with a friend from school, if any friend still cared, could have window-shopped until the clubs opened, if any friend were there to ask, but could not have gone with Darren because

Darren was at work. When I could have gone for a run down to the docks and back, could have ignored the looks and whistles or the swearing from passing cars, could have run until my body started to feel like a body again, when the mind dies. When I could have gone round the old house and sat on the wall and remembered our lives when we lived there. I could have done it differently. I could have chosen differently, but today I took the train up-county and went to Mum's new home.

Perhaps you said it then, perhaps that evening. We were sitting on the steps in the Square after the poetry reading. All that concrete was twilight blue, as far as I recall, and in the lowest windows of the English department, and in the chaplaincy, and in the cafe, and in the student union pub all the lights were on and orange. The lamps around the Square were the last to appear, bulbs blinking into red. It was night but it was warm, it was spring or possibly the last warm day of autumn, especially warm in the Square, as the concrete would capture the long day's heat and only reluctantly relinquish it. The clouds were plump with rain that hadn't fallen yet. You sat beside me, do you remember? Students passed us, up and down the steps, heading to drinks, or dorms, or to the lecture theatre block to watch the evening's film. How much of this is make believe? It feels remotely real. The blue was probably less blue, more the muddy red of sunset light, but the air was hot, yes, and felt gritty in the lungs and smelt of burgers cooking and cigarette smoke and diesel fumes from the buses over the way. That feels more real.

When the train bound for Colchester left the platform at Liverpool Street, I was sitting at the rear of the carriage, behind me only the wall. A minute later we had passed the point where the switching rails overlapped like lines on the palm, and a minute after that we had passed the point where walls black from centuries of city smoke gave way to wire fences and hoardings and then sunlight and open space and tower blocks like stricken ships, turned end up before the final plunge. And we hurried away from London. The train tucked neatly into the curves of towns and countryside, tracing the crooks of knees, napes of necks, the hump of the spine. I looked through my small portion of window, looked down into back gardens, into the loading bays of supermarkets, into petrol station forecourts. Miniature lives, forbidden places, into which I could not pass.

You waited while I finished my fag, it was tobacco- no, nothing else, and then, at dusk, when the blue had become black, we went on into the student union pub. It was busy, as always, and loud with club chants or the music. I remember pushing through crowds of

students, we found a free table at the back, in a corner, under the big television. I don't remember what was showing, possibly sport, possibly nothing. It was so dark outside, so light within, that the windows were mirrors, even sitting with my face against the glass, all I could see was reflection. My hair was longer then, I remember. It made me look studious, as I imagined poets looked. Chloe was there and Alice and the bloke with the glasses. Ben or Peter, something beginning with a B or a P, you and him started talking about poetry or something, I can't remember, but I knew I didn't want to be a part of it. We got the beers in and how long do things stay with you? Funny how long things stay with you. Is there a spell to let them go? Alice brought up the coursework, I think, asking how everyone was doing, so close to the deadline. And she was the brightest of us, I think we all agreed. She was writing a novel, I remember, we read a bit for the workshop. Something about her dad and greyhounds, autobiography and also fiction, like everyone's first novel. That was back when you were writing a novel, too, remember?

Predictable, the patterns of train seating. On the journey up, they came and went with each station on the line and they sat where others had sat and they stared out of those same windows at the similar sunlit countryside passing in its timetabled stop-start fashion. By the time we reached Chelmsford I fancied I could, within a second or two of seeing them, decide each passenger's eventual place in the carriage; one of those powers gifted to a wandering mind by the fatigue that comes from sitting idly, I guessed. The accuracy, although not perfect, suggested more than luck. How a certain type of man would rather sit away from others and how a certain type of woman, when presented with a choice, would rather not sit beside a man. How one sort would favour the window seat, another the aisle. A seat near the doors, a seat facing forwards, a seat facing backwards, owing something to symmetry or efficiency or a perception of space in the luggage rack.

At Witham, a pair of teenage girls in bright and patterned dresses had climbed aboard our carriage, jewellery golden at their necks and ears. I watched them approach along the aisle and guessed they would sit in the empty seats in front of me. And so they did. I could see their artfully waved and sparkling hair through the space between the headrests. They talked and talked about dancing with their boyfriends at the Co-Op Hall, and about how they had assured their respective parents they would be home early, "by eight at the latest", and about how their parents had believed them. I listened to them and I imagined the sex they would likely have and I watched the window blaze with all the green

light of Essex beyond.

You were worried you wouldn't finish your work on time. You should write poetry, I said, that's quicker. You said you weren't a poet. I said, butcher your novel. Novel, pop songs, Bible, whatever. Put some line breaks in it, I said, chop it up and call it poetry. You said you thought there's more to it than that, and I said, yes, of course there is. You were drunk, do you remember? I'd never seen you drunk before. You should have been drunk more often, you would have been less guarded and less of a twat. You talked a lot but I don't remember anything you said, except you said your life was boring and what did you have to write about? I said, we have Essex, you said, not very glamorous is it? Life is rarely glamorous, I said, other people's lives are, you said. Life's not a competition, I said, against other people. Life will be a war, you said, against parts of us we won't acknowledge as self. I remember some of this, not the moment, but some of the words because I wrote them down and used them in poems. Your words in my poems, as far as I could recall them, and I made you sound wiser sometimes, and vain, possibly, and sometimes I made you sound poetic, in places. But sometimes, most of the time, they were your words, and I just wrote them down.

Coming out of the fields and meadows, I spied the landmarks of Colchester on the horizon, the water tower, the town hall, buildings on the hill. The conductor announced the connections, the train began to slow. The girls in front of me leapt up eagerly, they rushed to the doors and, before I'd even stood, watched them jump down to the platform. "Oh God, it's fucking freezing!" I heard one scream. When I stepped out of the carriage, I realised that, yes, the day had grown colder, out of the sun, and the descent into the tile-lined tunnel beneath the tracks had about it something of the cave and something of the hospital. On platform 5, I waited for the train to Walton. Colchester. I wondered why it had some significance, then realised that somewhere out there, in the town, was Martin Welles and places he went and places he knew. And I thought, how long has it been since I thought of you? And I couldn't answer, because I didn't know.

At Thorrington or Bentley a lad had come aboard and sat across the aisle from me. He was on the phone and angry with his girlfriend, I imagined, or mother. No, fuckin'ell, he wouldn't be back soon, he was already going out, oh fuck off, it could well be his last chance, he could be dead in a fortnight. He wore a uniform, with a beret smartly on his head, his hair shorn to shadow on his neck in a way that made his ears look too big. His face

against the phone was narrow and all his features seemed shifted forwards as if vised. Have you been there? I wanted to ask him. Have you been to the place we'll all eventually go? He closed the phone, bitch, and swore, fucking bitch, and acknowledged my glance with an accusatory, "Y'right?" I turned away and looked out of the window for the rest of the journey.

You never asked, I never said, how much of me was in my poetry, how much it hurt to get it out. You broke sentences like snapping beans and you called it poetry and they called it poetry. You snapped them, you tossed them in the pot, you boiled the fuck out of them and you called it dinner. They ate it. You got your reward. Writing's a talent and a craft, they said. We drank, that night, we drank. Shots were called in, no sooner brought than drunk. It was the pattern of those evenings, at least for me, obviously not for you, those evenings at uni. You needed the loo, you asked where it was because you didn't know the place, and you came back and you said it was time you head to bed. I don't remember what was said between then and the next memory. We were walking down the Drive, all those similar nights cleave together but some elements seem related to you, to that single night. You held my hand, my right hand, as we walked. I don't think I minded but I don't think it was romantic. I don't think so. Was that the only time we ever touched? Was there any touch before? I remember my left hand was brushing against the twigs and leaves of the hedge beside the pavement. I needed to throw up, as I recall, but I was trying to hold it in until we reached my room. Why were we going there? The next thing I remember we were in the stairwell, climbing to the second floor, and you tripped and scraped your shin on one of the concrete steps. You swore and it sounded so loud in that small space. Why did you walk me home? Do you remember what we had planned to do? After that I can't separate what of that night was memory, what was imagination and what was hope.

I only had vague directions to the caravan park. Leave the station, keep right and the pier will be in front of you. Turn left and follow the seafront north. Walk along the seawall, down the Parade, down the Esplanade. When you see the minigolf and the children's play area on your left, you'll notice the caravans beyond. It was a school day in the off-season and the few people at the pier seemed cold and hurried as if they worked there. There were large bright signs for fruit machines, dodgems, a waltzer, but through the doors I could see no lights. An ice-cream shop by the entrance was locked-up. The wind came up the slopes from the beach, blew around me, tested all the zips and fasteners of my clothes, then off it

went into the town. I lit a cigarette.

Walking along the Parade, I looked over the seawall at the grey sea. Gulls in large number came screeching over. The tide was receding and the foreshore, between its slick green groynes, was dark and smoothed, like a skin upon which crept the dogs and beachcombers and wanderers of the winter seaside. Far away, a ship, impossible, exposed, seemed balanced on the edge of the rounded horizon. Shops offering rock and candy floss and floats and buckets and inflatables, all were shuttered, closed for the season. A man in a parka stood against the wall taking photographs with a long lens, not looking at the pier, not looking at the distant ship, what was out there on the water that he could see at such a range? He paid me no attention as I passed him. An old couple with big coats sat together on a bench in the seaside shelter. They faced away from the sea, towards the road, just silently sat there. The old man held a walking stick, the old woman held the handle of her shopping trolley, and they watched the sparse traffic. A young man in a hat and long coat came up to me as I knew he would as soon as I saw him, and he kept calling me darling and he asked if I had a light for his fag. I proffered my lighter and he accepted the flame and then he asked me if I was from around here and I said no and then he asked if I was enjoying the seaside and I said yes, thanks, but I have to go now. As I turned away he asked if I wanted to get a drink in the pub yonder and I replied cheers but no and kept on walking. The street did indeed continue along the seafront for some way, the beach one side, closed-up attractions and pubs on the other, and perhaps it switched its name, and from occasionally the number of people would surge, perhaps around a bus stop or a cafe, but for the majority of the time it was a lonely walk, provoking nothing more than introspection.

I remember opening my eyes and seeing your face. You must have been sitting on the floor, your head resting on my bed. Asleep, your lips apart. I quickly closed my eyes and pretended I had never opened them. My heart was beating, so uncontrollably I thought it would shake the bed and wake you. I tried to slow my breathing to ape a sleeper and thought at times that it might slow to a stop and how then would I start it again? No mother now, to birth me, no mother here. I remember the panic of the blackout and the fumbling for a narrative. What had happened at the bar? How had we got back to my room? What had happened here? A lot of it was missing then, there, and didn't return until later. When had I removed my shoes? Why was my skirt beside me on the bed? I had never been as scared about waking up next to somebody as that moment. I was still pretending to sleep

when the cleaner came. She said something and I heard you swear and you ran away, I didn't know why. Of all of them, those morning faces of men, I regret none more than yours. I never mentioned it, you never mentioned it; you asked me how I was, the next time we met. I said, I think I said, fine. Odds, I told myself, were that we had not had sex. You didn't know, and you never would, how ashamed I was, that following day. We never talked about it, we denied it a space, we made it disappear, and I only recalled it every other morning for the next year. Would it have been so bad? Why did it seem so bad? Of all the boys, of all the men, those while sober, those while drunk, you wouldn't have been the worst. But odds were that we had not had sex and odds were you remembered as little as me. Did you?

When I reached a place where the town opened up like a cracked nut, a wide green area with ill-kept grass, I had to stop and lean against the concrete wall. Across the way, beyond the expected minigolf plot and the children's playground, I could see the white tops of caravans and chalets. A gull perched upon a lamppost nearby, dark against the sky, and big-beaked shrieked its meh meh meh alarm. I watched the kids in the play area, the mums and dads sitting on the benches or standing, arms stretched, beneath the climbing frame. And in searching for thoughts to preoccupy me I thought of Darren. We'd slept together last night. I was sure there was a reason. Perhaps it was that Darren had come back from town, pissed, at 1 or 2 in the morning, and I'd been sitting on the settee, drinking tinnies he'd put in the fridge, watching the news. Perhaps it was because he was angry and swearing, because a girl had led him to believe they'd fuck, but it had come out, as she was giving him a blowie, that she'd had a boyfriend or something. Because he swore at her, she swore at him; because her friends swore at him, his friends told him to leave it. Because, from how he told it, he deemed himself a hero for not forcing her to continue. I supposed those were reasons. Because the only light came from the TV? Because at some point the baby next door started to cry? Perhaps because we smoked and drank a little and because he, sitting beside me on the settee, had put his hand on the inside of my leg and leaned in, we had gone from there. Perhaps I had said something reassuring to him. I woke when his alarm went off, an immelodious percussion of electronic sound, and, when he had gone to the bathroom to prepare for the day, I'd slipped out of his bed and back to my room. I'd locked the door behind me. Not being his girlfriend felt a lot like being his girlfriend.

Then. I found Mum's caravan easily. She had left the message saying as long as I kept to the left along the park's roads, I couldn't miss it. One road led to another past a hundred

caravans of similar appearance, secured to the land in rows like ritual stones, some with flowerbeds about them, some with little fences and patios. Many seemed unoccupied for, I assumed, the owners only lived there during the warmer months. The doubt began then. At each junction I took a left, as the park sprawled out, in my mind, like a tree, until I was in a cul-de-sac at the very end of the smallest branch of the crown. It was the central one, she had hinted, nestled between two quite similar looking homes. I climbed the step, took a breath, and knocked.

I didn't think about you every day. Only when I thought of poetry, which was thankfully less and less.

The evening seemed to welcome all things into it, all the things I could see and all the miles of Essex beyond. My watch said it was five when I stood up from the step. It was the pressure of all the day that made me turn towards the caravan and not walk away. The pressure of sixty miles and three hours of travelling and six hours of worrying and the girls in their dresses and the boy in his uniform, the beach, the ship, the old couple in their peace, the man who called me darling darling, and little kids climbing above their parents, and then Darren, Darren Darren Darren. I hammered on the door, shook the single-glazed glass in its white plastic frame, the aluminium siding scraping and squeaking against its holdings. And my fist might have broken the lock or shattered the glass if the pounding were sustained, if I'd the will, if some unchamfered edge or loosened screw had not caught the skin of the heel of my hand and torn an inch of blood and a string of swear words.

I kicked the door with the toe of my shoe, left an indentation.

"Fuck it. Fuck you." I stepped down and away from the caravan. The long return journey back down the Essex spine. Walking, sitting, waiting for bus and train. After night-time traffic, commuters and the cold; Darren in the flat at the end. I reached for the fag packet in my jeans.

"A'right, love?"

A man stood in the doorway of the neighbouring caravan. He wore striped pyjama trousers, slippers, a dark dressing gown open at the front with its cords hanging down as if he himself were unravelling. With one hand he smoothed the wispy grey hair on his head, with the other he pointed a rolled-up newspaper in my direction.

"Evening."

At that, another figure appeared, a woman, perhaps his wife. She was smoking a

cigarette. She took it from her mouth and called, "Who you after, love?"

I gestured towards Mum's caravan. "Er, Tracey Garrett. She lives here—"

"Sorry, didn't catch it, love, who's that?"

"It's Tracey, you deaf bugger, next door's Tracey. She hasn't been around for a while now, sorry, love."

"How long? How long would you say?"

"Oh, I don't know. What would it be? God. A couple of weeks, a month maybe."

"Did she say where she was going? Did she leave a note?"

"No, love, do you know her?"

"She's my mum."

"Oh! Well. I'm sorry, love, she didn't say. But she did have us take her post. Go on, you, get those letters and things for her."

"No, no."

"No, no! No bother! You're her girl, might be something important in there. Didn't seem right looking through them ourselves, you know."

The husband came back to the door and stepped down to the grass. He came over and handed me a collection of letters and catalogues held in a rubber band. "Here you go, love."

"Ta."

"She's probably gone away for the winter, you know. I'm sure she'll be back in the summer."

"Yeah," I said. "You're probably right."

The walk back through the town was cold and damp. The lamps were on behind net curtains. An amusement arcade I had thought was closed for the winter was now lit up, with trilling and plinking machines, and kids hanging around, chatting, smoking. Pub doors were opened, drinkers moving to the chairs and tables outside. Somebody was lying on the bench in the shelter. I walked past and heard the person stir, say something quiet and pointed, but couldn't work out the words. Buses went along the street, engines loud and fumes circling me, and I looked at the people sitting there, in the light, at their faces, in their own world. And the whole length of the walk, the snoring and unseen sea somewhere beside me, always there, and I could hear it when the rest of the world was, infrequently, quiet.

I called Darren from the phone at the station. There was a ringing unanswered in the

empty flat. I let it ring and ring. Would he have a girl at the flat tonight or would he expect me to be present for him? The time had finally bent me. Quietly swearing, I replaced the receiver in its cradle and retrieved my change from the slot. I would spend it on cigarettes or a cup of tea on the train. I had no friends to call.

I sat on a bench on the platform and waited for the train to Colchester. I placed the letters and catalogues on my lap and looked through them. Bills in brown envelopes, a magazine about adult education, a politician's monthly newsletter, and three letters. One had our old house on it and it was crossed out, with 'not known at this address' and the new Walton address written beside it. And it was my name on the envelope, not Mum's. I tore it open with my finger.

27.

—You're close to the end now. Well done for remaining such a spirited group. Many of the exams seem to have gone pretty well- let's hope that the results will reflect that.

"Are we here? Are we here, do you think?"

The headmaster said, Hymn number one, Mr Gould, Glorious things of thee are spoken, if you please. Now, let us sing well, school, and boldly.

I open my eyes, and all the world struggles to recreate itself and the missing time. There is no memory of dreams, no memory of closing my eyes, but my bumped side, my numb thigh, these remember every movement of the man sitting next to me, his side, his thigh against mine, all the words he had said, every swaying of the plane as it stumbled through the sky. Perhaps it had not been sleep, but a dropping from consciousness—not a deep dive, much more a floating, buoyed up by the too-rigid seat, too-loud compartment, too much turbulence, coffee. A hanging—the plane a limbo, a suspension between home and destination, up and down. My head a weight, my neck so weak now. I lean forward, forehead meeting stowed tray table, softly, a kiss.

"You all right?"

"Yeah, fine." My head is persuaded to displace itself to the right, to the window. So much sun. Cement rising to meet us. Crashing? A slow, generous crashing—more an agreement, a rendezvous. Is this the slow-motion of death, the flash of life-before-the-eyes? No, nothing fatal in this. Just a landing, just the sudden shifting in the crosswind, the jolt of the rear wheels, the jolt of the front wheel, the shudder of friction, just a landing. Am I still there, just above blacking out, imagining as much as, if not more than, perceiving?

—I'm glad to see you have engaged with the text, Martin. However, your language needs clarity- clarity in writing, clarity in thought. I sometimes find it hard to follow your train of thought and I think your argument gets lost in its own complications. Perhaps if you consciously return to your original point, you might have more success.

"Welcome to the other side of the world," calls a disembodied voice. The pilot? Had that same voice called out "Welcome aboard" so many hours ago? Such a weak voice, tinny and minuscule through speakers, faraway like a message from another country, as if down a telephone—back where we took off, been flying us by remote control, back in England, back in Stansted. "It's been a pleasure—" Trust he's really here, really flying the plane, really in

control. But such a fake voice, synthesised, distorted through wires. “Wish you all the best—” Trust he cares that this is the other side of the world, trust he cares how we feel.

But despite him, a cheer rises from the passengers, relief. The recycled air has vinegared during its eight-hour stirring, and it drips now, yellow, from the vents above our heads. And they reach up beseeching hands, through the plastic’s acidic sweat, to flick numb fingers at unresponsive dials. The falling drops of condensation stain my trousers, the condensed breath and coughs and words. Songs of women, football chants, and the national anthem. Sneezes, laughter, swearing. I touch the wet, darker spots on the camouflage, feel a tingle in my fingertip like an allergy. This English air.

—Again I feel that you were not on best form. You allowed some of your thinking and phrasing to be woolly, you imagined circumstances that distorted your interpretation, and you blundered (last page) over which characters were being talked about. There are good points too, but I wish there were more.

“Here at last,” says the man beside me. “Here at fucking last.” He stretches and bumps my arm, doesn't apologise, perhaps doesn't even realise he did it. The pilot is saying something over the speakers but I can't hear it over the noise, perhaps something about remaining seated until the seatbelt light is extinguished. The man stands, but the sensation of his leg against mine remains. There is a gap in the aisle amongst the standing men and I slip into it, tight behind my erstwhile seating partner, and we wait for the door to open. He turns to me and smiles. “Just a few more minutes and we’ll be free,” he says. “I don’t know about you but I haven’t been able to relax for days.”

He tells me, with unadorned frankness, he looks into my eyes and he tells me about his last night in his own bed, and how he was getting comfortable with his girlfriend, and it was all going smoothly until that point when his left hand was on the back of her neck and his right hand was inside her blouse and her fingers were between his skin and the waist of his jeans. Nothing was working down there, he tells me. “What do you think that means?”

“I don't know. You were distracted?”

“I'd say. That's what I told her. Well, I say that, but I don't think I said anything much. She didn't say anything, I remember that. Not till later. She seemed to think that was the reason. I think it was generally agreed that was the reason.”

