

The image features two white line-art hands, one on the left and one on the right, set against a solid green background. Each hand is depicted with five fingers and a wrist. From the wrist of each hand, a complex, branching network of lines extends downwards, resembling a root system or a dense thicket of roots. The lines are thin and white, creating a stark contrast with the green background. The overall composition is symmetrical and minimalist.

# Five Dials

No. 46

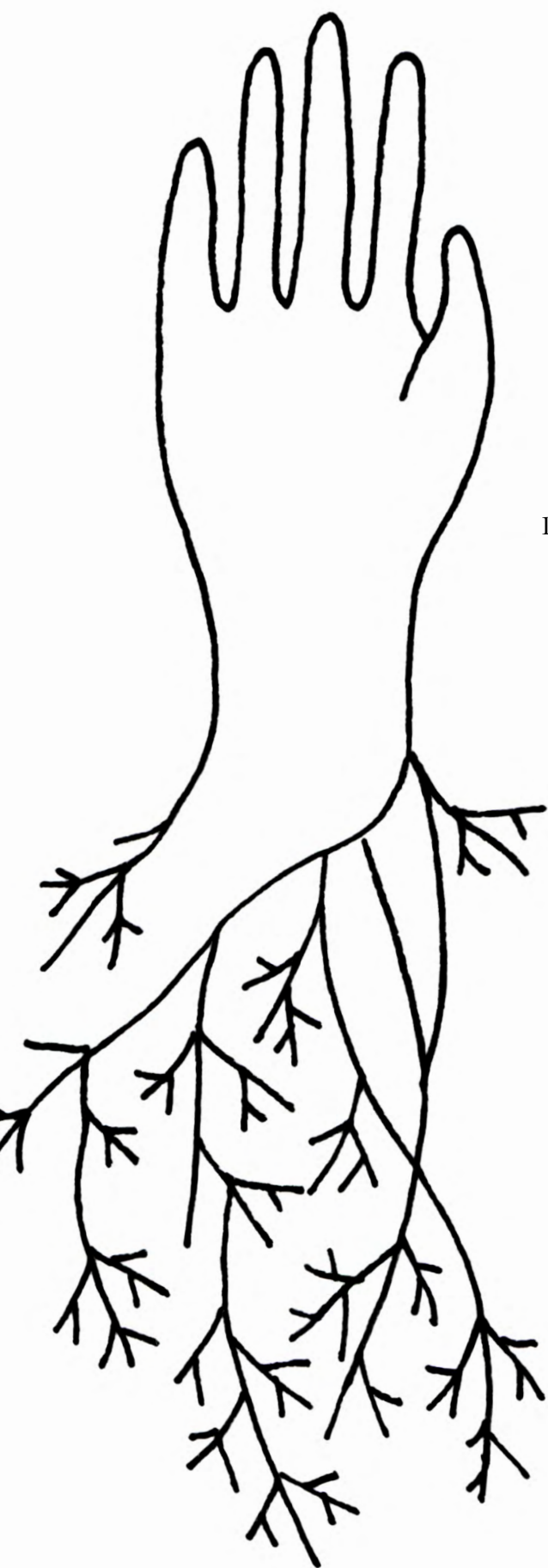
What Is It Good For?

# The War Issue

## Featuring

WW1  
WW2  
Space Force  
The Iraq War  
The Cold War  
Drone Warfare  
The Trojan War  
Maybe a teenager  
Doritos and M&Ms  
US anti-terrorist doctrine  
The sexual life of the narrator  
Male pulchritude in the bedroom  
Art made by working people, for working people  
The increasingly surreal land of 'actually existing socialism'  
The kind of dark that descends in a desert free of street lights or buildings.  
The spot in which the soldier was actually executed  
The cradle of the U.S. Air Force fleet of drones  
The 'alienation between artists and the people'  
An imbecile, a deeply unserious creature  
State-commissioned literary critics  
A surprisingly eloquent astronaut  
Any heart's most primal contents  
The dahlias of the suburban lawn  
The head of the White Monster  
Chloe Dewe Mathews  
No sense of urgency  
Grégoire Chamayou  
Martha Sprackland  
Philip Oltermann  
Nim Chimpsky  
Antony Beevor  
Sandeep Johal  
Adnan Sarwar  
Trevor Quirk  
Pat Barker  
& more