—A floundering essay. I wonder what went wrong. Firstly, it is written unusually carelessly for you, both as regards grammar and precision. Secondly, you make virtually no

use of the text at all. You cannot make out a satisfactory case about a play with only two quotations.

He tells me of various previous instances of his failure to penetrate. Too drunk, too tired, interruptions by friends or relatives or her pet cat. I nod and pretend to sympathise. His body is bumped from the other side and he bumps into me and I, in turn, bump against the man standing behind me. A line of apology flutters from mouth to mouth and ends, rudely, somewhere towards the rear of the plane. It is like the shushing of the wind before a sudden outburst of rain, as a moment later the door opens and sunlight enters the cabin and another wave of sound passes through this bodily medium, of gasps and whoops of quiet cheer. We begin to shuffle forwards.

Leavers' day, that last half-day of grammar school when we had not been required to attend assembly but when those of us who had not skipped the day had gone obediently to the hall, whether through a sense of obligation or by Mr Buckham's urging. We stood at the rear, where the Sixth Form stood, and most of those there mimed the hymns and talked amongst themselves in whispers and tried to avoid the disapproving gaze of Mr Buckham. And I was looking around the hall, at the panelled walls, the herringbone planks under my feet, the school banners and house gonfalons, the centuries-old portraits of past headmasters. At the dark wood vaulted ceiling, its joists, the mezzanine and its trefoil parapet, the roll of honour high on the wall with its *He Leaves a White Unbroken Glory* and its carving of a downcast soldier and its names and names in gold. At the organ in the far corner, the serried ranks of golden pipes, and Mr Gould the music teacher working the stops and pedals. Looking at the girls in the Lower Sixth, wondering what have we missed by one year? Their long hair in the sunlight, their legs beneath their skirts.

The headmaster stood up, adjusted his gown, and said, Today, before we break for the summer, I should like to say goodbye to our boys in the Upper Sixth, whose leaving marks the school's last year of all boys. Thank you for presenting yourselves so patiently this morning. The whole world is outside those doors, put off just a few hours by the old routine. Think of us fondly, when you're gone, and look back on your time here with rosy affection. Education makes you wealthy, gentlemen. It is your knowledge that makes you kings, and your kingdom is all of the world and all experience in it. It is all available to you. My boys, you can be assured that if your lives last only a few years more, by the Grace of a mighty God, you have been made full of heart and steady of soul and open to all new knowledge.

The men who have passed through these ancient buildings have worn the purple and spoken those imperishable words, to which we still hold, Vitae Corona Fides. Spend your days in service and spend them widely, for you are rich, boys.

—A strong essay, though the first page promised even more. Some drift on page 2. Not completely successful in finding new ideas.

“Why can’t people just say things outright?” the man is saying as we reach the open door. “Why don’t people just talk plainly?”

The men file out of the plane and down a mobile staircase to the ground. A bare airfield surrounds us, rough concrete runway and apron, an assortment of squat concrete buildings in the near distance. A wire fence rings the far perimeter and beyond the fence miles and miles of red dirt and sun-bleached tussocks fading at the limit of eyesight in a heat haze. Each man stops for a moment on the top step, as if pausing to be anointed by the foreign sun; each lights a cigarette and nods with a fixed face and a lack of fear. Then each steps down, each first footfall an ill-judged too-heavy clatter of boot on metal. Drops of sweat perk up on skin, every metal edge becomes a filament. The sun fascinates all things, even the shadows are interested. It is the natural draw of light, to lift up everything, and pull every lifted thing at least a fraction towards it. The eye can barely look at it; it raises hands to brows, this unobstructed light.

He takes a deep breath through his nose. “Smell that, like a workshop. All that wood. Ready to burst into flame.”

“Let’s hope not,” I say.

“What are we stepping into?” he asks and begins to descend.

I take my place on the top step.

The few of us who had studied Classics assembled outside Gurney Benham House. Boys from the lower school were in lessons in the ground floor classrooms and we could see them through the windows, heads down at their desks, elbows spread, writing on lined paper as the teacher spoke. When the time came, we went upstairs and stacked our books upon the desk. The boys arrived with books and departed without, their Virgil, their Aristophanes, textbooks on sculpture and ancient Greek, all left behind. In classrooms, behind closed doors, we heard boys reciting Latin conjugation and the teacher who corrected them.

—Excellent, Martin- a fluent, coherent and freshly personal piece of writing. You

have ably addressed all parts of the question. Well done!

“Lieutenant Mike Shaw,” he tells the corporal from company headquarters who walks down the line of men with a clipboard in his hand, asking each their name and number and marking each off against a list.

I am next and I tell him my details.

“Oh,” says Shaw, turning around, “you’re that Welles.”

I give a sort of smile. “Which Welles?”

“The poet? Big fuss in the paper. There was a bit on the radio about you, I listened to it the other day.”

“Yes, I suppose I’m that Welles.”

“Sorry, sir, which Welles? Who?” asks the corporal.

“The poet,” Shaw says.

The corporal shrugs. “Sorry, sir.”

He sneezes a handful of snot into his palm. I feel a spray on my face. Two tears of phlegm hang from his nose. He wipes his hand on his shorts, his face into the crotch of his elbow with a muffled, “Fuck this shit.” He looks up at me, red cheeks a place between anger and embarrassment. “A cold in this place, sir, what are the fucking chances?” I hand him a napkin I took from the plane, and he looks at it and at me as if no one has ever done him a favour before, except his mother when he was young. “Cheers, sir.”

I ask him, “Did we bring that?”

“Bring what?”

“The germs.”

“No, it’s been going around. It’s always going around.”

“I should keep away from him,” Shaw says, jovially. “Wouldn’t want to catch something as soon as you arrive. Could be laid up for weeks.”

“Next please,” says the corporal.

We waited outside Elianore House for the music lessons to be finished. Swifts were darting overhead, screeching, in the sky between eave and tree. Muffled behind windows, as if far away, brass instruments played in awkward arrangements. The horns sounded uncertain at first, a single phrase over and over, for in repetition they were reaching for something. Then there came a pause, a thought, and then that familiar phrase rose again and continued and there was a delighted voice, a discovery, and the music changed to joy.

We waited by the wall outside the house, waited to return our history books. Peter sat on the wall, knocking his heels against the crumbling brickwork, knocking against names scratched in the bricks, initials and dates from forty, fifty, sixty years ago. Always garrulous, flushed with the self-confidence wealth or family usually inspires, he talked at length and fluently, and he left not one boy in any doubt that heaven would be a grammar school and all our stationeries resupplied. I was touching that same wall, and listening, and wondering what muscle anticipates the feeling of fingertips in brick and which cone in the eye reforms the flight of swifts against a bright August sky. Is it, now, some misconception of magic or mathematics, or somebody's indetermination that marries cause to effect, ineffectually; yet it cannot be denied that one thing leads to another, somehow, somehow.

Do schoolboys know they'll die? If they knew their end would come, sometime beyond their last exam, would they cherish that hour and the tedium of writing? The cramping fingers, the bouncing knee, the fear of failure tempered by that much ignored and much resented fire that learning kindled. It flares and retreats, it can go untended for days, for weeks, years possibly; who has tested its endurance? Who would dare the point of extinction? It will burn blue and wildly, and yet it will also shrink to a small and pale ember barely visible, overshadowed by every brighter part of life, by love and play and anguish and boredom, and all combinations and all things in between. His meandering and ultimately aimless poetic line at times seemed to long for a conclusive halt. Peter didn't wait for a response or affirmation, he had never needed it, he was right or he had made us feel worthy, which was the same thing.

—Very good - a serious and well-sustained discussion.

"You'll have to be patient," the sergeant says. The officers, Shaw and myself, had discovered a spot in the shade of a concrete storage shed and we stood together against the wall. The other ranks had found their own spaces and I can see them all around, amongst the airfield staff, lying on their packs, in the shadows of buildings, sheltering from the sun. The sergeant apologises for the wait, the old battalion were scheduled to have left already but they didn't have the planes. They needed ours. "The old battalion are coming down from Castle in the lorries. They're leaving and you're arriving. Switching places."

"Castle?"

"It's what they're calling the base, sir."

"Thank you, sergeant," Shaw says.

The sergeant checks his watch. "They shouldn't be long, sir."

He has barely said it, his arm barely back to his side, before Shaw says "Look" and points towards the town. A column of Bedford lorries comes down out of the town, five vehicles in a cloud of dust, and within a minute we can hear the sound of their engines. The lorries are waved through the airfield's checkpoint and draw up nearby, parking side by side on the apron. As the engines are switched off, we hear orders shouted and see men emerge from the canvas, their boots slapping the ground. From the cab of the nearest lorry descends an officer. He wears a cap slightly askew, with the peak high on his head, and a dark moustache from cheek to cheek. After exchanging words with the man in the driver's seat, he jogs over to where we are standing, as we quickly come to attention.

I salute the captain but he waves it away. "Now, don't bother with that, chum, it's a different world here. There's not really time nor inclination for that sort of thing," he says, holding out his hand. I shake it. "Brammer. Where are you lot from?"

"Essex, sir."

"Oh, bad luck," he says.

A lieutenant who has, until now, been in conversation with a pair of NCOs, approaches us. "Sir," he says to the captain, "the men are ready to board."

"All right, tell them to carry on."

"Very good, sir."

We are soon caught in an assembly of men, their men, our men, mingling. Orders are shouted, paces are picked up, a relay shifting equipment from truck to plane, plane to truck, a machine of arms and legs and the hearts pumping and the lungs gasping in the too hot air. The lieutenant returns after a minute, interrupts the pleasantries Shaw and I share with the captain, reports that every man has been put to work, the operation should take no more than half an hour. The captain seems pleased and suggests the lieutenant spend a moment in the shade with us.

—Not a very satisfactory approach to the question. Your adoption of a highfalutin style took you away from the text into claims that sounded profound but went entirely unsubstantiated. Your answer lacks a textual approach. You seem to be developing some new ideas on the text, but you need to push them through to fruition before the exam comes along.

"I was just telling these gentlemen," the captain says, "that, in my opinion, they've

come in at the end of things. The camps have been shut down. At its height, you know, there were twenty thousand rebels there, in camps across the country. They're mostly in prisons now, like the Chalet, that's the biggest. Oh, the Governor's changed the name now. Do you remember?" he asks the subaltern.

"Bullwood."

"Yes, right, that's it. Changing the bloody name. What rubbish. Complication or deception? It makes you wonder."

"Governor's a right one."

"Eh, you're not wrong. Well, Chalet, Bullwood, even then, it's not like it was before. Four thousand detainees we had there, at the beginning. Can you believe that? We had an enclosure on the rear, walled it up, fenced it in, prefabs and wire. The smell, you can imagine. They rehabilitated a lot of the rebels, though, or moved them on."

"Or strung them up," the other adds.

"Hmm."

"It sounds like a delicate situation," Shaw says.

The lieutenant smiles. "Do you have your rules of engagement card?"

"Yes, I—"

"Then entre nous I'd tear it up."

Shaw laughs uneasily. "I don't think they'd like that at home."

"Well, if those at home could see what we've seen."

I scratch my cheek. "Is it bad?"

"Oh, you'll see some things here." The captain slaps the back of one hand into the palm of the other. "Beheadings, immolation. Quite monstrous. Castration. Mutilations. They have little respect for the integrity of the body, shall we say, alive or dead. In a situation like this, where the rule of law has collapsed for such a large number of people, the measures by which we consider actions good or normal have to shift. Sometimes I believe it's a conscious shift, for survival's sake, and sometimes it's unconscious, these things just happen. Usually one group does something we'd consider a crime and another follows suit, because they perceived an encouraging result. And now it's accepted, to act that way, it's normal. What it comes down to is we don't know what barbarities each group is capable of. Then we have to work all the harder to neutralise these groups and they accuse us of being heavy-handed. One has to determine a course of action based on both what one knows and what one

doesn't know."

"It's bollocks," simplifies the lieutenant.

"Good Lord," Shaw says. He seems to have been only half-listening to the captain. He fans himself with his hand. "This heat."

The captain chuckles. "Did you never go abroad?"

"Not to places as bright as this."

"Well, 'wish you were here', eh?"

"Are you on your way back to England?"

"Ha. I posed that question to my superiors and they said we'll be sent where we're needed, I believe that was the phrase." The captain straightens his shirt, pulling at each side in turn. "No leave, no evacuations. No repatriation. One might conceivably suspect England no longer exists. Well, if it weren't for chaps like you arriving, dropped down this hole to be with us here in the dark. Perhaps we can only descend lower."

The four of us stand in that half-place between the sun and the shade as men and equipment move around us in great sweeping crowds, dozens, dozens of men working together. A breeze, a light breeze, comes behind a curtain of dust and as it cools us, yes, for a second it seems this might all be bearable, but it is gone, gone and is unrepeated, and we are left hotter and blinking grit. We exchange a silent glance that suggests we understand what has, for a second, been shared between us. But the lieutenant seems focused on the progress of the embarkation, Shaw is fanning himself, the captain brushes dirt from his moustache, and my cheek is itching from sun or sand, and perhaps none of us can actually appreciate what the other thinks.

—All rather list-like - thorough, but not probing the theatrical effect of sound in a good production. Ideas of harmony/discord, other-worldliness and dream visions ought to have cropped up in your mind.

"Sir," says the lieutenant, looking at his watch, "that's it."

The captain shakes our hands again. "Right, well, good luck. Give our regards to your man Dixson."

"My man Dixson?"

"Lieutenant Dixson. One of your lot. HQ company, I assumed. Deployed here a couple of months ago, a liaison. Our OC has had him on base security. Gave us lot a chance to get out into the country. But he picked a bad lot for base-defence, local boys who, as it

turned out, had nationalistic sympathies. They pinched uniforms, flags, the base's heavy weapons, rolled them right out the gates in the middle of the night on the back of a Bedford."

The lieutenant laughs. "He got a right bollocking from the Boss. Poor sod will never live it down."

"Good luck to you chaps with that one."

I look at Shaw. He shrugs.

"It's your country now, chum," says the lieutenant.

Just before the lunchtime bell, we went to the English office to return our books. Novels, plays, volumes of poetry, their margins brimming with pencilled annotation, their covers worn and all their corners bumped to softness by months inside the rucksack. By far the hardest handover, to surrender those books and all those things inside them. What glue or static made spine seem to cleave to skin? I saw, on the desk, the piles of similar texts, piles ten to fifteen high, identical besides their superficial flaws, and had to accept with a sting they had not, after all, been only read by me. Old Courage Copyn, who had been busy at his desk before we arrived, was now stood by the door with his cane, watching the boys dispose of their books, thanking each as they departed. When it was my turn to leave, he pointed at the wall and the pages pinned there. On one of the sheets, I knew, was my name. Still it stands, Mr Welles, he said. Long may it last. I said, thank you, sir. Mr Copyn said, Well done on your university place, I think you will enjoy your time there. Thank you for suggesting it, I replied. Well, keep on with your writing, Mr Welles- good luck, perhaps I will see you on results day. Thank you, sir, I said. It all felt, still, so unfinished.

—Good. You've responded strongly to many of the challenges posed by the passage and by the question. More comment on language might have brought an even higher mark.

The ride in the lorries is mercifully short. The heat is excruciating and feels unlike any other discomfort, it eases into the skin, quietly, slowly, does not announce itself until it has invaded, at which point it struggles, thrashes against the flesh from within. The heat is a presence like a hundred bodies, making all else feel like absence, all human congregation feel like loneliness. Shaw seems almost on the verge of fainting as he sits beside me in the cab, his eyelids fluttering. The lorry bounces along the roads through the town. The driver complains, with respect, that it feels as if the previous lads had never done a day's work on the vehicle. He emphasises his point with the screeching clutch. "And the brake pressure's

low,” he says. “It’ll get sorted out,” I tell him. A huge fly buzzes around the space in the cab, slamming itself against the windscreen over and over. It is a straight drive through the town to the other side, and the walls of the Castle, white in the sun and crowned with shining wire, are at first an incongruous sight, but a sight that grows perhaps more credible with each moment, until there can be perhaps nothing more likely, this monument rising out of the dead land, here, beyond the low houses.

“Blimey,” says Shaw, and for him it still seems inconceivable, “look at that, would you.”

The green steel gates are swung wide and a sentry waves our column onwards, salutes Shaw who lazily reciprocates, through the open window. A sergeant directs the lorries to park a few yards inside the base, holding his insistent hands high, stop. Shaw opens his door and jumps down to the ground and I follow him. The sun beats against us as if it’s angry that the world now depends on people. The light so fills and dizzies the senses that sense has no purpose, the world can only be perceived as it relates to the cool internal, allusion or memory or imagination. In the yard, before us, a dozen or so men are standing apart in strange formation, a great human orrery, most of them standing still, as if time has momentarily stopped. So English, this positioning of people, this anticipation, this sharp straight movement of a man towards the centre.

The striking batsman straddles the popping crease, his bat held taut in the backlift, like a trap ready to snap. It is him, I’m sure. The bowler approaches, a fast tumble of limbs, a loose bound at the last, and almost a collapse as the ball launches from him. The batsman, in shorts and vest and dusty shoes, advances down the wicket and fearlessly drives the high-bouncing ball across the yard. It strikes the compound’s far wall halfway up, sends up a spray of dust or grit, a trailing dull report. The fielders applaud the shot and it is in this moment of triumph that the batsman looks up and notices the new arrivals. He calls something to the bowler, slips his bat underneath his arm, and walks jauntily towards us. His face, older but the same. That nose, that chin. Those eyes, I had forgotten the colour, but not the size and the shape and the strong brows above them. His smile.

—This is a first-class essay, its perceptions being both penetrative and precise. They are well-expressed and well-supported by quotation. You were at your best at the start, but even on page 1 there was the use of fine-sounding but unchallenged assertion. This is a feature of your writing when not at its best- not by any means typical of all. You also did

little to make your direction clear. There was, for instance, no reference to the wording of the question, and there was a suspicion of repetition in places. On page 4 you seemed to shift from love to nature, but, for clarity's sake, the jump needed to be made more explicitly. You were good in what you said on language, but treated it pretty cursorily. None of this leads to the conclusion that the work is not 'A' class. The qualities I described at the beginning assure me that it is: they also suggest that your study of the two poets has been first-class. However, the negatives in my comments suggest that the appropriate mark will be in the low 80s.

"Hello," I say. "Fancy seeing you here."

He looks at me. "Hello," he says. He looks at Shaw. "How are you chaps?"

"Very well, thanks. How are things here?"

Dixson laughs and gestures to the waiting fielders. "A little piece of England. They're not a bad eleven. Better," he says, leaning in, lowering his voice, "by far than those chaps just gone. I've given them some instruction, a little encouragement, you know. They're quick learners, these Home Army lads. But I'm sure they're not comparable to these brave Essexmen you come here bringing. I'm Dixson, Paul Dixson." He holds his hand out to Shaw.

Shaw shakes it. "Mike Shaw. Pleased to meet you."

"Likewise," Dixson says, retrieving his hand. He holds it out to me.

—Your writing style is highly promising, but here I felt you didn't give it strong enough material. The reason, I suspect, is that while you are attracted to ideas you didn't look closely enough at the words you are dealing with.

I look at his hand, his square hand with its large fingers, perfect nails. Like something dead or waiting, I wonder if I have failed to breathe. The light I had expected to see has not come to his eyes; he regards me as he does the other man. What have I fallen into? How does he not remember? It has not been so many years since we saw each other, five, or six, he isn't so old his memory could fail.

"Martin." I take his hand. "Welles."

Now? Even now?

"Pleasure," he says.

Is this another world?

"Well," he says, clapping his hands. "I'd better finish this over. You chaps had better be off and see Major Guthrie."

Shaw frowns. "The Major. Is he the strict sort?"

"Oh, no, Guts? I hesitate to say his standards are lax..."

"But?"

"No, no, I hesitate to say it, but they are." Dixon flicks a finger from his forehead, a sort of salute. "Gentlemen."

Ben had given James and Mark G a lift home. David, Ian, and Mark L had walked into town to have a drink at the Lamb. Ian had asked if I'd like to go with them but I'd said, no thanks, and he'd said, Yep, typical Virgin Mary. Yeah, yeah, I'd said. Boys, friends I'd known for years; we didn't really say goodbye. I sat on the wall by the school's rear gate, looked forward to results day and that first summer unbracketed by school. I thought about university, writing, success. I didn't think of the things I would never do again. I would never again sit in the library underneath the stained-glass windows. I would never again walk along the streets behind the school to Park Road fields. I would never again watch the grammar school boys play football in bibs and the November scud, begging the whistle and the end of day to kick off their boots and shin pads. Each in his purple rugby shirt and his long black-and-white socks, each in the air cold enough to give you a headache. Would never again hear the clatter of studs on the pavilion floor, never smell the sweat and the mud. A learning opening up all the world. A learning that had diagrammed my life in geographies of pits and scarp, a past impassable now on foot. So this, sweat and mud, this is it—

—Terrific! Original criticism - ideas about the play I've not come across before, but seeming utterly to ring true. Specifically in the A+ band, evoking envy in the reader. Despite the noted lull in the middle paragraph, this is certainly one of the best responses to this text that I have seen over three years. For the best before that, see Dixon's essay on the subject on the wall in the English office- still a treatment nonpareil on this text.

So this is where the massive past and present instant connect.

Empire Day:

Critical Commentary

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Introduction

—Where does your poetry come from? Is it something you find in the world, something to be discovered and picked up? Is it from people, other poets and those around you? Do you take it from the interactions between you and other people? A sort of frisson from contact, like static? Or would you say it's entirely from within, from inside you, self-generated you might say? Bodily. Can you actually pinpoint the moment of genesis? Or is it a sort of mystery, in that it takes you, the poet, on a journey as much as it does the reader?¹

These are the questions asked by this thesis, which consists of the novel *Empire Day* and its commentary. Driving towards the same goal, they approach the subject from both sides of the academic discipline of creative writing: through a creative work of fiction and through a critical analysis of the writing process. The novel looks at the act of writing through the lens of war poetry, unpicking the term into two parts, the war and the poetry, a task which might allow a glimpse of the poet. It examines the figure of the War Poet, viewed in hindsight and usually through the lens of his (for the poet seems always to be male)² poetry, who stands at once within the war and outside of it – corrupted yet somehow simultaneously incorruptible. The novel attempts to disrupt this view of the poet as observer or moral (male) authority, as the definer of the character of a war. The commentary is an attempt to add to the body of creative writing research through practice. It seeks to demystify the process of creative writing, to lay bare the method, the choices made and the difficulties faced.

The novel contemplates the act of writing, investigates the thoughts and hopes of writers, asks how writing affects the writer's life, asks from where the writer's desire to write originates. The novel is written ever in a personal space and, even while presenting fictional characters in fictional situations, can never avoid the subjective gloss of its author's life. In his handbook on creative writing, *The Art of Writing Fiction*, Andrew Cowan likens the

¹ Oliver King, 'Empire Day', pp8-9. From here on, references from the text will be identified as 'ED'

² James Campbell, "Combat Gnosticism: The Ideology of First World War Poetry Criticism," *New Literary History*, Vol. 30, No. 1, Poetry & Poetics (Winter, 1999): 204

relationship between the autobiographical and the fictional to that of a tree and its roots, such that if “the tree is the novel, the roots will be that novel’s origins in experience, in the facts of your life.”³

Writing is an excavation and under the ground are graves. The novel, complete, and finally of itself, represents an exorcism. This is a spell to remove haunting spirits. This is the form it takes, perhaps because it is a first novel. W. H. Auden recognises this notion of an exorcism, and concludes in his essay ‘Writing’, that “[t]he work of a young writer... is sometimes a therapeutic act. He finds himself obsessed by certain ways of feeling and thinking... the only way by which he can be rid of them forever is by surrendering to them.”⁴ Those thoughts and memories unearthed by the act of writing fiction add a fugal layering of voices towards the development of a specific theme. I am alert to the possibility that the depth of such a layering may betray a sophomoric lack of restraint.

Empire Day and its commentary examine the identity of the war poet as social and moral commentator, the connection between war poet and war, and the extent to which a war’s character is defined by its poetry. The novel and its commentary also address the relationships between the soldiers, between the empire and its colonists, between the colonists and the subjugated people; between men and women; between men and men. The novel is an attempt to portray a possible modern view of empire, presenting young, contemporary people on the driving tip of history, propelled further and further with a momentum built up in a past that does not belong to them. It presents a view of empire once removed, seen through its literature and films; a fragmented view, of a modernist flavour, the truth (and moral superiority) of which is unknown and unowned. It is a view of tradition and all its pointlessness and power, its extravagance and its ever-hopeful projection into eternity.

Chapter One of the commentary will focus on the context in which *Empire Day* was written; the ‘why’ and the ‘what’, perhaps. Influences, inspirations and the ways in which the novel is ‘interlocked’ with other texts are discussed in order to build a picture of the important first steps. This chapter will also investigate the conversations into which *Empire Day* enters by exploring similar war literature, identifying the ways in which other authors

³ Andrew Cowan, *The Art of Writing Fiction* (Harlow: Pearson Education Ltd, 2011), 32

⁴ W.H. Auden, *The Dyer’s Hand & Other Essays* (New York: Random House, 1962), 18

approached similar themes and also how they may have solved similar problems telling tales about conflict.

Chapter Two is concerned with the process of writing; the 'how', the 'when' and the 'where'. Questions of style, theme, character, setting and method are addressed, as well as how these aspects of the novel developed during the course of the writing. For the writing of a novel is work over time, and the work can be made easier and it can be complicated as serves the fiction and as serves the author's intentions and circumstances, circumstances which are constantly shifting.

Maintaining a journal during the writing process provided the opportunity, via reflective writing, to keep track of thoughts, to examine the process of creative writing, to document the emergence and development of ideas, and also to serve as an aide-mémoire: as Barbara Bassot writes, "Reflective writing helps us to link our ideas together and discover meanings from the things we see and experience."⁵ As the journal is a significant record in the development of the novel, it is included in part in Chapter Three of this commentary: the journal is a place of free and uncritical creative thought, a place for attempts, for misreadings, for false starts and trails to nowhere, which are all unavoidable, indeed vital, elements of the writing process. The journal is a document alive alongside the unfinished novel, whereas this commentary represents a refined, reserved analytical response to the finished text. Both seem a valuable supplement to illuminate the novel and the act of writing fiction, and worthy of inclusion. To avoid problems with length and to provide a clearer picture while maintaining a sense of the scope of the journal, not every entry has been included. Those entries included in this commentary have not been altered from their original state, except in those cases where quotations required referencing.

Finally, in this introduction, it is worth noting that, although it was not an intended outcome, the novel and its commentary have taken on the shape of an elaborate metafiction. The former is 'writing about writing', the latter 'writing about writing about writing', together having the appearance of an inwardly folding mirror, the self-reflecting tunnel of the kaleidoscope. David Lodge defines metafiction as "fiction about fiction: novels and stories that call attention to their fictional status and their own compositional

⁵ Barbara Bassot, *The Reflective Journal* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 14

procedures".⁶ The metafictional nature of the novel is, perhaps, nowhere more evident than in the fact that within this novel titled *Empire Day* is another novel titled *Empire Day*. And the metafiction has a spokesman, the character Six Knot, who appears to see through the narrative and grasp the nature of his fictional form. He berates Martin, reveals to him that in fact he is "Not a person, not a soldier, / you're a story being told" (ED, p.184). Six Knot's rupturing of the text seems to prove David Lodge's hypothesis that "[m]etafictional writers have a sneaky habit of incorporating potential criticism into their texts and thus 'fictionalizing' it."⁷

⁶ David Lodge, *The Art of Fiction* (New York: Viking, 1992), 206

⁷ Lodge, p.208

Chapter One

Intertextuality and War Stories

1.1. Intertextuality: Inspiration, Interplay, and Influence

It is necessary here to define the limits of the term 'intertextual' as it will be used in this commentary. It seems acceptable to allow the term, when used by the author of a text, to 'swerve' slightly from the Barthesian suggestion that "to try to find the 'sources', the 'influences' of a work, is to fall in with the myth of filiation"⁸. The author, unable to be a reader of his own text, can only consider the work in the language of intertextual interplay, influence, inspiration. Perhaps, in the refiguring of the term, we are in good company. María Jesús Martínez-Alfaro in her article 'Intertextuality: Origins and Development of the Concept', concludes from the varied definitions of the term that "[s]uch a proliferation of theories underlines the inapprehensible quality of the concept"⁹. And in *The Art of Fiction*, David Lodge, when discussing his novel *Nice Work*, acknowledges the conscious interplay between his text and a precursor: "I incorporated *Howards End* into the intertextual level of the novel, emphasizing the parallels between the two books"¹⁰. It seems fair, as this commentary concerns a creative work and the details of its production, to allow the term as used here to stand for conversations between texts, and between authors, at any level, to any degree. The commentary can only speak to those conscious connections and those connections, as in the case of Lodge, that revealed themselves and imposed upon *Empire Day*. The literature relevant to the thesis therefore takes three forms: texts or works that directly inform the writing of the novel through inspiration, through influence, and through interplay. Here again, it may be worth noting the metafictional tendency of the novel: at the same time as these intertextual forces came to bear on the novel's writing, the novel itself confronted and presented ideas of influence and inspiration.

⁸ Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*. Trans. Stephen Heath. (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 160

⁹ María Jesús Martínez-Alfaro, "Intertextuality: Origins and Development of the Concept," *Atlantis*, Vol. 18, No. 1/2 (June-December 1996), 283

¹⁰ Lodge, p.38

'Inspiration' is, perhaps, the hardest category of texts to document. It must be the same for all who create, the struggle to identify which seeds grew amongst the countless broadcast. Exactness impossible; the answer, if it were ever certain, now irrecoverably lost to time. It could be a colour or its complement, or the smell of spring evenings while stargazing, or cold winter mornings in the library with rain drying on the shoulders of your coat, many little things which must remain unmentioned and uncredited. And, too, some sources will perish from self-censorship, of the embarrassing or the better-best-forgotten. If I were to guess at the most basic of inspirations, perhaps I would credit Housman and Larkin, Hoppus and Conrad and Ishiguro, Ballard and Bogart and Woolf, and... and... and.... This bit from there, that bit from here, a name, a phrase, a plot point, a location, a sentiment. No. It seems both frivolous and ultimately pointless to attempt a full reckoning (a list that would run to the thousands and still no doubt omit plenty) and appears, if inspirations must be declared, it is necessary to simultaneously take a wider view and apply a tighter focus. To be clinical, tough, bureaucratic, editorial, to separate the inspirations into two groups: 'first beginnings' and 'beginnings again'.

The first grouping delves into the past, much as the novel does for Martin who, by the final chapter, has made his way, via memory, back to his grammar school days. That much is autobiographical. I believe, when the germ of the novel began to grow as an undergraduate, there was a need to write about those years of my life, to make sense of them and, as described in the introduction, to perform an 'exorcism', to be able to make the transition and move on. Andrew Cowan calls "an ability to recall the lost experiences of the childhood we actually enjoyed or endured"¹¹ vital for a writer, because "their earliest experiences are not simply a resource for their writing, but the very source of it, the place from which it all springs"¹². Perhaps it was distance that permitted the recognition of this time period's importance (indeed, gave it even greater importance after so many years), but it is precisely because of this significance that the grammar school was placed at the end of the novel. Martin has found his spring.

Inspirations which belong in the category 'beginnings again' are those which are primarily concerned with the period just before the commencement of the PhD, namely the war poetry of Keith Douglas and R. N. Currey, and British war movies of the 1940s and

¹¹ Cowan, p.68

¹² Cowan, p.67

1950s. Currey and Douglas also factor as intertexts, but for the moment this commentary will focus on their role as inspiration.

I was not aware of Currey as a war poet before reading an article, written by a former English teacher of mine, in an edition of Colchester Royal Grammar School's alumni organisation's newsletter, the *Colcestrian*. Currey, too, had been an English teacher at the school, after the Second World War, which could have been, for him, a "comfortable war" according to P. J. Hadcock who wrote the article, "but he chose to touch it - a poet's choice - to feel it, to touch war's essential nature".¹³ Not only for this reason, Ralph Currey's poetry is another important source for the project, as, being a relatively little known war poet who grew up in the midst of empire, he also represents the idea of the moral poet. In the introduction to Currey's *Collected Poems*, written by Ronald Blythe, we are told that Currey "saw that as a poet he stood both within and without Britain and its empire, a position which not only gave him moral authority but an unusual clarity".¹⁴ His dedication to poetry, his wish to be a channel between war and art, led him to sign up when the Second World War broke out: "I was a poet and I had to go / Into the trade I did not wish to learn".¹⁵ As well as the man himself being a template around which the novel's protagonist is sketched, these collected poems, in the same way as Douglas's, greatly inform the style and language of the prose. Currey's subject, as in 'Boy with a Rifle' and 'Unseen Fire', is the effect of war on those fighting it, the dislocation of a soldier or an airman from his enemy, not simply in physical space. It is precisely these ambiguities and mysteries which surround the war poet that interested the creative writing and its commentary.

Douglas's war poetry informs the style and content of Martin's own poetry and, to a certain degree, the texture of Douglas's writing shaped the novel's general prose, hinting at its starkness and lyricism. The story is not based on the life of Keith Douglas but has certain parallels: a young man, recently graduated and suddenly published, goes off to war, corresponds with friends and family while writing poems to send back home. Here is where inspiration evolves into 'interplay', for Douglas and Martin stand in the same space, one text above the other, more intertextuality than inspiration. Young men, writers, poets, eager for life to provide material for their work. In much the same way that Currey was reluctant to

¹³ P. J. Hadcock, 'Ralph Curry & 'Unseen Fire', *The Colcestrian* (September 2011), 86

¹⁴ Ronald Blythe, "Introduction" in R. N. Currey *Collected Poems* (Oxford: James Currey Ltd, 2001), xviii

¹⁵ R. N. Currey, 'I Was A Poet', *Collected Poems* (Oxford: James Currey Ltd, 2001), 145

fight but hungry for experience, seeking fuel for his poetry, so “Douglas saw himself as a poet before he saw himself as a soldier¹⁶”, Lorrie Goldensohn writes in *Dismantling Glory*. She suggests that Douglas’s poems “treat war as one more nugget... within the circle of acts and objects greedily scavenged for poetry by a young man greatly gifted, burdened, and hungry for love and recognition”¹⁷ And here, of course, in much the same way, Copyn stands for Currey, the old writer-turned-teacher, who traded empire for Essex.

A further interplay exists on a deeper level still, perhaps on a level so deep as to become inconsequential. There is an overlaying of texts in which *Empire Day* follows the warlike narrative curve of the *Aeneid*. One might see Martin as Dido and Amanda as Aeneas, where Martin dies that night in Amanda’s room and is transported to the underworld. Amanda, as Aeneas, searching for a new home, eventually finds her way to the Colony and they are reunited. The roles may well be reversed- both could be said to suffer a death as a result of their meeting the other. Elsewhere, characters take on roles from the Trojan War: the imprisoned nurses in Bullwood become the Trojan women, Hecuba, Andromache, Cassandra, Helen. The reading calls to mind the beginning of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, with Marlow’s conjuring up the image of the Roman on the Thames, his pronouncement that “darkness was here yesterday”¹⁸, and the memory that Colchester used to be the Roman capital of Britain: it was into the ‘dark’ kingdom of Cymbeline (Cunobelin) “that the invading Roman army marched in AD 43”¹⁹

It is to influence that this chapter finally turns. *Empire Day* is a novel about writers and their work interacting. An important question posed by the text is the extent to which one person, one writer, can change another. It is a problem that Amanda identifies when she points out a fact that with toes, “when they’re squeezed together, you can see how they’ve shaped themselves against their neighbours.” (ED, p.57) Amanda and Martin as poets, Martin and Ombarrago as poets, Martin and Dixson as soldiers, Elsie and Martin as artists, Dixson and Amanda as lovers, England and the Colony; these relationships are destructive but they are also relationships of synthesis. Cowan suspects that in every writer’s life there has been “the presence, somewhere early on, of a teacher, mentor or supporter who not only applauded her, but first took the trouble to listen to what she was

¹⁶ Lorrie Goldensohn, *Dismantling Glory* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2003), 125

¹⁷ Goldensohn, p.125

¹⁸ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (London: Penguin Books, 1995), 19

¹⁹ Patrick Denney, *Colchester* (Stroud: The History Press, 2009), 7

saying.²⁰ Between writers, poets, there are constructive relationships, for the greatest wish of the writer is to be read and validated, but there is also resentment: Harold Bloom's deliberate 'misreading'. Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence* tells us that "what divides each poet from his Poetic Father... is an instance of creative revisionism"²¹. If we take Copyn to be Martin's 'Poetic Father', the English teacher from his school days who had written a novel of such insurmountable renown as (the novel's) *Empire Day*, then the journey of Martin to Copyn's homeland as a conqueror and coloniser must represent a most dramatic 'swerve' away from the precursor text or 'clinamen', for "[t]he stronger the man, the larger his resentments, and the more brazen his *clinamen*"²²

For Martin as for other writers, the literature that came before is a challenge to modern writers. The writer attempts to create a new vision, personal and meaningful, but is thwarted by his encounters with previous, stronger texts which say the same thing and better. The writer finally must accept that he was never creating something out of nothing, for all these words and thoughts have existed for years. It is as Northrop Frye claims, that poetry "can only be made of other poems; novels out of other novels."²³

1.2. War Stories

It will be useful here to provide some degree of context to *Empire Day* by considering work by other novelists and poets that exists in the same sphere or that shares relationships whether thematically or formally with the novel. Important texts for the project not only included the works of war poets but also literature concerning fictional/fictionalised poets and prose concerning soldiers in conflict. Of particular relevance to the writing of the novel is war literature: texts, whether prose or poetry, that share the same subjects as the novel, such as war poetry or colonial conflict; and also texts that address the nature and criticism of war poetry. From widely reading both literature and theory in the field of war narratives it became apparent that were five main issues of importance, specifically, to this novel. These issues complicated the writing of the novel, by asking questions of the text and also of

²⁰ Cowan, p.80

²¹ Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (Oxford: OUP, 1997), 42

²² Bloom, p.43

²³ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 97

me, for two of the issues problematised my relationship to the story I was telling, both concerning privilege. The problems are: specificity, 'combat gnosticism', colonialism, masculinity, and violence. These problems will be discussed as they pertain to the various texts presented here.

The first, and most important to consider, is that, as Tim Kendall states, "[w]ar poems tend to concern themselves not so much with the timeless as with the specificities of time and place"²⁴. In other words, war poems and war novels are necessarily locked into the period of their war: wars are demarcated by date and location, the start date and end date may be years apart and the location may be whole continents, but a war poem or novel cannot usually escape these boundaries.

Pat Barker's novel *Regeneration* fictionalises Siegfried Sassoon's stay at Craiglockhart²⁵ during the First World War, portraying the details of his experiences with doctors and patients, including Wilfred Owen. According to Catherine Lanone, "Barker's novels play with the accurate depiction of 'real' characters like Sassoon and Owen, mixed with fictional ones, like Prior, or re-invented ones, like her Rivers with his deeply humane, ethical quest."²⁶ By choosing to write about Sassoon and Owen, Barker is necessarily restricted by history. She cannot deviate too far from the accepted 'truth' without the possibility of opening herself to accusations of factual error. She is also bound by Sassoon: her novel is about him and his war is the First World War. His experience, as she writes it, is the experience of a First World War poet, which is far removed from the experience of a modern war poet. As historical fiction, it is an inescapable conclusion that, as much as this and the other novels are about poets, they are unavoidably about and in history and, as Alistair Duckworth suggests, "a historical novel such as *Regeneration* achieves its most authentic effects on the basis of attested facts"²⁷.

As well as representing a successful novel about First World War poets there are two important ideas in the text, which find reflection in *Empire Day*. Of interest is Barker's intimations of certain characters' gender ambiguity, of the boundaries between camaraderie and homosexuality. On the subject of male intimacy, Sarah Cole writes: "The

²⁴ Tim Kendall, *Modern English War Poetry* (New York: OUP, 2006) 80

²⁵ Pat Barker, *Regeneration* (London: Penguin Books, 1992)

²⁶ Catherine Lanone, "Scattering the Seed of Abraham: The Motif of Sacrifice in Pat Barker's 'Regeneration' and 'The Ghost Road'," *Literature and Theology*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (September 1999), 267

²⁷ Alistair M. Duckworth, "Two Borrowings in Pat Barker's 'Regeneration'," *Journal of Modern Literature*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (Winter, 2004), 67

war's urgent language about male intimacy presents a complex set of personal, social, and institutional conflicts, where the homosexual body is linked with other forms of masculine vulnerability and protest."²⁸ The relationship between Sassoon and Owen, as friends and poets, becomes central to the novel and Barker plays with the reader's perception of their mutual attraction. This prompts perhaps the novel's most important theme, in terms of its usefulness to the thesis, namely that of the interplay between poets and how this affects their poetry. The question is important to *Empire Day*, in terms of the characters' various interactions in the story.

The First World War novel *Clay* by Gladys Mary Coles is, like *Regeneration*, tied to the conflict it fictionalises. Such a cinching of fiction to space and time might offer the opportunity to disrupt a narrative and surprise the reader, but the First World War is so overloaded with pity and elegy that a disruption may appear as sacrilege. The novel follows a soldier-poet to the front, where the scenery is well-known: mud and gas and trench fever. Interestingly, the novel contains epistolary sections in which the poet, William, sends letters and poems to his sister-in-law, as well as sections of 'action' written in present tense: "Walker, on the firestep, has his right hand up, whistle in his mouth, eyes fixed on his synchronised watch. Eight a.m. He gives the piercing signal."²⁹ At one point Coles interrupts the narrative to provide a medical case sheet, typeset in an alternative arrangement to differentiate it from the rest of the text.³⁰ The letters, when they appear, are printed in a different font to the main text and separated from the narrative with text ornaments acting as horizontal dividers.

Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead*, too, is caught within the period of the Second World War. The novel follows the progress of a platoon through its assault and occupation of a pacific island. However, Mailer's otherwise naturalist and realist narrative is interspersed with 'Time Machine' sections, which, Nigel Leigh writes, "introduce massive amounts of background material, which appears as blocks of unrefined societal research, seemingly assembled rather than written".³¹ The problem of Campbell's theory of 'combat gnosticism' complicates our appreciation or criticism of Mailer's novel, namely that "the

²⁸ Sarah Cole, "Modernism, Male Intimacy, and the Great War." *ELH*, Vol. 68, No. 2 (Summer, 2001), 472

²⁹ Gladys Mary Coles, *Clay* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Flambard Press, 2010), 49

³⁰ Coles, pp.146-147

³¹ Nigel Leigh, 'Spirit of Place in Mailer's "The Naked and the Dead"', *Journal of American Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (Dec. 1987), 427

knowledge of combat is a prerequisite for the production of a literary text that adequately deals with war”³² and how can somebody who does not possess this ‘gnosis’ judge the quality of a text written by a combatant? The issue is further complicated when the question arises of whether a non-combatant can write a text dealing with war; Lynne Hanley extrapolates from this that, “[t]he locale of war literature is the front, the battlefield. The author of war literature has to have been there. If we accept this definition, there is little we can do but choose among the stories of soldiers.³³” To the exclusion, of course, of women.

Vanessa Place’s *Dies: A Sentence* represents an even greater deviation from realism.³⁴ The poem challenges the need for a historical context. A long poem written as a single sentence, it begins as a soldier lies dying. There is familiar imagery of the First World War, the mud and the artillery, the dead and the maimed dying. Place subverts all expectations of a First World War poem, however, as she begins to play with all aspects of her poem. The main character has many names, is many people. The poem’s narrative has no set location, becomes all places. All times are referenced: the past, the present, and the future from the perspective of the dying soldier. It is as in T S Eliot’s *Four Quartets*, where all times are present, all connected. We might see the disunity as a crisis: perhaps this is what it is like to die; an unending torrent of memory, of wished-for things, prophecies of what you will never live to see. Perhaps this is dying, and living in a last second of uncompromising, awesome clarity. Lacking full stops, it reads breathlessly at times, a vicious incantation, at once an impenetrable fortress but also an unstoppable force, an invasion. The poem is rich and thick with layers of meaning and incomprehension, as dreams are, with profundity and nonsense all spiralling around. *Dies* represents a way, through poetry, to circumvent perceived notions of war and those things which follow, namely death and lost love, and to represent the experience of the soldier in grand, quite universal terms.

The expansion of the notion of war poetry from the domain of soldier poets to encompass voices outside the military, is an area of interest for the thesis. A modern attempt to balloon the definition of war poetry can be found in the poetry collection *Enduring Freedom: An Afghan Anthology*,³⁵ which contains poems written in response to

³² Campbell, p.204

³³ Lynne Hanley, *Writing War: Fiction, Gender, and Memory* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1991), 30-31

³⁴ Vanessa Place, *Dies: A Sentence* (Los Angeles: Les Figues Press, 2005)

³⁵ Ryan Gearing (ed.), *Enduring Freedom: An Afghan Anthology* (Brighton: FireStep Publishing, 2011)

both modern and past wars. Of varying artistic merit, they succeed as documentary pieces but must fail as poems of consequence: they will not last as Owen or Douglas last. There is either a gulf of poetic skill, or a glut of voices, or a lack of receptive ears, or a slipperiness in the nature of modern warfare which prevents these texts from adhering, from enduring. The question itself, even unanswered, provided an enormous impetus to investigate the issue in the novel. Notably, the book helps to open up the definition of war poetry - not just members of the armed forces but wives, children, civilians are represented, all given equal opportunity to project their voice, all responses to war given equal validity, all qualifying as war poets. To investigate the state of modern war poetry written by soldiers, one can examine the work of celebrated American poet Brian Turner, whose *Here, Bullet* recalls his life in the US Army during the Iraq War.³⁶ If one agrees with James Campbell's suggestion of 'combat gnosticism', namely that the work of those who have experienced war first-hand has a greater inherent value than that of those who have never fought, one might suggest Turner's voice has been afforded a certain weight because of his status as a veteran, poetic skill aside. In Suman Gupta's survey of literature written in response to the Iraq invasion, *Imagining Iraq*, he notices in Turner's poetry "an exquisite sensitivity to being a foreigner in this land... to the two-fold displacement of the poet-soldier away from home ... and within a strange land"³⁷.

Adam Foulds's *The Broken Word*, a long poem about the Mau Mau uprising,³⁸ places its main character, Tom, into the to-and-fro of fierce guerrilla warfare and subsequent military retribution. Through his poetic voice, Foulds explores the dehumanising violence of war, and reveals the coarsening texture of a young man who witnesses, and is party to, torture and killing. Foulds presents the final product of the conflict: a haunted man forcing down a viciousness that threatens to control him, a jagged man ill-fit to peace. It is surprising to find a modern poetic treatment of such a conflict, these blunt depictions of brutality and murder alongside deep impressions of abrasively hot Kenya, and this account of a man's maturing surrounded by concentration camps and casual mutilation. In its scope, it touches upon the epic poetry of Homer's *Iliad* or Virgil's *Aeneid*, following the course of a

³⁶ Brian Turner, *Here, Bullet* (Farmington: Alice James Books, 2005)

³⁷ Suman Gupta, *Imagining Iraq: Literature in English and the Iraq Invasion* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 87

³⁸ Adam Foulds, *The Broken Word* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2008)

war and illustrating its effect on those caught up in it, whether that be death or debasement or glory.

An objective of *Empire Day* was to achieve a similar sense of the other, a depiction of a people simultaneously seen as being familiar and fundamentally different. The poem is situated undeniably in Kenya, undeniably in the 1950s, and the other for Foulds is the Mau Mau, impelled to unspeakable, unstoppable violence by both an oath they fear to break and their hatred of the colonialists. The nature of the Mau Mau in the poem is amorphous, shaped by propaganda and hyperbolic rumour, and the reader is sometimes asked to consider their savage notoriety parallel to the description of these beaten, desperate men imprisoned in the British camps. The novel attempts to achieve a similar ambiguity in terms of the other, the 'enemy', albeit in a manner which relies less on specificity or historical context.

One can be in no doubt reading Fould's *The Broken Word* that colonialism and violence are indelibly linked. Violence is the means by which the oppressor rules, violence is the means by which the oppressed seeks freedom. It is violence almost without second thought, instinctive:

Stepping with his dusty brogues
into the weak backs of their knees
he made them kneel
and to do it quicker than he could think
shot them one two
each opened head falling away
from his hand³⁹.

The poem contains many more instances of such callous violence, but, of course, it is not unique to this one war text. War is necessarily a violent enterprise. According to Tim Kendall, having witnessed "the soldier sprawling in the sun"⁴⁰ with his "burst stomach like a cave", Keith Douglas's "work is brutally human and brutally honest in its ambivalent

³⁹ Adam Foulds, p.6

⁴⁰ Keith Douglas, 'Vergissmeinnicht', *The Complete Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000) 118

response to the sight of a dead enemy⁴¹". In *Clay*, Coles gives us this image of a wounded man: "A blackened hand, fingers twitching, and then a shape inching onto the parapet, a contorted face, blood-caked, one of his eyes hanging from the socket"⁴². In *Empire Day*, the violent episodes include Dixson's description of beating a prisoner (ED, p.49), Amanda investigating the dead shaman (ED, p.132), the joint deaths of Harris and Dixson (ED, pp.52-56), Piggott's death at the base (ED, p.140). Amanda and Martin stand relatively outside the shade of violence, but does that excuse them? Kendall proposes "[b]y avoiding pity, Douglas denies the consolatory gesture of inserting a human sensibility between the reader and the horror, and lays bare... the risks and the guilty pleasures of spectatorship."⁴³ Amanda and Martin, even if they avoid the worst excesses of the violence in the Colony, are still unable to avoid looking. It is Goldensohn who delivers final judgement on both the characters and on the writer: "When we read or write violence it is never a wholly formal matter; we are inevitably implicated in both the setting forth and the reception of the details"⁴⁴.

How then is this last problem, the presentation of violence in a war narrative, overcome? Martin Wesley suggests he has found the answer in Tim O'Brien's Vietnam narrative, *The Things They Carried*:

by presenting violence in terms of burden rather than battle through deliberately non-dramatic structure, by stressing the continuous pressure of war rather than the climactic action of combat through the metaphor of weight to be borne, *The Things They Carried* deflates the excitement of traditional portrayal of the violence of the military adventure, and it deflects the ascription of moral purpose to the violent events of war.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Kendall, p.157

⁴² Coles, p.48

⁴³ Kendall, p.157

⁴⁴ Goldensohn, p.130

⁴⁵ Martin Wesley, "Truth and Fiction in Tim O'Brien's 'If I Die in a Combat Zone' and 'The Things They Carried'." *College Literature*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (Spring, 2002), 6

Chapter Two

Writing Process and Practice-Led Research

2.1. Style

The novel was begun in the spirit of experimentation. From an early point, the plan was for a conventional story (soldiers in conflict) to be told in an unconventional narrative format (unchronological, varied narrators, varied tense). The assumption and disruption of familiar stories and familiar modes was of central importance to the novel's writing. This modernist attitude was a guiding principle in the writing process, as well as an attempt to imitate the modernist prose of Virginia Woolf and the poetry of TS Eliot and David Jones. We may usefully work with Sarah Cole's list of the features of modernism, namely "the alienated wanderer... the impermeability of the individual psyche; images of fragmentation and loss (at both personal and cultural levels) ... narrative discontinuity"⁴⁶. I believed this sense of play, of creative disruption, would produce a unique work and allow me to counter Keith Douglas's exhortation to "Simplify me when I'm dead"⁴⁷. A major aim in the writing was to avoid or explode simplifications, to create complexities in order to address complex issues. There was no intention while writing to produce a difficult text for the sake of difficulty, for the sake of provocation- what complexities exist exist only as either unintentional weaknesses in the narrative or as a result of an effort towards a full and 'all-encompassing' vision.

The aim throughout the novel was to produce a layered narrative emulating music or the collection of archival sources in a history textbook. Michael Alexander, in *A History of English Literature*, sees in Eliot's *Four Quartets* "a depth of language yielding levels of meaning"⁴⁸ and highlights the similarities between modernist poetry and music by noting that even the title of the set of poems itself "suggests chamber music played by four players."⁴⁹ He stresses the differences between Eliot's poetry in *The Waste Land* and *Four Quartets*, suggesting that the latter is "less intense and dramatic, more meditative,

⁴⁶ Sarah Cole, p.471

⁴⁷ Keith Douglas, 'Simplify Me When I'm Dead', *The Complete Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), 74

⁴⁸ Michael Alexander, *A History of English Literature* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), 336

⁴⁹ Alexander, p.336

repeating and varying themes on different ‘instruments’ or quietly self-communing voices”. John H. Johnston, in his article ‘David Jones: The Heroic Vision’, recognises the modernist attitude in the poet’s work, *In Parenthesis*, focusing on Jones’s “use of remote background materials, his unorthodox narrative techniques, and the special qualities of his lyric visualization”⁵⁰. These ideas of a fugal symphony, a broadness and vividness of vision, formed the basis of *Empire Day*’s stylistic prose.

The prose of Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* also “asks a high degree of attention, like a modernist poem”⁵¹. Lily Briscoe’s final brushstroke, a single motion that makes sense of everything that came before, that brings her vision to its long-promised consummation, declares that “reality... is aesthetic in form”⁵². To Lily, for whom “so much depends ... on distance”⁵³ (between people, between a painter and her vision), human existence is always within the voids between encounters, which are those moments in time when things eventually touch and take on the aspect of epiphany. Guided by the vision of Lily Briscoe, Woolf’s novel suggests that there is a constant yearning for connection, between people, between the present and the past; as Yuko Rojas writes, “[t]he creative or recollective power that enables Lily to feel that she has captured the essence of the past also frees her from the sense of loss or of distance from the earlier period that she so vividly recalls”.⁵⁴ Again, memory and dislocation are central concerns for the modernist writer, wounds of the psyche which can possibly be healed through the act of creation, through discovering new ways to see.

We moved carefully, to place him upon the floor. And I was thinking, this is all new, this is all new to me. And the world, while we handled this dead thing, seemed all filled up with both ceremony and roughness, as gardening is, with rules and with right and wrong and also with violence and sweat and with shit for spreading. There is science below it all, science and ritual, understood by people far away, not by me, not by anybody here. I hardly breathed but there were no surprises or leakages or shocks,

⁵⁰ John H. Johnston, “David Jones: The Heroic Vision,” *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (Jan 1962), 80

⁵¹ Alexander, p.342

⁵² Alexander, p.342

⁵³ Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (London: Penguin Books, 1996), 280

⁵⁴ Yuko Rojas, Proustian Reminiscence in “To the Lighthouse,” *Studies in the Novel*, Vol. 41, No. 4 (Winter 2009), 454

and the world appeared to accommodate our work, to accommodate this novelty as if happily surprised, and rewarded us, for the shape into which we eventually managed to set the uncompromising body was neat and full of care. (ED, p.18)

At 4 in the morning and with no one having slept, we will march the evacuees through the town to the airfield with every step on these streets seeming a sort of trespass. This eight-mile journey. We have taken up our weapons and we have put on our armour and we have put off sleep and taken down the flag from the lawn of Government House. We are all somewhere beside ourselves with weariness. (ED, p.67)

In these extracts, as throughout the novel, a conscious effort was made to create a style of lyrical prose: what Lodge might call “fancy prose”⁵⁵ or “poetic prose”. The use of syntactical repetitions, of compound sentences with multiple clauses separated by a repeated conjunction, reaches for the effect of a line of poetry or a musical motif or a chant or a spell. The lengthening of the line sacrifices grammatical conformity, ease of reading, and the reader’s ‘breath’ in an attempt to heighten the power of the words and the conjunction and the sentence as a whole. Alliteration and close proximity of similar sounds in the sentence give the impression of song, perhaps. Not all the prose of the novel, however, flows in this vein. Johnston recognises in Jones’s poetry that the “narrative method... is fragmentary and impressionistic, alternating between dramatic and lyrical elements that represent both objective and subjective realities”⁵⁶ and the novel sought to achieve the same chiaroscuro effect.

The narrative of *Empire Day* is broken up in each chapter by the inclusion of documents, inserted from an extradiegetic space. These take the form of letters, reviews, reports, song lyrics, dialogue from television programmes. In a number of chapters, the narrator’s own memory or thoughts take the narrative from its regular, chronological space and colour or ‘off set’ the story with complimentary or opposing information. Despite the fact that these reveries usually appear unremarked in the text, while writing they were

⁵⁵ Lodge, p.95

⁵⁶ Johnston, p.67

considered distinct from the characters' normal first-person narrative, set apart by the dislocation of time or subject. The more epistolary documents appear after em-dashes, a signalling apparatus designed to separate the two levels of narrative. The decision was made to not alter the formatting of such documents (no change to font or font size, or to how the text appeared on the page) except in one instance, namely the inclusion of the larger, bolder typeface used in the film reviews of chapter 10 (ED, p.100). This decision was made in order to reduce the sense of artifice of the novel, to heighten a sense in the reader of the novel's simplicity or unity.

In a similar vein, each chapter begins simply with its number. Various alternatives were considered and attempted, such as each narrator's name appearing before the chapter, a description of the chapter's contents, and the date on which the events of the chapter occur (both in terms of relation to the 'present day', e.g. "two weeks earlier", and strict calendar date, e.g. "21/5/01"). All these approaches, however, added an extra layer of contrivance to the novel. There was a constant balancing between what seemed 'natural' and what made the novel 'accessible': what was designed to make the act of reading easier or more intuitive for the reader also worked to bring the novel into a place that seemed more artificial, more constructed than the desired effect. To have each chapter headed with the date or with "Martin" or "Amanda" would doubtless lighten the reader's load, but it would also reveal yet more of the author's footprints in the sand. If removing the author altogether was an impossible goal, it seemed an achievable secondary, consolatory objective to maintain a state in which the author remained mostly concealed, the number of visible strings minimised. It was not an enmity felt by the author towards the reader, to complicate the act of reading, but a desire for a roundedness in the narrative, an openness or boundlessness providing an experience without instruction. As Andrew Cowan discusses, the intent of "difficult" literary language may be to "resist the already known, the already said, by deviating to some degree from received or conventionalised ways of representing reality".⁵⁷

The decision to write Chapter 17 completely in verse seemed quite a natural decision. It was based on the nature of Martin's illness and the idea that his morbidity might affect the way he perceives the world. I had been composing poetry alongside the novel

⁵⁷ Cowan, p.163

from the very beginning, but had not been able to synthesise the two modes. The abrupt transformation of the novel into poetry, the dialogue with Six Knot, and the inconstant time, all work to create a sense of the septic delirium in which Martin is struggling to hold on. The chapter highlights the importance of Martin's perception to the novel's cohesion: as he draws close to death, the novel struggles to remain a novel. The chapter begins with stanzas of eight lines, representing the eight patients in the ward. As the patients pass away, the stanzas shrink until, when only Martin, Rickwood and Lindsay are left in the room, they have become only three lines long. The winnowing was intended to almost bring on a fear in the reader that the white space of the page would overcome the black and would, at the final stroke, possibly remove every word from the text.

When considering the jumbled nature of the chapters, it was useful to think in terms of 'fabula' and 'sjuzet', which are effectively defined by Peter Brooks in *Reading for the Plot*, fabula being "the order of events referred to by the narrative"⁵⁸ and sjuzet being "the order of events presented in the narrative discourse". He goes on to suggest that 'story' and 'discourse' are also suitable terms for the concepts: *Empire Day's* reversed chronology is not on the level of the story, but on the level of the narrative discourse. Therefore, only the reader is aware there is a disordering of events, for the characters, of course, must experience time moving in the correct, chronological direction. However, if it is the case that the novel is a narrativized retelling of past events in a present time (say, Martin's interview with Abina Matali in chapter 1), then it could be said that the narrative runs forward while the story is now the element of the narrative that moves into the past.

The choice to reverse the order of chapters was also influenced by the idea of getting to the very root of why people do the things they do: what was Martin's very basic motivation (so basic he probably would not even acknowledge it) to be a writer. The reversed order of chapters seemed to highlight this backtracking to source. The traditional use of 'cause and effect' to push the reader to continue to the next chapter would not work in a situation where cause necessarily follows effect as the reader moves through the book: an action occurs in one chapter and the decision to act occurs in the next. This follows, as David Lodge describes, in the tradition of the modernist writers who "sought to wean readers from the simple pleasures of story by disrupting and rearranging the chain

⁵⁸ Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot* (London: Vintage, 1985), 12

of temporality and causality on which it traditionally depended”⁵⁹. In an attempt to compensate, a constant conscious effort during the writing process was made to build each chapter with an accumulation of images fashioned into a rounded, almost self-contained story (with a conventional linear progression of beginning, middle and end). This forced the novel to ask each final sentence or paragraph to bear more weight- to require of them that unnatural duty usually reserved for a novel’s concluding paragraph or the last line of a poem; to sum up, to twist, to perform a volte-face, to declare that there cannot be and need not be more words. Cowan, however, gives hope that a broken chain of temporality would not negatively affect the reader’s enjoyment of the novel, when he posits, “the most compelling form of ‘what next?’ in fiction is perhaps not related to events - to the story as such - but to a character’s moral and emotional response to those events⁶⁰.”

2.2. Theme

Before discussing themes within the novel, it would be helpful to clarify and perhaps defend the use of the term ‘theme’. A thematic analysis of a text may seem either superficial⁶¹ or too enthralled with the writer’s primacy in the text. However, the fact that this commentary is presented from the perspective of the writer rather than that of a reader of *Empire Day* must give weight to the conclusion that there is value in discussing theme. Poet Louis Simpson defines the theme as “an idea that expresses the passion of the poet and, at the same time, speaks to our passions”⁶² and suggests that “discovering the theme is the nearest we can come to the central mystery of the poem - all other parts depend on this”. For Christopher Clausen, a ‘timeless’ theme is “is an interpretation of a deeply significant problem, situation, dilemma of human life ... that can apply in any time or any culture”⁶³; in other words, certain themes have a ‘timeless’ quality that not only endures but also works through all people. We could suggest, therefore, theme works on the level of codes as a connector, a basic shared understanding between writer and reader. In terms of writing a

⁵⁹ Lodge, p.82

⁶⁰ Cowan, 99

⁶¹ Christopher Clausen, “‘Canon,’ Theme, and Code,’ *Southwest Review*, Vol. 75, No. 2 (Spring 1990), 270

⁶² Louis Simpson, ‘The Poet’s Theme,’ *The Hudson Review*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (Spring, 1988), 101

⁶³ Clausen, p.273

novel, Gerald Warner Brace suggests that “a theme gives a writer a certain technical advantage. It offers a path to follow, a connection between start and finish.⁶⁴” Theme is not simply a buried code to be deciphered during the act of reading, it also has an active role in the construction of a text. Brace contends that theme is not a passive thing, it is challenged in the writing practice, and “is constantly tested in the actual drama that seems to unfold according to its necessities.⁶⁵”

Bearing these definitions and qualifications in mind, the themes of *Empire Day* were problems to be worked out by means of story and character. They have central importance to the reasons why the novel was begun, why it proceeded in certain directions, and why it eventually took the shape it did. These themes are part of the twisted thread of the story, with the strands of character and plot and theme tightly interwoven, and overlap in discussions about each constituent part of the thread. It is not a novel about these things, but these things help the novel become more than itself.

The spark, at its very first ignition, was that it would be a novel about writing. The main character, then characters, would simultaneously be writers at war and writers at war with their writing. Martin, Amanda, Ombarrago, Copyn, and Elsie have defined a part of their lives with text. For Martin and Amanda poetry is the way they make sense of and interact with the world. For Ombarrago poetry is a weapon and a symbol of defiance against oppression. For Copyn, through his words he has become a spirit of the Colony, his novel a palladium or a talisman to a land he has left. Elsie’s songs are her means of expression and a connection between herself and her father. To complicate the theme, Martin began as a writer of prose and became a poet through desperation, gaining fortuitous recognition for his verse, whereas Amanda became disheartened, lacking responses to her poetry, and ceased writing. Ombarrago and Copyn are inextricably connected despite one being the voice of resistance and the other the voice of empire.

Empire Day is also a novel about time and a person’s relationship with time. The trajectories of the main characters see them returning to a point in the past. For the characters there are traumas in their history, unresolved questions, loss. They have a yearning they do not fully comprehend. Martin and Amanda have a shared moment of misunderstanding in their pasts, a moment which neither remembers clearly and neither

⁶⁴ Gerald Warner Brace, ‘Theme in Fiction,’ *The Massachusetts Review*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (Winter, 1970), 182

⁶⁵ Brace, p.185

can investigate, because of fear or shame. Memory, its recall and its slipperiness, is an important touchstone in the novel. As well as a literal journey across the town, the platoon's march in chapter 7 (ED, p.67) is also a journey, for Martin, back through memory to his home town and childhood. The mantra, "Memory, impression, poetry, duty, and luck" (ED, p.69), not only mimics the platoon's marching feet but also describes the topography of Martin's inward (backward) journey.

For Martin, memory is not a discovery or a revelation, it is a means of clouding, a means of cloaking. He is searching for answers, for clues to his identity, but, for him, what is in the past is not a memory of things, but a memory of the gaps between things, the empty spaces between:

My memory is like a town at night. There are lights in windows behind net curtains, and from time to time I step into a streetlamp's orange glow and my shadow swings around, and there're the red rear lights of cars in strings along the bypass, cars with people heading home, and I wonder about their homes, where they live, how far they have left to drive, but I don't know them and I don't know where they're going, and I'll never know. And the lights pick out the edges of the leaves in hedges, and shine off the ice-skinned puddles in the holes in the road. And, for all the ill-defined things I see, the only thing I feel is the bulk of the things unseen, the weight of shadow behind them that gives them mass. The memory is not the town, but the night upon it. (ED, p.74)

There is throughout the novel a tension between moving backwards and moving forwards. It is in the transition of the Colony from empire to independence. It is in the transition from university to the adult world. It is the transition from life to death, the mortal to the metaphysical. It is in the decision whether to leave things in the past or carry them into the future. Generally, it is 'growing up'. As the original idea of the novel came to me during my undergraduate course, 18 years ago, half my life ago, 'growing up' has been an integral part of its incubation. On one level, the war in which the characters act can be seen as a life outside university. As transition brings anxiety, about the unknown, about things left behind (and lost), there are a number of times in the novel when a character

makes use of a transitional object. In *Playing and Reality*, Donald Winnicott, though referring to behaviours in infants, describes the emergence of “some thing or some phenomenon perhaps ... a word or rune, or a mannerism that ... is a defence against anxiety, especially anxiety of depressive type”⁶⁶, an idea which manifested itself in the novel with Dixson’s “page 23” (ED, p.251) and the preponderance of copies of Copyn’s *Empire Day* in the Colony. When there is great anxiety about the unknowable future, a retreat into the past might appear to be the best means of escape. This idea of retreating to the past was important to the novel, being one of the reasons for the reversed order of chapters, while also suggesting thoughts of longing or nostalgia, thoughts which may be wrapped around the topics of war poetry and empire. As Six Knot says in the novel, words can trick time into seeming like “the answer’s moving back to heartache” (ED, p.184).

The last theme to be discussed in this chapter is that of ‘Essexness’. Can a place (a county, a country) be simplified to a single voice? Both war and empire are fundamentally topics of the trauma of place and one’s sense of possession, a simultaneous feeling of belonging and ownership - how place affects the personality, informs its prejudices. For this novel, the place is Essex but is also the Colony, a generalised Other, an Overseas. Essex itself is agonised, its identity split. On the one hand is the stereotype of the Essex Girl, fake tans, and the encroachment of East London. Amanda attempts to burst these received prejudices in chapter 24 (ED, p.242) by upturning the Essex Girl jokes and recycling them into empowering hymns of feminine strength and a deep love of the land:

She is made of the same stuff as Essex, mud and sky and grasslands. She is the shore and the river wilderness. She can be everywhere and everything in it, but the city has begun to eat it and what makes her her, this infrangible centre, is fleeing to the edgeplace, where overwhelmingly, no one is able to remain. (ED, p.244)

On the other hand, there is the ancient Essex of the wilderness, the rough coasts and open skies, with its deep Roman and Anglo-Saxon human history. It is a dichotomy that is as much urban/rural as modern/historical, and represents the universal struggle for cultural identity

⁶⁶ Donald Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London: Routledge, 1999), 4

which is relevant to all places and people. It is a struggle that J. A. Baker recognises and laments; he writes in 'On the Essex Coast': "Essex has suffered so much; the new towns, the vast growth and overspill of London, the lancing through of motorways.⁶⁷" The theme, the problem attempted by the novel, is therefore how does one find, despite this dissonance, Essex's authentic voice, or, indeed, how does one, through fiction, give an authentic voice to Essex? In order to answer this question, the novel presented multiple viewpoints to address the sense of fracture in Essex's cultural identity and highlight the diversity of the physical landscape, both urban and rural.

2.3. Character

As I was interested in the interplay between the writing of poetry and prose, it made sense to create a soldier-poet protagonist in a novel about war and writing. Moreover, the character of Martin would be conflicted in his own self-conception: was he a writer of prose or of verse? Martin, as the first protagonist introduced to the reader, takes a prime position in the novel. As the first chapter written, from which the shape of the novel extended in various directions, belonged to Martin's perspective, it took some time to realise that the story of *Empire Day* was not his story, at least not simply his story. As the chapters belonging to Amanda took shape, it became clear that she demanded to also be a main character. Half of the novel belongs to her: half the chapters, half of the narrative, half the mystery. The shape of the novel determined the relationship between the two, and their reciprocal, binary orbits became the driving force of the novel; both characters are angled backwards towards a shared moment in their past, a moment of trauma which neither is privileged to fully understand. Here is evidence for Glyn Maxwell's claim that characters, "creatures" as he calls them, are "wrought by pressures of form and story into unique identity"⁶⁸.

Initially, the choice to write Martin's chapters in present tense and Amanda's in past tense was merely a means to contrast the two narratives and differentiate them for the reader. As the writing progressed a further thing became clear: the world for Martin is

⁶⁷ J. A. Baker, 'On the Essex Coast', in *The Peregrine* (London: Harper Collins Publishers, 2015), 431

⁶⁸ Glyn Maxwell, *On Poetry* (London: Oberon Books Ltd, 2012), 141

immediate, for him the narrative time is now; for Amanda, the narrative is in the past, she looks back upon the war from a point in the future, it is all reflection. For Martin, the war is happening in the moment; for Amanda, the war is a tale she is telling from a point after the narrative. A first-person point of view provided the opportunity to promote thought and impression to a similar level of importance as plot. It brings difficulties. The world from a first-person perspective is created by the conscious thought, by the interior monologue, of the character: all action, all existence, must be filtered through the character's perception. If the character cannot perceive it or imagine it, the action cannot take place within the first-person narrative.

One of the reasons for choosing this perspective was to, as far as possible, avoid the authorial voice of a third person narrator. The world of the novel is a world of uncertainty and foreignness, which is perhaps how a person experiences the world, especially if they are a stranger to a land, especially if their inner lives are turbulent and noisy. This had the advantage of minimising holes in the narrative: if the world of the novel is, for the reader, transformed into a world of the visual (that narrow viewpoint focusing only on what can be perceived by the characters), there is no expectation to learn the history of the Colony, or the population of a town, or the structures and manoeuvres of military units. What the characters know, what they must consider in the narrative moment, the reader may also know, and nothing besides. Character is foregrounded, although not necessarily to the detriment of action for, as Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan argues, "instead of subordinating character to action or the other way round, it may be possible to consider the two as interdependent."⁶⁹

On the subject of characters, Anne Lamott advises the writer that "it takes time for you to know them";⁷⁰ in fact, "you probably won't know your characters until weeks or months after you've started working with them."⁷¹ She cautions, "[y]ou are going to love some of your characters, because they are you or some facet of you, and you are going to hate some of your characters for the same reason"⁷². We may surmise from this that the reason it takes a writer time to know his or her characters is because of a reluctance or inability to recognise oneself in them. Interestingly, Barthes suggests that, for a reader, the

⁶⁹ Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (London: Methuen, 1988), 35

⁷⁰ Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1995), 44

⁷¹ Lamott, p.53

⁷² Lamott, p.45

author, “[i]f he is a novelist... is inscribed in the novel like one of his characters, figured in the carpet”⁷³ which calls into question the relationship between a writer and the characters, and the writer’s identity after the characters have been written and read. Martin and Amanda’s characters both have aspects of the autobiographical. Martin and Amanda are the simulacra who take into themselves the anxiety and distress of the author. To a lesser extent this is also true of other characters such as Dixson and Elsie. No one character is purely autobiographical, however. The very act of creating these characters in the span of a novel has changed the writer: as Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle observe in *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*, “reading characters involves learning to acknowledge that a person can never finally be singular - that there is multiplicity and ambiguity from start to finish”.⁷⁴

The outward appearance of the main characters is rarely mentioned in *Empire Day*. There is a disconnect between the inner mind and the outer body. Andrew Cowan’s tracing the dividing line between ‘characteristics’ and ‘character’ is an important distinction for a novel written in the first person, in which a main character’s appearance is relatively little discussed. For Cowan, the distinction is simple: characteristics are that “assemblage of information about the outer, visible person... her appearance, her mannerisms, her habits of behaviour”⁷⁵ whereas character “is associated ... with the inner, moral choices and hidden psychological forces that govern it”

In chapter 3 (ED, p.22) Martin scrutinises his own body, eager or afraid to find any physical change there which might be evidence of a transformation, away from his own skin into the skin of Dixson. At first, he fails to recognise himself, “this sweat, these cuts, these gritted scabs—this tan, whose arm this?” (ED, p.22), but through an examination with both eyes and fingers, notes his “Anglo-Saxon chin” and the pressure marks on his skin “like healed wounds”. Caught between the present moment, his presence in Dixson’s room while the 21-gun salute continues outside, and a memory from years before, change or disappointment has rendered him a stranger to himself. He attempts to stabilise himself, indeed his character, with this inspection of anatomy, this inventory of characteristics: “Nothing new on arms, chest, hips, thighs. The hair, mine. The moles, mine. Skin, mine. My

⁷³ Barthes, p.161

⁷⁴ Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1995), 55

⁷⁵ Cowan, p.98

face, a slight bristling of stubble but still my chin, my jaw, my lips she had once called feminine" (ED, p.24). But a character in a novel is not a physical person, there is no body but what is written, and then, of course, it is not a physical body but a body made of words, no more or less substantive than thought or memory. It is a conclusion borne out near the end of the chapter, as Martin considers that "[a] memory is a momentary wound, it gashes present flesh, right down to white bone past, for a view of what holds us up, and then in gushes blood and its million tiny ways of mending" (ED, p.31). Thought and memory have become a bodily actuality as real to the characters in the novel as their outward appearances.

For Amanda, too, her existence as both an inner consciousness and an outward character hinges equally on her own self-realisation and the inward-looking gaze of the outside world. I wanted Amanda's character to be marked by her relationships. Her personality is encroached upon by family and boyfriend but her poetry should be inviolate- she does not want Martin to 'corrupt' her. She struggles to be herself. This defensive attitude, almost as if she must fight for her place as a protagonist, leads her to frequently consider the effect other people are having on her, rather than the effect she might be having on them. She sees herself, self-deprecatingly, as "[I]azy, good-for-nothing, head in the clouds, gobby, poet, blonde, Essex girl." (ED, p.228)

In chapter 22 (ED, p.227) Amanda suffers a moment of existential uncertainty, in which the conscription form, a text, a collection of words, comes to represent a choice between the possibility of the death of her personality and the possibility of the death of her body. Body and mind are equally at risk and, under the stress of such an impossible decision, Amanda breaks apart into the character of the novel *Empire Day* and the character of Amanda's own self-conception, an Amanda Budden in the third-person. She is, in the moment of crisis, outside of time and her own body, outside of the story, aware of her own nature as fiction. In a sense she has suspended the temporal structure of the novel; nothing can proceed until she makes the fatal decision: "If nothing happened, if the Amanda character did and said and thought nothing, it might not exist." (ED, p.231) I believe she has broken the novel: nothing we have read to this point will be able to be true, must be discarded as illusion or lie, if she does not complete the form. The deferment of the very act

of choosing might dispel the “chronological illusion”,⁷⁶ the phrase Barthes uses as he considers whether logic or temporality govern the functions of narrative. It could be concluded that Amanda’s sabotage here, her stopping of the clocks, proves the point of logic’s dominance, in that “logic, based on alternatives (doing this or that), has the merit of accounting for the process of dramatization for which narrative is usually the occasion”⁷⁷. If there is no choice, if the character refuses to be a character, the narrative cannot proceed. The reader knows, however, what her choice will be: in effect, there is no choice, for *Empire Day*’s disruption of chronology, the disparity of story and discourse, has denied her agency.

The degree of differentiation between the two voices was a near-constant worry while writing the first-person perspectives. Both characters are capable of impressionistic observation, both submit to the poetic, the chance of their voices mingling seemed high. I considered writing Amanda’s chapters in such a way as to attempt to reproduce her Essex accent in the text; she never drops her ‘th’s in the novel, although Martin says she does in speech (ED, p.48). I decided against this as I concluded it would be hard to represent the accent with the authenticity it deserved, authentic enough to keep it from descending into parody. I decided, eventually, that the fact there may well be correspondence between their viewpoints or between their modes of reflection was not necessarily a problem and that it might instead prove beneficial; here might be another piece of evidence of the interplay between their characters, the one changing the other, or indeed, evidence that, unbeknownst to the other, they think and feel in a similar way.

By the time the novel was nearly completed, there was little conscious thought as to how each character would react in any given situation or on what aspect of a scene they would focus. Indeed, it was not until the writing of this commentary that I realised how enjoyable it had been to write their respective chapters. It felt like a loss to have written their voices for the final time. Perhaps Glyn Maxwell articulates the feeling when he predicts, “He will grow away from you, and so will she, and they, and it, and all the creatures you made, because they were born not only of you, but of your will in love with your language, and shored against silence.”⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Barthes, p.99

⁷⁷ Barthes, p.100

⁷⁸ Maxwell, p.141

2.4. Setting

Empire Day resists established concepts of space and time. When the characters leave England, they enter into an undefined space, but even when they are home they are caught in an ahistorical oblivion where all time periods are present. The novel is set in an entirely imaginary country, generally referred to simply as the Colony. It does not exist on the map but it is considered to be the exact opposite of the UK. When the pilot of the troop plane at the end of the novel says, "Welcome to the other side of the world" (ED, p.268) the figurative phrase has multiple meanings: this is both a foreign place a long way from home and equally it is the underside, the flip side, the reverse side, the mirror side. Whereas the UK climate is mild and changeable, the Colony's climate is subtropical and perpetually hot.

The Colony does not belong in our world and its presence in the world of the novel is also subject to uncertainty. The characters never call it by its actual name, indeed the Governor's map shows that the placenames of the Colony have been overwritten by the placenames of Essex towns (ED, p.95). It is a place that is England and a place that is of England. This idea is complicated in the novel as Essex is presented as a place apart from the rest of the country and the Colony as a place to which people are sent but from where they might not return.

I wanted to present the Colony as a place of timelessness and dislocation. To that end, I resisted the urge to overlay the novel's topography with any found in an atlas. In *The Naked and the Dead*, for example, Mailer leaves us in no doubt of his characters' location. In the very first paragraph of the novel, we are introduced to Anopopei, a fictional island but an island delineated by Mailer, made solid and real by the density of subsequent detail: "...it was shaped like an ocarina.... The body of the island, about a hundred and fifty miles long and a third as wide, was formed generally in a streamline with a high spine of mountains along its axis.⁷⁹" By setting his novel during the Second World War, by having Anopopei under Japanese occupation, by its setting in the Pacific, Mailer has concreted the novel into a certain space and time.

In a world where the Colony does not truly exist but instead stands-in for the victims of colonialism, the novel steps into the realm of allegory. Allegory, for Eliot, as Michael

⁷⁹ Norman Mailer, *The Naked and the Dead* (London: Harper Perennial, 2006), 51

Alexander suggests, showed him that “[h]istory and experience are open to a realm where language stops but meaning continues, a realm to which language can only point.⁸⁰”

Perhaps the Colony stands for the displacement of a people from a place they felt they belonged and displacement from the past they believed was truth.

In her article ‘Temporal Paradoxes in Narrative’ Marie-Laure Ryan suggests life leads us to believe the following four truths about time: “1. Time flows, and it does so in a fixed direction.... 2. You cannot fight this flow and go back in time.... 3. Causes always precede their effects..... 4. The past is written once for all.⁸¹” The novel attempts to break these rules in its subversion of the temporal order.

One of the disruptions of time which *Empire Day* accomplishes is the use of ellipses between the chapters. There are jumps in time between chapters, sometimes a day, sometimes longer, sometimes weeks. Chapter 11 (ED, p.116) is itself an ellipsis: the back-and-forth letters between Martin and Elsie mark the time that has passed since the arrest of Ombarrago. These ellipses both help move the story forward and serve to confuse the flow of time. The Colony is a hole into which all time and lives descend and struggle to escape. The same, however, can be claimed of the Essex of the novel: history has either split apart and spread itself across time or it is always present.

The novel employs a very impressionistic style both in terms of the story and the writing itself—the setting is a kind of 'smudging' of history, from around the 1940s to the present day. Essentially, it is a kind of 'alternate history' device, somewhat as if history is a still-wet oil painting, and if one slipped one's fingertips into the colours of seventy years ago and swept them towards the colours of today, one would find certain shades had been smeared all the way across, mixing and contrasting and complementing.

To this end, there are Marconi mobile phones, Churchman cigarettes, Pathé Radio. Most importantly, and the novel's biggest conceit, the British Empire still exists. The novel attempts an 'aesthetic' that evokes British war films from the 1940s and '50s, but that also reaches back to the modernism of the interbellum; perhaps suggesting a kind of continuum of human experience, unconcerned with eras defined by transitory things like music, fashion, brands. One can conjecture that the name of the war (whatever it might be—indeed, wherever or whenever it might be) does not matter: it becomes simply a way of

⁸⁰ Michael Alexander, *A History of English Literature* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), 336-337

⁸¹ Marie-Laure Ryan, “Temporal Paradoxes in Narrative,” *Style*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (Summer 2009), 142

pinpointing a place in time. With no named enemy, no named location, and no definitive period or sequence of conflicts to give it identity, the war depicted in the novel can become either all wars or no wars. All that matters, perhaps, in a reversal of real life, are the people and the poetry.

An intention from the start was that the book should read somewhat like a text from the early part of the last century. To achieve this, I took inspiration from Neville Cardus's cricket almanac *Good Days*, *The Wayside Book* travelogue by Gilbert Rumbold, and H. V. Morton's *In Search of England*, an account of his car trips throughout England in the 1930s. In these extracts there seems to be a higher register present in the text, a focus on small details, and words which sadly now seem to belong to a previous period: "marvellous", "loveliness", "charming". These books, used as a resource to dip into, provided insight into a former mode, and texture to add interest to the prose of *Empire Day*:

He hit a ball for six to leg so fine that you were ready to vow that it went over the wicket-keeper's head. The ball was past him when he smote, as though by an afterthought, incredibly late. Constantine's strokes are always made late: he must have marvellous eyes⁸².

The beauty of Denham is of a breath-taking quality, and how generously it gives its loveliness to those who will meander through the length of its winding main street, a street flanked at each end by narrow stone bridges over the same tiny trout stream.⁸³

She was distinctly charming, especially when she flickered. She was wearing a small brown hat into which a diamanté arrow had been shot by an unerring Bond Street jeweller. She was neat as a doe, and rather deer-like in a brown tweed costume- with speckly stockings ending in brogues. A tight string of small pearls was round her neck, and her blouse was tangerine colour.⁸⁴

⁸² Neville Cardus, *Good Days* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1934), 39

⁸³ Gilbert Rumbold, *The Wayside Book* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1934), 57

⁸⁴ H. V. Morton, *In Search of England* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1936), 24

2.5. Method

To have the determination to finish a piece of writing, Anne Lamott argues, “[y]ou need to put yourself at [the] centre, you and what you believe to be true or right”⁸⁵ The writing of *Empire Day* was a very personal journey and when the words came easily it was thrilling and when the words would not come it was painful. Glyn Maxwell conjectures that “[a] poem, any poem... arises from the urge of a human creature... to break silence, fill emptiness, colour nothing with something, anything”⁸⁶ There was definitely a need to tell the story, a physical need, once the story had started to take shape. It is interesting how something made only of text can so completely consume the body and mind of the writer. Tony Williams describes writing as “not just a matter of technique.... It is also a human activity, situated in and forming part of the writer’s everyday life.”⁸⁷ This writing endeavour is more than a task, it is a transformation.

The ritual objects for this transformation included a word processor (the Scrivener software allowed me to keep drafts and research together, attached to the main document) and numerous notebooks. The novel was composed in conjunction with the keeping of a writing journal. The journal was a useful tool for recording frequent or occasional thoughts. Rather than being a regimented, routine assignment, writing in the journal was a safe place to put thoughts about writing without necessarily including them in the thesis. As Gillie Bolton says “[t]he learning journal is a relatively unstructured form of reflection and reflexive questioning dialogue”⁸⁸; it is almost a silent partner in the writing process. The journal would have aspects, too, of the diary, containing “stories of happenings, hopes and fears, memories, thoughts, ideas, and all attendant feelings” (pp127-128). A diary, as a journal, can be a “place of creation” (p127). Finding its way into the journal were lists of words, timelines, synopses, outlines, maps, poems, reminders. It sometimes gave an outlet when writer’s block made the prospect of working on the novel seem extremely difficult.

⁸⁵ Lamott, p.103

⁸⁶ Maxwell, p.22

⁸⁷ Tony Williams, “The Writer Walking the Dog: Creative Writing Practice and Everyday Life.” *American, British and Canadian Studies* (2013), 226

⁸⁸ Gillie Bolton, *Reflective Practice: Writing & Professional Development* (London: SAGE Publications Inc, 2010), 125

Overcoming the practical difficulties of writing was as important as putting words on the paper. Forcing through the writing when all inspiration has dried up. There were numerous methods of forcing. Sometimes working at a certain time of day worked to move past the block. Sometimes also did a required daily word count, but failure in this regard could have a detrimental effect. It became clear that distractions are much easier than writing. Perhaps Eliot had in mind writers when he wrote in 'Burnt Norton':

.... Only a flicker
Over the strained time-ridden faces
Distracted from distraction by distraction
Filled with fancies and empty of meaning
Tumid apathy with no concentration
Men and bits of paper, whirled by the cold wind
That blows before and after time...⁸⁹ (ll. 102-108)

Walking and being out in the world allows us to "confront the bodily, 'dwelt' experience of writing, to recognise that writing is a human activity which happens in space and time, our everyday environment."⁹⁰ Tony Williams suggests dog-walking is a good method of rediscovering the drive to write, and washing the dishes also allowed the mind to clear itself and refocus on its imaginative business.

Writing the novel was a constant battle against perfectionism. Usually, perfectionism won. Anne Lamott suggests that perfectionism is a natural defensive strategy the writer has evolved: much as our "psychic muscles... cramp around our wounds—the pain from our childhood, the losses and disappointments of adulthood, the humiliations suffered in both—to keep us from getting hurt in the same place again.... Perfectionism is one way our muscles cramp."⁹¹ It seems plausible. Towards the end of the novel there was an easing up of the cramps of perfectionism, brought on perhaps by a wish to reach the end of the journey, to finally see the finished artefact.

⁸⁹ T. S. Eliot, 'Burnt Norton', *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), 180

⁹⁰ Williams, p.235

⁹¹ Lamott, pp.29-30

Certain exercises were used in an attempt to remove the yoke of perfectionism, including automatic writing. Andrew Cowan builds upon, or rather focuses, Dorothea Brande's recommendation⁹² to wake each morning, earlier than usual, and write uncritically, by stipulating that the writing should concentrate on one's "earliest memories".⁹³ Such a technique not only prepares the writer to write and circumvents procrastination, but also helps the writer to "access some of those 'treasures of memory'" (42), as he uses Brande's phrase.

Two of the more successful exercises are included here:

It was an old extendable table with an extra leaf in the middle, all very oval and made from that shiny, almost plasticity-veneered wood that was popular in the 70s and 80s. A and I used to play underneath it, and I was fascinated by the bolts and latches that were under there. I think we used to play Star Wars or something similar and we drew on the underside of the table in crayon or chalk: control panels, and buttons and signs. Mum and Dad had a brown tablecloth that I distinctly remember. It was a very thick fabric, almost terrycloth like with a fringe of tassels all around the bottom. When I was under the table I remember the tablecloth would come down about halfway to the floor. I would play with the tassels. One thing I remember vividly because maybe I'm just making parts of it up, is that I was running, probably chasing A in some game, and slipped/tripped on a toy (Skeletor's staff, perhaps?) and went flying headfirst into the side of the table. I think there was a lot of blood and worrying, and I went to an emergency dentist because I'd knocked out a tooth or two, maybe? That's about all I can remember about that. I'm sure the table moved around my parents' house a lot, different places and orientations in the dining room. So many buffet lunches, especially when Michael and Lawrence would come around at the weekends. I'm not sure when they got rid of the table- I can't remember if S ever saw it. Probably not.

⁹² Dorothea Brande, *Becoming a Writer* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996)

⁹³ Cowan, p.40

Mum and Dad have changed the back garden more times than I can remember. I'm trying to recall what it was like in my earliest memory of it, but a failing. There was a fish pond there for a long time, although it seemed to be constantly moved around the garden. At one point it was where the patio table is now, a rectangular pond surrounded by tiles. Dad made a small bridge out of wood, a humpback bridge, that fit over the pond from side to side. I have dreamed about the pond in that location before- there was a giant fish or some other kind of watery creature living in it. All my dreams of the pond, no matter its location, involve the smell and the feel of the slimy mud that always seemed to be at the bottom of the water. There was a distinctly fishy smell whenever the various ponds had fish in them. I think the pond was at the bottom of the garden at some point, but probably wasn't there for long. The last pond, I think, was the one where the rockery now is. It was small and 'scenic' and only had fish in it once- I think they either died from some condition that affects their delicate nature or were caught by the neighbourhood cats. Dad laid an electricity cable down to the shed and the garage- I remember I was worried that it would be very dangerous, or that one day in the future somebody would not realise it was there and electrocute themselves on the end of a spade. When they had the extension built I remember the smell of construction - of wood, of brick, of plaster, dust and paint. I remember being very tense during that time, but I don't remember exactly why- it may have been to do with the building or something going on at school at the time. We used to play lots of games in the garden- football and tennis and everything. We had a blue ride-on tractor that had a trailer- I remember the feel of it, the sound of the plastic as we moved against it. Dad had the wheels from the tractor in a drawer in the garage for a while, I think, big chunky black plastic wheels. One day I was in a mood and was out in the garden kicking a football around, when I kicked it at the shed window and broke one of the glass slats. I think I went sheepishly indoors at that point and didn't tell anyone. Dad found out later- I think there was shouting but I don't remember if there was any other punishment.

I was not altogether successful at establishing a routine. The techniques mentioned in this chapter worked to ease the blockages as they emerged but it was generally a case of fixing problems as they came rather than discovering a way to avoid problems. There was a sense, perhaps, that there should be something difficult, even painful, about the act of writing, especially if the work is of a personal nature or has been a part of the writer's life for an extended period of time. There must be a determination to bring the work to fruition, to clear the way for the outpouring of creativity. As Anne Lamott writes in *Bird by Bird*, a lot of it depends on the writer's belief in and love for the craft, but it will always be a struggle:

...you have to believe in your position, or nothing will be driving your work. If you don't believe in what you are saying, there is no point in your saying it. You might as well call it a day and go bowling. However, if you do care deeply about something... then this belief will keep you going as you struggle to get your work done.⁹⁴

⁹⁴ Lamott, pp.106-107

Chapter 3

Writing Journal

23/10/13

Perhaps Martin uses writing exercises of the kind suggested by Andrew Cowan- 20 minutes of free writing around a pre-determined subject, with no stopping for editing or contemplation. Perhaps Martin does this because he is suffering from writer's block while writing his novel, and manipulates the exercises to create poems through a formula or some degree of deletion.

The war represents the writing life - endless marching, intermittent fighting, inconclusive combat, setbacks and successes, a final destination that constantly shifts (closer and farther away, more concrete and then more unreal).

The war represents depression. I wrote a short story at UEA for my final graded piece of prose work which followed a man in his journey through a devastated town, where he bears witness to miracles and the bending/breaking of physical laws (chance, gravity). It was intended to represent the mind in distress, in the midst of depression, where all reality is turned upside down. In a similar way, the war in this novel plays with reality.

“My Love Sleeps in Peace”

My love sleeps in peace far from me:
No guns, nor my cries, reach to her.
In warless lands across the sea,

My love who sleeps in Colchester.

My love sleeps in peace far from here:

In dreams as deep as ever were.

She knows no pain, she knows no fear,

My love sleeps still in Colchester.

My love sleeps in peace far from harm:

Never cannon wake, nor shells stir.

As worms quiet is she, as soil calm,

My love who sleeps 'neath Colchester.

24/10/13

Adrian suggested the following texts which might share some common ground with my work:

Dylan Thomas - *Death and Entrances*

John Pudney - 'For Johnny'

Kingsley Amis

Norman Mailer - *The Naked and the Dead*

Penguin New Writing

Pete Seeger - *Waist Deep in the Big Muddy*

The *Aeneid*, the *Iliad*, the *Art of War*, Churchill speeches

In terms of pondering where to start the PhD, he suggested simply to start writing the novel and letting the notes made during writing and the accumulation of materials come naturally. Suggested I should pick a few writers whose influence is greatest on my writing

and focus on them - from that core, I can work outwards to other writers but avoid getting bogged down in too much/too wide reading.

Perhaps try to write the novel and the poems simultaneously, side-by-side - possible interesting way to format the manuscript? With poems in the margins or pushing into the prose?

Liked the idea of a lack of specificity for the place and time of the war - impressed the importance of making the case for such a choice.

The reality/unreality of war - armies fighting to remove their purpose for existing - having to find another purpose in peacetime. The call of duty as a natural, almost mythical, thing in a person.

Part One - The Last Week of University:

1. Martin - Introductory chapter, Martin getting ready for the March
2. Amanda
3. The March - At the pub, the March itself
4. Martin's Academic Advisor - His advisor tells him about publishing some

poems

5. The Creative Writing Class -
6. Amanda's Play - The play
7. Amanda's Room -
8. The Last Day of University -

Part Two - The Summer Holiday:

9. Their Unemployment
10. Amanda's Job
11. Martin's Job
12. Grays
13. The Party

14. Colchester

15. The Draft

16. The Train

Part Three - The War:

17. The Coast

18. The Company

19. Battles

20. The Captain

21. The Package - Martin sends a collection of poems to his academic advisor

22. Up-Country - Company moves up-country, Captain killed by bomb, Dixon

'promoted'

23. The Reverend

24. The Boat

25. Kipchumba

26. The Angel - Martin wounded

27. The Hospital

28. Letters and Emails - Communication with Elsie

29. The Mountains - Company moves up to the mountains, Dixon transferred to

Skyward, Martin promoted to Captain

30. The Minefield - Martin guides a platoon through a minefield

31. The Second Angel

32. The Manuscript

The lieutenants stood around the wrecked body of the Captain. Anders started to laugh. The others barely noticed the sound. They stared. Dixon tried to say something but beyond stuttering over "I-I-I t-think...", he got no words out. Parson and Farrow were pale-faced and shivering. Gordon ran a hand over his head. Martin thought how like children they were, like boys after their ball had burst. Their game would now be ended, they would have to go home, early, and they were disappointed. Out one ball and needing a new game. After a moment, in which the boys were all silent, they looked at each other. Each was humbled in

his comrade's eyes, each was a mirror onto the other. Each but Dixson, who alone amongst the Marxists was the son of a king, and shone with duty. No one was surprised, it was expected. His duty, blind as a new kitten, swung around in wild thought for another few moments, before he said, "We should call someone. John," he touched Gordon's arm, "go and make sure someone else heard it. Someone should be coming. Someone needs to know." Gordon nodded and, smartly, turned on his heel and ran from the room. Dixson waved slightly at the body. "I suppose he is dead, right?"

"Modernism's First Wave"

The long interrogation of noise
by music plays in the strike of the clock.
See the flowering dreams and darkness
under the veneer of regard sweeping away.

Certainties remain vital, fascinating
the cold chance we might endure.
Someone shone lights so dazzling
years appear like the best work of literature:

writing so good at lamenting the previous age
is doomed to be more certain
that in the dark modern world
war and poetry are key.

The Culture Show BBC2 - Wars of the Heart

Intensity of life required for writing

'Distorted values' - 'the high-pitched level'

A deflation afterwards - 'life seemed flat'

15/11/13

Reading the collection of Keith Douglas's letters, written before and during the Second World War, makes it clear that they are a principal resource for the project. In much the same way that Douglas communicated with his friends and family during his years away at school, at university, and in the armed forces, the vast majority of the 'dialogue' between the protagonist and one of the other main characters takes the form of an exchange of letters and emails. In this way, it is an examination of the nature of an epistolary friendship such as Douglas experienced, emphasising the disconnection between the participants and highlighting their isolation – these letters illuminate the necessarily unconventional long-distance relationship, infrequently renewed yet keenly felt.

“Larks by The Bush”

There is a need to name
the rites of man
around the upward birds.
A feather

(structured, film-sensitive)
aligned is hard,

opening, turning:
it was born in the mud.

Untangle the centuries:
the broad-described dust
now the broad joy
above the marsh.

The familiar present of thought:
all life, by the end,
bears a kind of wildness, and is
more abundant.

The wild possibility of intellect!
Reading the signs of identity
through the narrative features,
with a mouth and a chance

to rage that,
in-born, men mock
what it means to
live there.

Moving in the current,
all here respond to the sense of self:
it ends in the hunt.
The body, at end, is history.

All things go
on-
all, all, all-
and there's nowhere a balance.

22/11/13

This piece represents my latest attempt at the first chapter of a novel, entitled *Empire Day*, or perhaps *Kingdom of Essex*. Of all the fiction I have written, or tried to write, this has been by far the most difficult, always having stalled soon after starting. The most difficult aspect of writing the chapter has always been choosing when to enter the story: the beginning, the end, or in medias res. Previously I have been inclined to start at the chronological beginning, and to have events unfold in linear order—it has seemed the easiest and most straightforward solution. This latest attempt at the first chapter actually occurs at the end of the story, and in a way provides a frame for the rest of the novel, the events of which take place earlier, chronologically.

In my mind, the reversed order and the idea of a framed, almost 'flashback' narrative begin to suggest a (potentially false?) retelling of events, which invites a pleasing ambiguity of truth and fiction. On the other hand, having a narrative in reverse (or, at least, moving in a generally rearwards direction) seems to bring its own complexities: how does one position the climax of the plot, which can possibly only be a revelation, when the action has already been resolved in the first few chapters? So, in my thinking, questions and complications must be raised early and resolved (or left pointedly unresolved) by the end of the novel—everything is a sort of Eleusinian initiation into the cult, with the final chapters representing the unveiling of the mystery, the arrival at a point of total truthfulness. Whether the truth brings clarity or further ambiguity remains to be seen—no doubt there is a sweet spot, somewhere between disappointment and satisfaction.

I am Okar.

I am the freedom on wings

as I fly through your window.
You have no nets to stop me:
I am free to bite you.
I am the freedom on wings,
you cannot stop me.

This is the well the White Man made
For he feared that we would die of thirst.
As I lean over it, I see another man:
The man staring at me has White Face,
White Hands, shake and shiver
In frightened water.
I pull him up and drink him, his White Face,
White hands:
White man, I draw you up!
I drink you!
You quench me!
I control you!

26/11/13

It seems that, as fiction inherently has something of the unreal within it, there is a logic that suggests one should abandon attempts to cross the boundary back into the real—to not fear the unreal, to not be ashamed of it and want to cull it, indeed to embrace it as a necessary and immensely liberating part of writing. There are two precepts from studying creative writing that have stuck with me (which surely must mean they contain some sort of wisdom), two commandments to the writer: 'specify' and 'return to the characters'. I think, more than anything else, these two commandments make or break a piece of writing, and they are primarily concerned with truth. I've tried to stay faithful to those ideas in writing this chapter: no matter how poetic Martin's voice became it would always have something

of his character in it, and no matter how far the narrative departed from the real world there would always be something factual or solid upon which the story could balance. Ultimately, I think those moments of specificity and those moments where one sees something believable or familiar in the characters allow the writer the degree of freedom necessary to challenge the reader with complexity or artfulness.

It is hard to write about one's own writing in a detached way. Attempting to sound academic or to find elements of critical theory which explain choices made in the writing process seems both vain and duplicitous: most of the choices made, I would struggle to attribute to any principles or touchstones of theory. I would suppose that the vast majority of decisions made in the writing process are personal and unconscious and impossible to explain. I suppose, as in a war, battleplans can be shared and explained, the final results of the conflict can be clearly seen by all, advances can be described, engagements can be reported, the waves and shifts of narrative can be explained in a grand scale. The fighting, however, the wrestling with words, the choice of a word or phrase, this little thing or that little thing, can it possibly all be told?

Border between the explicit and the elliptical

How long can it avoid being a novel?

Moving in reverse chronology- without one incident building upon the last like blocks, how do you keep a reader? If it's a deconstruction, removing layers to reach some inner core, how to show the progress?

Is this a failure of the first chapter? If the first chapter set up a hook, would the reverse chronology not hurt the novel throughout its reading? Or is a constant incentive required?

A hook:

Using an authorial voice

Using the radio broadcast

Using an abstract indicator of progression: the trajectory of a bullet

Martin is writing a novel

He's idealistic

He gets blocked- writes poetry as an exercise

His poetry gets recognised and published

Elsie's songs are trite- she realises this

She reads Martin's blog when it's mentioned in the press

She sends him an angry email- they correspond

Amanda writes plays

She's very realistic, down-to-earth

She's seeing two guys at the same time- one at uni, one in Grays

She unconsciously wants to have a baby- but her 'ball-less boys' can't impregnate her

She gets harassed by the one in Grays

She becomes masculinised

Her play gets performed

She gets pregnant by Dixson- accidentally

gender-bending:

Dixson has 'relationships' with both Martin and Amanda

At first they're both Dixson's bitches, but both grow above him:

Martin out-soldiers him (?)

Amanda gets pregnant by him, which terrifies him

Dixson is the ultimate man, ultimate soldier

He is successful, handsome, perfect

“A Brief Part”

He died un-aged-
those years he left behind
in us age.

The gulf around
his death is still-
shores
impossible to inhabit
sprawling away.

All a hole: no joy,
no where but the undeniable
past. So he is
interred.

A distant form
calls from a dream,
a remote
view of a life
three years old.

Days with school and work
stand off in the dark,
a vague potential
that is a man ahead.

Fixed in silence,
the man,
the other, is
then isn't after all.

His first words linger
on my face- I've become
his voice. The son
comes back, suspended
in memory: he was,
for those few years,
all.

The way a tone runs
longest in silence,
we ever, ever
connect: his form, the centre
of him uprising in
his last day
with his father.
The father's final tenderness.

Overwhelmingly,
no one is able to remain.
Mysterious,
these sounds fall out
and go to him
in the night.

A boy, at the end.
The boy, my small boy,
that night, in my hands.

What I have is a
desperate conviction:
he is much beyond pain.

He is beyond
every influence,
but love is in everything.

8/4/15

Victoria the nurse is a tricky character. I'm currently unsure whether I will keep her or cut her. Originally, I had planned that Martin and Victoria would have a relationship while he was recuperating in the hospital.

A sexual relationship between the two now sounds like quite a cynical exploitation of the 'exotic' - I think Martin would go along with it but it seems unlikely that Victoria, as a married nurse and secret rebel, would. They are not queueing up to have sex with soldiers- it is not an attraction to them or a badge of honour. I think they should only have a platonic relationship but perhaps have hints of something more.

The hospital chapters are ones for which I have various sections drafted and I am looking forward to actually writing them. I hope it doesn't become necessary to cut Victoria because I think it would be an interesting situation to explore.

"Consciously Atomic"

Full lived from over-
chronologic times,
the only inspired
form of poetic register:

consciously atomic.

A medium bizarre to us,
to everything, we don't
naturally think. We perceive
some permanent, indivisible
power of human happiness.

Connect.

Calling.

Calling.

Seeking the surefire soul,
a dread poorly contained.
All things are made of folly:
human particles bombarding us
and contentment.

21/4/15

Martin and Amanda:

It's becoming increasingly obvious to me that I am guilty of writing a 'will they, won't they' relationship drama. Feisty female and retiring male, constantly at each other's throats- sounds like a Cary Grant/Katherine Hepburn screwball comedy. I watched Bringing Up Baby as part of a film studies course at UEA and it affected me greatly, but it's not the dynamic I intended for this novel. From time to time I wonder if it effectively comes across that she really DOES hate him and he really DOES want to only be friends with her.

I think the beginning of the novel leaves it quite pleasingly open as to whether or not Martin has started a relationship with Elsie. The fact that he attempts to call Amanda when

he's feeling lonely suggests not- although I suppose this could also be read as a returning soldier's inability to connect to people without similar experiences. He is reaching out to Amanda because, perhaps, only she can understand what he's going through.

That's a lovely reading that I hadn't intended while writing and certainly something I could try to pad out. I like that complexity. The first chapter will definitely need a degree of rewriting after the novel is finished and if I am able to bring some of this into it, I feel it will be improved.

22/4/15

Chapter 6:

I enjoy writing the relationship between Amanda and Emma Harris, being the only two women in 2 platoon, although they are very similar in tone, which I fear makes it harder to distinguish them.

I wasn't entirely happy with having Harris cry in this chapter when she is recounting her experience at the prison. I was wary of it coming across as quite sexist but I tried to make the situation she was describing so charged that it wouldn't seem like a weakness for her to show emotion- I hope if it were one of the male soldiers instead, that they would cry too. It may need extra work. Perhaps somewhere in another chapter a male soldier could cry in a similar situation, to give a sense of balance.

I was recently at a funeral for a family member, so the parts of this chapter concerning Amanda's Nan were written from quite an autobiographical place.

I think, in a way, this chapter talks about the 'thin places' of life and death. How Amanda felt that the grave was the edge of the world, how the nurses facing their deaths so affected Harris.

Mostly, it explores the idea of how people are affected by those around them, as Amanda says, like fingers or toes 'deforming' their neighbours. Harris mentions how it feels like they're alone in the world, which contrasts with how her encounter with the nurses affected her. In her memory, how Amanda's mum's coldness pushes her towards her cousin

Lizzy, who introduces her to pot. At the end, Amanda at once embraces the young girl Netty and violently pushes her away- I was attempting an echo of our own mother's attitude towards her.

I think this chapter needs a bit of work to tie all the strands together.

24/4/15

Is there a name for the moments when, while writing, things just start FALLING INTO PLACE? You suddenly see a connection you didn't realise was there, an until-now-hidden network of cables and contacts with MEANING pulsing between them.

Apart from actually finishing a story, placing that last word, can there be any better, more motivating experience for a writer? A similar emotion occurs, I believe, in visual art, with the 'happy accident' and similarly, in music, there must be times when the musician has a sudden, almost epiphanic moment. But is there anywhere but in writing that the feelings can have such resonance throughout the whole work?

Usually attributed to the muse? Some psychological classification? A delusion? Brought on by too many late nights and too little objective distance?

1 section

- Cpl Polley
- Gripp
- 'Ham'
- Swain
- Drove
- Pullin
- Knowles
- 'Clarkey'

2 section

- Cpl Franks
- Jonesey
- Strong
- Kettell ('Cuppa')
- Tubby Tummons
- Vise ('Squeeze')
- Morling
- 'Vickers'

3 section

- LCpl Budden ('Andy')
- Snell
- Stanton
- Piggott
- Bratt
- Killen ('Machine')
- White ('Pasty')
- Alcock

1/5/15

I like this part from *Little Gidding*:⁹⁵

A people without history
Is not redeemed from time, for history is a pattern
Of timeless moments.

Which connects with the earlier

⁹⁵ T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002)

Here, the intersection of the timeless moment
Is England and nowhere. Never and always.

Is Eliot's timeless moment the still point where there is no movement? Or the point between life and death which is neither but gives both meaning? Past and future are both in the present, oak trees are within acorns from both directions, humans within babies in the same way. History is a combination of these 'impacted' moments, one after the other, each containing something of the previous and hinting at the one to come. At a micro and a macro scale, for people, for nations. Between, touching neither but colouring both.

In the holy place, where "prayer is valid", England and nowhere are connected- prayer is the connection between the physical and metaphysical, and both of those are, have and will be. From Creation, to the present, to the metaphysical Revelations- prayer connects all these? A physical action of the present, that connects this place to all places (or to no other physical place); that connects, through the metaphysical, all times to this present moment, including when Christ walked, including the death of all living things.

I like to think that the novel, playful with memories, playful with chronology, experiments with similar intersections in the narrative.

10/5/15

Chapter 10:

Amanda and Martin are talking to an unresponsive Ombarrago. I like the image of these two talking and bickering about incredibly pointless things and things very of their culture, while Ombarrago sits impassively.

I wanted to play with the idea that Westerners write the story of the Other without their voice/consent - the whole novel is having a conversation about this issue, I think, a sort of argument with orientalism. These are the stories of Westerners in another country, and the lives of the local people are generally only seen through the eyes of these Western

characters (I struggle with using the white/black dichotomy, as not all the soldiers are white and I don't think all the locals are black- I prefer the Western and the Other).

So, when Amanda tells Ombarrago the details of his own life story, I think it comes across as overblown and definitely unfair to him. Martin tries to defend him, at least a little, but also is guilty of assuming what the other man is thinking and feeling- taking offence for somebody else could be considered equally offensive.

It struck me that it would be amusing to have them be silent when Ombarrago falls asleep - their talking was merely a way to avoid the awkwardness of the situation. I think the final reveal of the extent of Ombarrago's torture is another means of bursting their bubble and shaming them.

I never wanted to make Martin out to be a hero but I think, as one of the protagonists, he needed to show a sympathetic side and I think that is part of his character. Twice in this chapter he is ready to defend Ombarrago: I think it's a mixture of humanity and also pragmatism, as he realises that Ombarrago is the bargaining chip for peace between Britain and the colony.

I put the snippets of movie reviews for Elsie's musicals in this chapter because I thought the situation was quite filmic: a sort of jailbreak, a car journey, a stand-off in the desert. There also seemed to be elements of acting and direction in the actions and conversations of Martin and Amanda. There are also a few tongue-in-cheek homages to Ice Cold in Alex - hiding in an ambulance; Amanda's talk of a long, cold drink as a reward; the handing over of a prisoner. The reviews are also reviews of the chapter, in a way: 'overlong' and 'dialogue-heavy' being a case in point.

13/5/15

I enjoy the snippets of material tucked into the main narrative - they seem, to me, like the sources presented in a history exam. A letter from the front, a newspaper article, a poem, a laundry list, a photograph. 'Using the sources, do you think Franco was considered a fascist leader?' or some such. This works, for me, in the novel because on some level it comes across as an investigation into the 'war' - what happened, why did it happen, who did what

to whom. From Abina's interview in the very beginning, I think a mystery is set up: what happened in this faraway place that affected these people in such a way?

From a purely technical standpoint, I like and equally dislike, in the novel, how the 'asides' are quite 'in-line' - they don't stand out and probably will make the book harder to read. Is this a problem? If it is, is it a problem solved by formatting? Indentation? A different font?

17/5/15

Amanda is very angry.

I'm not entirely sure if, at the moment, it is clear WHY she is so angry.

She is angry at Martin because he was successful without trying, without suffering for his art as much as she. She is one of the only people that knows he isn't a 'real' poet (Martin himself is the other person). Her poetry got her into university, it gave her hope, it's something she thinks she's good at... until Martin flukes it and crushes her confidence.

She is angry at her boyfriend - not really for who he is, but because she can't love him. In fact, she probably loves Martin more than anyone else, even though that's a different kind of love- which makes her even more frustrated.

She is angry at her mum for being so happy that she left. Being angry is a way to survive at this point- it's her coping mechanism for her unhappy life, which just digs her deeper into her own hole.

I found it difficult to describe the landscape. I lacked the words or the knowledge to create in the text a sense of place. This was an issue in regard to descriptions of both the Colony and Essex

The governor

Don't like his character/dialogue

How to fix it

He is about to lose his colony

LOSS

Why Empire? As the novel concerns the past and transitional objects, I considered the British Empire to be exactly one of those comforts, a thing people hold on to. There seems to be a percentage of British people (and people in the former colonies who benefited from empire, or their descendants) who regard the empire as a good thing. It is history to be proud of, this sense of moral righteousness. I think this sense is central to people's 'memory' (a cultural memory) of empire, the nostalgia tied up in the 'good bits' of war poetry and war films. Of course, it's no longer enough to uncritically remember these things, to uncritically hold them up as the pillars of Britishness.

As vague as the nature/geography of the novel's Colony is, by writing this novel now, by mentioning British imperialism, by the very fact that the backdrop to the story is a colony (and thus invoking the shadow of empire and colonialism) seems to require me to engage at some level with racism, orientalism and post-colonialism. Does my heritage/privilege as a white Briton also bear that debt? Do I share a certain guilt by being a white British writer? I would not deny it. Indeed, it seems evasive, sheepish, ultimately guilty to try and skirt around, or indeed ignore, such matters when writing 'about' the British empire- a wilful denial. As a writer, writing this, it is an obligation not to appropriate the story/voice of the victims/survivors of imperialism. I feel I have to write mindfully, without forgiving or lessening (especially through the voice of a 'native' character) colonialism; without ignoring or silencing the concerns of post-colonialism.

I cannot avoid the bottom line: that, no matter the explicitness/surreality of the Colony in the novel, the very notion of British colonialism necessitates this engagement. A conscientious writer's duty, in this regard, to not be flippant.

It's helpful when writing about a place that doesn't exist to have a model, so I searched for a real-world example on which to base the town in the novel. In the back of my mind, Kenya had been the real-world counterpart to the Colony, and I found a town of an approximate size and location (some distance inland, not near the coast or too high in the mountains) called Nanyuki. Researching the town through various online resources, I came to picture the General Hospital of the novel as the simulacrum of Nanyuki cottage hospital and Government House as the Fairmont Hotel, set in its acres of green lawns. There is an airfield just outside of the town and the platoon's walk from Government House to the airfield in the novel follows roughly the same course.

At first, the use of a real place on which to build a fictional location was purely to create in my mind a more solid picture of the world in which these characters lived- it was simply a matter of how things looked, how far one thing was from another, the act of taking measurements. I could answer questions such as 'How long would it take to march through town?' and 'How does Martin return to the Hospital after the bomb?' and 'What sort of roadside details would they see as they walked down the streets?' without grasping at ill-defined nothings in my imagination. I think there came a point, however, where the real life Nanyuki came, in my mind, to stand for the unnamed town in the novel, even though I wanted to completely avoid placing the Colony with any kind of specificity in Africa or Asia.

I like the motif of the yellow flowers. It was not at first intended, but I think they have come to symbolise another of those things which we carry with us, from the past. Amanda sees it on the embroidery on her grandmother's mantel, and she has it tattooed on her neck to keep it with her. The yellow signifying joy or illness or the sun.

The celandine poems of Wordsworth and Edward Thomas were interesting factors in the flower's reappearance.

I thought about how Martin, upon finding Amanda, a woman with similar writerly qualities, after years in a boy's school, is like Wordsworth confronted with the celandine:

A small, unshowy flower, I think of Amanda as the celandine: hardy, unnoticed, unassuming.

For a long time, I avoided choosing a name for the author of *Empire Day* and skirted many times around the void in the novel. This is the character who is inspired by R. N. Curry, the war poet turned school teacher at Colchester Royal Grammar School. Like Curry I wanted the author to have been born in the colony, to have settled in Colchester and to have taken up a post of English master at the grammar school. His influence on Martin would be a big motivator for Martin's character. I settled eventually on the name 'C. A. Copyn', with the full name of Courage Aeneas Copyn. I wanted it to be Coping at first, but decided to obscure it slightly: apparently, 'copyn' is a Welsh word, meaning 'spider' which seems appropriate if one considers his many-legged effect on people, influence like a web. His middle name doesn't appear in the novel, but I like to think of him as an Aeneas leaving the Colony, settling in Essex, beginning a line of writers. His first name suggests similar names in the Colony, such as Beloved and Bold.

He's a colonist writing about the colony, writing a eulogy for his home but also a place that doesn't exist. He's the font, inspiring Martin, inspiring Ombarrago; tricking them, I guess, into believing in things that don't exist.

Does the first chapter represent a framing device, a bit like *Heart of Darkness*, with Marlow on the Thames relating the history of Kurtz? Is the story being told by Martin, in the 'present' day, to Abina during his interview? In which case, what could Amanda's chapters represent? Her own words or Martin's assumption of a different voice? I have often considered having all the viewpoints being a part of Martin, or of Amanda, or that both of them were created by Ombarrago as a sort of creation story for his post-colonial nation. Arguably, these can all still be valid interpretations, yet the framing device gives primacy to a 'face value' reading, namely that the chapters belong to their respective narrators. The

recollections and letters are arguably things that happen or documents that exist in the 'present' day, rather than at the time they appear in the narrative. For example, Amanda's extradiegetic conversation with, presumably, a journalist or researcher in chapter 6 must occur at either the same time as chapter 1 or in the gap between chapter 1 and chapter 2. On the other hand, Elsie's interview in chapter 25 must have been recorded very early in narrative time, probably in the endless void of narrative time after chapter 27. The transcriptions of both these interviews, however, are, as I see it, both actual documents which are available to a fictional reader within the timeframe, the 'present' day, of the first chapter. Are these letters, transcripts, reports, and photographs actually all physical documents on the desk of Abina as she conducts her interview?

Music plays a large role in the novel. This is quite unexpected as it was never really my intention. While I write, I constantly listen to music- there can have been little of the text written without music in the background: it is an undeniable part of the writing process. I don't know if this explains the length of some lines, or certain rhythms in the text, or the more lyrical sentences, but I believe some influence in that regard would be unavoidable.

The majority of music listened to while writing seems to fall into two categories. The first seems to be ballads. I take the word (in its original context?) to mean a form of story-telling music. Included in this is folk music, specifically British, both traditional and contemporary, and also country music. My uncle is a folk singer in Northamptonshire and both folk and country were a near-constant childhood soundtrack. I like to think of the novel as a kind of folk song, a lament perhaps, to things and loves lost, of soldiers who are either rogues or the gallant dead. It borrows from tradition, hints at a long history.

The second category of music includes jazz and light music. These specifically relate to the original direction I had for the novel: this is the music of the war films, of the 40s and 50s, of the palm courts and the dance halls.

Jazz

Light music - Richard Addinsell

'Our Captain Was a Lusty Man'

Well our Captain was a lusty man, it came quite naturally
To dally with a pretty Private, but to him said she, "No thanks!"
So he loaded up his rifle with a cartridge full of blanks.
Captain said to Private, "Come into my company",
And Private said to Captain, "Sir, now that would surely be
A matter for the red hats from the blessed RMP!"
So he shipped her off up-up-upcountry, oh up-upcountry!
Yes, he shipped her off up-up-upcountry, oh up-upcountry!

Well our Captain was a prideful man, to be spurned by such as she:
A captain oughtn't be turned down by a lady in the ranks!
So he loaded up his rifle and not this time with blanks.
Captain followed Private and espied her upcountry
Carousing with a red hat from the blessed RMP-
So up he raised his rifle and gave her two or three.
So he's now a-swinging up-up-a tree, oh up-up a tree!
Yes, now he's a-swinging up-up-a tree, a tree upcountry!

One of my major aims is to present the soldiers in the novel as characters in a war film, rather than as actual soldiers. This is partly to avoid too strict an adherence to authenticity, which would be both difficult to produce with authority or accuracy and also at odds with the unreality of the colony and the war, but mostly it's to reflect the country's strong nostalgic temper. The country doesn't want to let go of the memory of the world wars and prefers to remember them, shallowly, in fiction, in black-and-white on a TV screen. Is the memory accurate? Wars with John Mills and Richard Attenborough and David Niven and

Noel Coward, with stirring orchestral soundtracks and with after-film credits thanking the Armed Forces for their assistance. I'm trying to avoid making the characters clichéd but want to allow a sense of pastiche- for all their flaws, this novel is to pay tribute to those films. It wants to become a war film, in a sense, by mimesis, by aping the trappings of the 1940s and 1950s, the glamour, the fashion, the speech, the music. It knows, however, that it never will be, never can be, for novels are not films and that period has collapsed into the irreversible past, has folded up and has folded up other considerations within it, can never be seen or apprehended in the same way again. It is, I suppose, both an attempt and a failure, an incompleteness, a planned failure.

'Captain True'

Heed the tale of Captain True, that ill-fated Mutineer:
He cursed the other Officers and did flatly engineer
By villainy and mortar shell to make them disappear-
In the morning, in the morning, they'll hang him in the morning.

The Major and Lieutenant, they were blasted all away-
We gathered far-flung body parts and by the end of day
Every man was adamant that Captain True must pay-
In the morning, in the morning, they'll hang him in the morning.

The Sergeant and the Lance Jack, oh they beat him black and blue-
For treachery's a wicked crime and swinging's surely due
But un-til then there's ample time for thrashing Captain True-
In the morning, in the morning, they'll hang him in the morning.

That night he spent in suffering with neither food nor water-
He pleaded through his broken teeth but none would give him quarter:

Starving's such a petty price for such a wicked slaughter-
In the morning, in the morning, they'll hang him in the morning.

They stripped and bound the Captain and they strung him at first light-
The comp'ny all fell in to watch the hangman serve him right.
The Sergeant tied the looping rope, the Lance Jack pulled it tight-
In the morning, in the morning, they hanged him in the morning.

Sergeant said to Lance Jack, "Tom, let's take the time to savour
If bastards must away to hell pray you'll take this wager:
Dear Captain True is joining the Lieutenant and the Major"-
In the morning, in the morning, they hanged him in the morning.

Being a Christian

Knowing Christians: brother-in-law, aunt and uncle

Martin's conversion

Desperation and a sincere hope for a God

Amanda's anger seemed unwarranted for a long time. While I was writing her chapters, it seemed natural for her to be angry, especially at Martin, but I was unsure of its cause. She is angry that he is a successful poet, that his idea of poetry differs from hers, and she is also very angry after the death of her friend and her lover. She is possibly angry at Martin because of their history, but I don't particularly want Martin to be the driving factor in her personality. After writing her chapters and especially her memories and reveries about her past, I came to realise that she turns sadness into anger. I think I tried to show that this is the same flaw she saw in her father- an insecure man, deeply unhappy, who dealt with his unhappiness by becoming angry towards those to whom he was closest, his family. I think

this cost him his marriage and his formerly close relationship with his daughter. I don't know if I showed that Amanda is worried about this becoming her life, too: she fears that she will become her father. Arguably, she also fears that she might become her mother. I think this bristly nature is in a manner of speaking the way that Amanda protects her personality from outside forces/invasions, the manifestation of her 'self-determination'. I suppose one might say that she resents and attempts to resist those who would create colonies inside her- especially the armies of Martin.

At times I have wondered whether to highlight the similarities between the people of the Colony and the lot of poor people in (the novel's) England. It was a consideration from the very beginning of the writing process, the hardship facing the poor, but I kept doubting myself, thinking that it was obviously not an exact analogue as other there are factors at play in colonialism (racism for example, and geopolitics). With that in mind, wishing to be sympathetic to the suffering colonialism has inflicted on peoples and countries throughout the world throughout history, I decided to background the similarities and avoid any explicit comparison. However, at a more abstract level, I find it interesting to think about the relationships between the powerful and the weak, and the weak's exploitation, natural in all human society. Despite my anxiety around what I deserve to write about, this mismatch of power, a mismatch that is at the root of racism and poverty, of colonialism and warfare, all human conflict, is still a valid topic for fiction and finds form in the novel in the opposition of England against the Colony, the Army against Ombarrago's rebels, officers against soldiers, middle class against working class.

I thought of Amanda as lo tormented by the gadfly, tormented here by her painful tattoo, pushing her on and on.

The interwoven passages in this chapter are an attempt to present photographs to the reader. It is presumably Amanda looking at the photographs, possibly in those times she describes, after school, when she would look at her mum's photo albums. It might possibly take place in a future time, beyond the war, either between chapter one and chapter two or

at a point even after Martin's interview. It brought to mind Sebald's use of black and white photos in his novels- including actual photos in this novel was an interesting concept that I considered but ultimately rejected, mostly because of practical reasons.

'Come out from where you are, come out'

Come out from where you are, come out
from undersheets, love, and wake up.
Come out from under, come up and come out:
our earth is caving in today.
Our churning rolling hill of gravel,
underbedded, under us,
tiny sparks as flint strikes flint strikes
a twinkle twinkle flicker of fire.
Understirring fires now upsurging,
overwhelming damp old Colchester.

Come out, love, and see come out
old worlds of rocks and shifting slabs
shake down the spires of Langenhoe,
make rubble and rubble and rubble
of Rowhedge and waste of Wivenhoe.
Mud river bubbling as strata sheer away.
The unset earth comes caving in today,
upheaving unremembered history—
a rummage through the ill-packed clay
asking why here and here and here?

Come out, come lift the town and sex it,

inspect its marl mechanic underside.
Fortuitous rampart and pleasant valley
from East Hill to North Hill to Colne,
wall-sloped already, well-enveloped
by Headgate and South Gate and Hythe.
So here was Cymbeline, upon the upland
reigning, simply raised to hold the higher
ground, his armies fell, to crash on foes
who failed to mount the town's incline.

So here then the coming in, the coming
out of Rome and all the bones of kings
and temporary emperors prop the homes
of local men. 'Remember the horseman
of Thrace,' reads his split and faceless stone,
come out from under Balkerne Lane
or from the soil at Stanwell.

But now what is he and what the legions?
Just words on rocks, a schoolboy's essay,
and what time has left of wood and nails.

So here as well were Lucas and Lisle
and Morant and Hawkins and Spurgeon
and Rebow and Gilberd and Taylor—
Guntons and Humphreys and Jacks—
but why here and why here and why here?
My friends and how they were sorted:
Blaxill, Grammar, Charlie Lu—
Harsnett's, Parr's, Dugard's, Jay's—
Meeanee, Goojerat, Sobraon—
but why here and where have they gone?

You smelled like all the wine you drank
and ash from smoking on the porch
in late December's fag-end snow.
Come out, you called, the evening's planned:
film at the Regal, jazz at the Suite,
a dance and some drinks should inspire
a kiss on the crest of Balkerne bridge.
Over passing night-sparse traffic—
a broil of engine grind and fumes—
your cold hand was warm in my hand.

So here are nights spent drunk as hell
when we fell, out of the Bull and the Playhouse,
rolling double-headed down the Monkey Walk.
Took self-portraits with girls in shop windows
and the photographs would come out winding
time about place about people—
there, posed behind us, the black unfocused High Street,
an underexposed bulk of dread:
a hole for undetermined time
and those of us now dead.

So here we'll be shrouded in purple and gold,
and laid out unstirring on chiselled stone slabs.
Find some grass, then dig it, and plant us
in Welsh Wood or High Woods or Rec.
The Roman and we, we go the same way:
perge— and perge— and perge.
Come out, the tidal earth's receded:
what woke us up returned, retreated.
Shore up the spires of Langenhoe—
come out and twinkle and go.

It feels at times as if I'm writing a lot but saying very little. Thus the artist's failure: thought cannot translate to reality without losing something, becoming vague. Hence these 100,000 words saying nothing. The dread at the possibility that so much has been written for no purpose whatsoever, beyond that momentary sense of satisfaction upon typing 'The End'. I suppose it haunts everybody, at least every writer who wishes to be read, the fear that the fire, the enthusiasm, the anticipation, that was so red-hot in chapter 1, in chapter 2, has been quenched by the reality of only being able to find the 'good enough' word to describe the 'perfect' thought one-hundred thousand times. The author must ask the question, how much of it is the writing and how much the end result? Find some solace there. Also, find some solace that the writer is not the best judge of the work- should not, frankly, be allowed to judge the work at all.

'The Essexmen'

Come all you young folk and hearken to me:
I sing of the people 'tween London and sea.
Kin of the soil and the stream and the tree
And sure of God's wish for man to be free.

*Oh, rustic then and rustic now,
No rustic man shall ever plough
His Essex fields for London hoards
For Essex men shan't yield for lords.*

The king rode to Essex his tribute to claim;
With crown and with sword and with taxmen he came,

Yet soon his march was halted, in golden fields of grain,
By a company of Essexmen upon a country lane.

*Oh, rustic then and rustic now,
No rustic man shall ever plough
His Essex fields for London hoards
For Essex men shan't yield for lords.*

Now, the vain and shameless king he cursed them cruelly
And sent his squires with rod and sword to break the peasantry.
Oh King, cried the Essexmen, though thy steel may bend our knee
Our land shall never bend to thee!

*Oh, rustic then and rustic now,
No rustic man shall ever plough
His Essex fields for London hoards
For Essex men shan't yield for lords.
No, Essex men shan't yield for lords.*

I wasn't sure about including a 'dream sequence'. They can be used as a cheat for the writer to directly communicate to the reader, without subtlety, without any kind of artfulness. They can be heavy-handed. I think Six Knot does puncture the novel (possibly unavoidably) but I tried, consciously, to draw his 'omniscience' back into the narrative and have his character, though wide and unbelievable, remain somewhat grounded in his coarseness and physicality, to have him be signalled at various points (the otter-skinned man that Abina mentions in the first chapter) and his power to disrupt the narrative mitigated somewhat.

He talks about novels and writing and Martin being a character which, arguably, all break the fourth wall, but since Martin is a writer and the novel is about writing I considered this cheeky but also true to the fiction- I suppose the risk of deflation here is quite high,

halfway through the novel, the risk of the reader thinking “Well, if the author doesn’t care for the fiction, why should I bother?” I suppose I’m relying on the reader’s stamina at this point, or the reader’s willingness to set this chapter apart as something different from those previous (an option highlighted perhaps by the chapter being written in verse), something to be excused. I’m conscious of the hedging here.

I don’t know. He’s a risky character (both because of his omniscience and his vulgarity) but in a way I think he should be. He was intended to suggest the sort of bolshie chauvinist who looks back on a lot of the things in the novel (empire, English cricket, war films, the military, the 40s/50s, ‘Englishness’) and sees it all only with a rosy nostalgia. I was trying to suggest, by having Six Knot be a part of Martin, that there is a tendency in everybody to find some happiness in those things, even if that’s an uncomfortable confession: I remember Sundays when I was young when my dad would be watching war films or cricket on the TV and I would watch with him and that is a clung-to memory. All of it, I guess, is a means to set one apart, to elevate oneself, to find meaning, to fuel the ego, to belong: this is one’s home, these are one’s people, these the relics and the psalms of the cult of Englishness. A necessarily divisive membership, holding on together. Natural, neutral, divisive, bigoted?

For the most part, he was supposed to be a deeper aspect of Martin, saying things that Martin could not admit to himself, about his writing, about Amanda. At the same time I didn’t want him to be the ‘bad side’ of Martin. All along, my aim has been to have Martin be as rounded as possible: to be likeable and relatable enough to be an effective main character but to not be perfect, to be frustrating and ineffectual and self-absorbed and too precious about writing.

Six Knot as God and Essex and progenitor, always in the past and ever-present. He is always there but rarely seen and never acknowledged.

Finished the book. Later I found out my cousin and his 10-month old son died that afternoon.

One of the unintended consequences of reversing the sequence of the chapters, something I had not considered until well after it was written, was the emergence of the resurrecting power of the text: how the reversal of time in the narrative brings certain characters from death to life, most notably Dixson and Harris. They are introduced to the reader as ghosts, really, only having had 'life' to the reader in that half-chapter before they die. It's a magic I hadn't thought much about, for the novel is fully open to the writer, who, unlike the reader, is unconstrained by the uncertainty of what's on the next page. This particular foreknowledge, I feel, meant I had not really seen the characters as the reader might, as ghosts brought to life- an end, for me, although it comes near the beginning of the novel, is a beginning, in fact. Similarly to the worries concerning the chapters' nonlinearity and its effect on the plot, the deaths of those characters must mean something different to the reader: if the deaths occurred, rightly, at the end of the novel, the reader would necessarily feel different emotions towards the 'loss' of those characters. I came to enjoy the idea, of characters brought into being from the memories and reactions of other characters: what was once simply a topic for Amanda and Martin to discuss has become, in chapter 5, a character, who promptly dies and is resurrected in chapter 6.

Does Martin's character, rather than develop, retrogress in the course of the novel?

Searching for something in his memory?

Finding a place in his life where he was good, or was the person he wanted to be

Potentiality.

Amanda's final chapter. I wanted to focus in this chapter on choices, specifically choices that Amanda has made: the broadness of potentialities initially open to somebody and the narrowing of those potentialities by circumstance or obligation or choice, by inner reasons and outside forces. I suppose, in essence, what I wanted to do is question the existence of free will- that there is no free will and we're not free to choose our actions;

even seemingly free choices are based on one's preconceptions, anxieties, stresses, learned behaviours.

I had planned for this chapter to be the final word about Martin and Amanda's evening at university. I had also planned that there would never be a satisfactory conclusion to the question of what actually happened. It was enough, for the narrative, that they changed each other: I think Amanda still feels like a victim and still has a lot of anger around that night, but it's not settled in her mind and she has internalised a lot of that fear and anger; Martin has managed to put it away but I think doubt and guilt bubble around inside him.

The final chapter. The beginning of the chapter, with Martin arriving with Shaw on the plane, has been around for a long time, written quite early in the process. It is strange to have the end of the novel already existing while writing the rest, having a sense of the shape into which the story will mould itself, and equally that such a situation threatens contortion unless both pre-written end and currently-written middle are allowed to adapt. In this case, I did not know who it was sitting beside Martin until quite near the end, when the possibilities limited themselves (it should be an officer, but it could not be Dixson for he was already incountry, should not be Eseley for his manner was too familiar) and only Shaw was left after this narrowing.

I enjoy the sense of a circle allowed by the arrival here, this revolution. In the first chapter Martin arrives at London via train; in this the last chapter he arrives at the colony via plane.

Martin's memories of the final day of all boys (or a shift in the present of the narrative- perhaps the narrative has jumped to years before, the perspective to first person past tense- can his recall be so accurate that this is memory?) are close to autobiographical. There was no great speech by a boy and I cannot remember our last assembly, though I'm sure there must have been one. We had been the last year of all boys at the school and there had been a day we'd returned our books to the various offices which had felt like shedding a skin I had still needed (rawness and bloody pinkness beneath). In my mind it had

really felt incomplete, as perhaps all endings do, these schooldays uncapped, as perhaps all leavers feel.

The comments on Martin's schoolwork are for the most part based on comments on my own schoolwork. It is sometimes hard to revisit: after time has rounded them, to see the original sharpness of things can be uncomfortable. I suppose it is the memory of emotions at the time rather than the words themselves, yet to put the criticism on the page works as both scourging and catharsis. It works, too, I think for Martin: if he believes in the redeeming power of words, he doesn't necessarily believe he is a prophet; he has failed as much as he has succeeded. These are the lingering doubts he has, that stay with him precisely because he attempts to run from them.

I tried to make the final revelation in this chapter, of Dixson and Martin's schoolboy friendship, touch lightly: to my mind this is not information that changes anything in the rest of the novel; it is not supposed to be a 'gotcha' or a deus ex machina. Perhaps, at most, I anticipated a reader's contemplative "Ah."

I don't know if this is a satisfactory ending. Have I said the things I intended to say? Here is a novel about a war poet- I need to go down the checklist, though the process was not a checklist filling exercise. A multitude of voices? I believe that was achieved. Disruption of the idea of the war poet? I believe by including Martin and Amanda and Ombarrago as 'obviously' (self-proclaimed?) poets the novel gives a wide angle on the agreed definition of war poet (solider poet in combat or contemporary poet at home, on both sides, and both male and female). And if one sees Dixson's or Beloved's contributions as a form of poetry or even Elsie's letters as a form of poetry or indeed if one sees a certain proportion of the novel itself as a prose poem then the contention of poetry necessarily being verse written by a 'poet' is touched upon. Does it reach a conclusion about these ideas? What sort of a novel would it be if it spelt it out? Aim, method, conclusion. Does it need to? Give that

responsibility to the reader? Did it allow me to reach a conclusion about those ideas? I think so. Is the novel true to its fiction as well as fulfilling the PhD requirements? I hope so.

Basic synopsis (in chronological order):

Away from home at university, literature students Martin Welles and Amanda Budden strike up a friendship based on their shared Essex kinship. In their creative writing class, the friends are having the hardest time finishing their final papers, with the deadline fast approaching. Martin cannot write the opening of the novel he has promised his supervisor. Amanda has lost all interest/faith in her Essex-based poetry and cannot bear to let anybody read it, let alone hand it in. Both are beginning to suffer from depression when they solve the other's problem: Amanda tells Martin to forget the blocked novel, and simply produce poetry based on the writing exercises from their seminars; Martin convinces Amanda that her work is worthy, that she is doing primal, 'shamanistic' work writing about the county (whether he believes this or if it's just bluster remains unanswered).

Martin barely completes his final year of university when war breaks out in a far corner of the Empire. The Empire is crumbling, but England will not let go. Martin is conscripted and sent abroad to serve with the Essex Regiment in a colony erupting in conflict. He hears from his supervisor that the poetry he produced as an afterthought has impressed the faculty and she wishes him to send more. He feels like a fraud but is eager to please and to receive recognition.

Amanda finishes her degree and, despite envying Martin his escape, returns to Grays: her lonely home, her empty relationships, and grinding unemployment. She tries to write her poetry but can find no inspiration at home- she feels none of her subjects are worthy. She begins to wonder if Martin talked her up just to get into her pants. At the same time, she sees that Martin's poetry is getting published and, knowing how little it meant to him, how throwaway it was, grows jealous and ever more critical of her own work.

Abroad, Martin is taken under the wing of Dixon, a career soldier, whom he holds in awe as an example of the perfect man. Dixon seems at ease in this dangerous country - nothing fazes him, all situations seem to turn out in his favour, every combat mission he commands is a success. Whenever Dixon bends or breaks a rule, he suffers no consequences. Martin aspires to be like this universally loved and respected 'superman'.

When the situation in the colony takes a turn towards disaster, England's desperation to preserve the Empire sees women able to join the frontline. With only a slight hesitation, Amanda signs up and is shipped out to join Martin's company - perhaps now, despite the risk of death, she will have something to write about (it worked for Martin). Dixon and Amanda begin a secretive relationship. Meanwhile, Martin has started corresponding with a pop singer/movie star from England, Elsie Anders, while he is recuperating in a hospital after a near fatal attack. He befriends a local nurse who protects him when the rebels storm the hospital.

The Army is attacked at their base, and the Captain is killed. Dixon is promoted. The rebels are banding around an unlikely leader: a local poet-warrior named Ombarrago. Ombarrago's poetry is exactly as Martin had described Amanda's work: powerful and primal and shamanistic and able to touch everybody in the country. The army's response to the worsening situation is an increase in brutal retribution against the rebels- to attack the words of the people as much as the people themselves. There are war crimes and atrocities occur on both sides until Dixon leads a mission to capture Ombarrago. It is successful and a peace plan (or, from the British point of view, an exit strategy) is agreed between England and the rebels - the colony will become independent, Ombarrago will be released, the army will leave the country.

The regiment oversees the last days of the empire in the colony. They attempt to extricate those who might be at risk of reprisals come independence and remove the stockpiled weapons which could be used in such revenge scenarios. Dixon is killed days from the end of the war, in a simple, stupid accident - so much for the superman? Tensions between Martin and Amanda remain unresolved - their original friendship (and kinship based on their shared Essexness) is never recovered (perhaps Essex meant something different to each-

not much of a kinship after all). The colony becomes independent and the army returns to England.

The idea of having Dixson be a schoolfriend of Martin is based on a friendship I had when I was at school. He was handsome, clever, funny, self-assured, good at sports. I looked up to him, enjoyed his companionship, rivalry: for a very shy and anxious boy, his confidence and irrepressible charm seemed like a magic spell cast on all. From here I can see that it was a slightly upper-class manner he had, that easiness with everything, preparatory school, sailing club, which was not uncommon among the grammar school boys and which did not arouse resentment in me, at the time, but admiration.

I don't know why it sticks, but I remember one afternoon on the walk to the sports field, how he greeted a middle-aged man at work in his front garden, a "Good afternoon!" as we walked by. I had asked him as we moved on if he knew the man and as I recall it he'd replied, with a confused expression, "No" and I had been amazed, or at least that is how I remember it.

He was there on the final day of lower school, gave no hint about a departure or a change of mind, but nevertheless he did not return, that September, to the Sixth Form. We never kept in touch and, although I know how to contact him, have not exchanged a word in 20 years. It's a different world, we're different people, we're friends 20 years apart- as they say in the novel, all you know of someone is the moments you spend together.

Conclusion

“The end is where we start from.”

TS Eliot

“Well I guess this is growing up.”

*Blink-182*⁹⁶

Some part of it was, and is, and always will be 1999. Blink-182's 'Dammit' in my earphones, the open window admitting autumn air, the smell of detergent from the laundry block, exhaust from the traffic on Earlham Road, typing, typing, writing an essay or a story for some seminar or other. Essays and stories are becoming all the same, have always been, some mixture of statement and argument and personal response. The texts of the English literature A-level were still fresh, still springy when squeezed like a loaf at Tesco. *The Remains of the Day*. Housman. Larkin. *Heart of Darkness*. Something by Shakespeare, *Hamlet* or *The Tempest*, or both. If I was asked, 'Oh, who's your favourite author?' the answer would be, 'Conrad, of course.' Pick a poet to present to the class. 'Oh, Larkin? Which poem would you choose?' I don't recall which one I read (cheeks painfully flushed, no doubt). It was probably something angry, like 'Toads'. I know now 'The Whitsun Weddings' is the appropriate response. It was and is the first year of my undergraduate degree at UEA. I chose to study English Literature, with a minor in Creative Writing. The capitals are important, or were. It was my first choice. The other four choices were law degrees. In the sixth form, I wrote an Aristophanean play debating the benefits and disadvantages of those two subjects, purely for my own benefit. One could say the fact that I wrote such a play essentially obviates the choice. But there was a choice and words were written on a UCAS form. There was a story written about a bombing in Northern Ireland, an interview, an acceptance letter.

I remember the introductory course, Literature in History, and something about reading skills. It was at university, that first year, that I started the novel: an earlier effort,

⁹⁶ Mark Hoppus, *Dude Ranch* (San Diego: Cargo Music, 1998), <https://genius.com/Blink-182-dammit-lyrics>

tonally much removed, simpler and angrier. I can check the details of the original file: 27th October 1999, at 1:25pm. Google tells me the 27th was a Wednesday. There are only a few elements that remain: the names Martin and Amanda, a British Empire undissolved. My first creative writing seminars, my first workshopping. My first poetry recital in a smoky Norwich pub, not my poetry, I was merely in the audience. A film studies course. I remember we watched *Casablanca*, *Rear Window*, *Bringing Up Baby*, *Now Voyager*. A modernism course. *Mrs Dalloway*, *The Death of the Heart*. A post-modernism course. *Crash*, *The Crying of Lot 49*. A late, crowded screening of *Out of Sight*, in the winter, having walked the length of University Drive through a cold rain. Walked back past the Students' Union, the smell of beer and weed and the night, walked back under the streetlamps to my room, alone, and sat with my laptop and wrote. I remember the university hosted famous authors who gave lectures in the evening and signed copies of their works afterwards in the multilevel Waterstones on the Square. Complimentary white wine and nibbles. I heard Christopher Fry, heard Kazuo Ishiguro, did not buy their books afterwards, did not drink the wine.

I slipped away in that dark lecture theatre, sat there in that soft sprung seat (was it red?), and was younger, was back in school, am mapping out the days of Stevens's journey towards Miss Kenton, am writing annotations in pencil in the margins of the novel, am thinking of how at home I watched the VHS of *The Remains of the Day* (1993), watched Anthony Hopkins and Emma Thompson sitting on the pier as the lights came on, and am back at UEA and how does this attach to that? The present to the past? What was the way and how was it navigated? And I could not describe the path and I still cannot and could never hope to chart it ever again. Is this what time and memory does to one's life? Washes away the stepping stones so only the shores remain. One island to the next, with the little moments during the crossing forgotten. And this leaves the memory almost magical, a series of sleight-of-hand quick-changes. So here we are, sitting on the pier, with a sense of wonder and confusion, feeling glad we have reached the vast grey ocean but (the bulbs, plink-plink-plink, coming on) sensing we have forgotten something, but what, but what? And what now, here in the rain? No kiss, no love here, at last, simply a bus and another journey, to a place that isn't really home.

And it is this thought that nestles at the centre of the novel. It is an investigation into where lives, these present lives, arrive from. It is an attempt to analyse, or simply to name, the steps involved in the journey. Mistakes, coincidences, missed chances, opportunities,

successes, choices, revelations, lies, those things possible to control and those impossible. Things that made a difference and times when no difference could be made, no matter one's struggling. The war was never supposed to be 100% a literal war: at some level it represents adulthood after university (thus my initial reluctance to be too specific about the war and military matters). It is the struggle of self-discovery, the fear of being thrown into a quite alien world, where choices have much graver consequences outside of the relatively tame university experience. Couched in the presentation of the universal, couched in the fictional, is the excavation of the personal, is the autobiographical. Some mixture of reflection and statement, argument and personal response. As is all fiction?

Anne Lamott suggests "To be a good writer, you not only have to write a great deal but you have to care."⁹⁷ So a writer may take some comfort when he considers the flaws in his text. The first failing appears to be an attempt to force too much into the novel. The novel is too ambitious, too vigorous and hard-headed a striving towards comprehensiveness. In the attempt to produce a 'wide' account of human experience, specificity may have been sacrificed; at times there is a broadcast scattering of ideas, where a more focused approach may have made for a more effective narrative. Additionally, the difficulties of supervising the reversed narrative were greater than anticipated and required performing frequent revisions in the timeline of the action and of events which occurred outside the frame of the novel. Even keeping the war at arm's length, the novel required a certain level of verisimilitude in terms of the military organisation, military tactics and regulations, abbreviations, equipment. Striving for authenticity in this regard was a constant undertaking which I always resented: it felt, mostly, like distraction from the task of writing the novel. But I think the most significant disappointment is that I am unsure if the novel succeeds in its aim, or whether it fails to say what I wanted to say.

⁹⁷ Lamott, p.107

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