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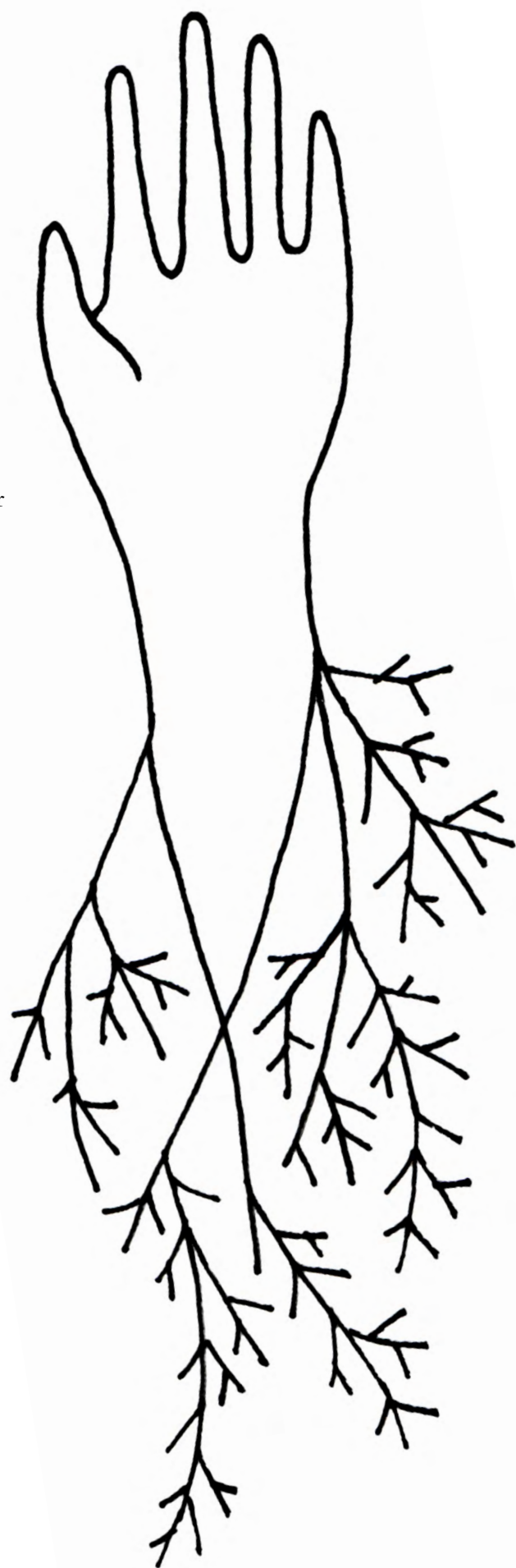
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# Contributors

**Pat Barker** was born in Yorkshire and began her literary career in her forties, when she took a short writing course taught by Angela Carter. Thirty-five years later, she has published fifteen novels, including her *Regeneration* Trilogy, been made a CBE for services to literature, and won awards including *The Guardian* Fiction Prize and the Man Booker Prize. She lives in Durham. Her latest novel, *The Silence of the Girls*, was published by Hamish Hamilton in August 2018.

**Antony Beevor's** latest book is *Arnhem: The Battle for the Bridges, 1944*. He is the author of *Crete: The Battle and the Resistance*, (Runciman Prize), *Stalingrad*, (Samuel Johnson Prize, Wolfson Prize for History and Hawthornden Prize for Literature), *Berlin: The Downfall 1945*, *The Battle for Spain* (Premio La Vanguardia), *D-Day: The Battle for Normandy*, (Prix Henry Malherbe and the Royal United Services Institute Westminster Medal) and *Ardennes 1944 – Hitler's Last Gamble*. His books have appeared in more than thirty languages and have sold more than six and a half million copies.

**Grégoire Chamayou** is a philosopher at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique in Paris and the author of *Les corps vils*, *Manhunts: A Philosophical History* and *Drone Theory*. Chamayou also lectures at Université de Paris Ouest, and has written for *Le Monde Diplomatique* among other publications.

**Sandeep Johal** is a Canadian visual artist whose colourful geometric forms and intricate black and white line work is aesthetically and conceptually inspired by her South Asian heritage. Her most recent series, 'Rest In Power' (2017), is a body of work dedicated to twelve women from various cultural backgrounds whose murders have

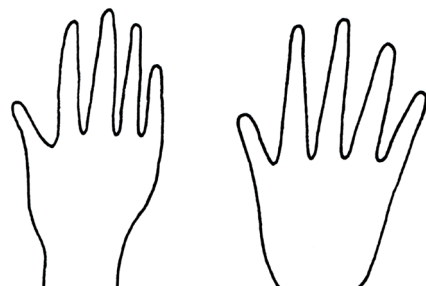
impacted her deeply. She has completed a number of public projects, most recently, a mural for ArtSmash 2018 on Granville Island in partnership with Vancouver Mural Festival. Her work has been featured in *The Vancouver Sun*, *The Georgia Straight*, *This Magazine* and numerous other print and online publications.

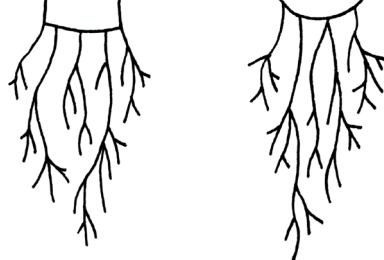
**Janet Lloyd** has translated over seventy books from French to English and has twice been awarded the Scott Moncrieff prize.

**Chloe Dewe Mathews** is a photographic artist based in St Leonards-on-Sea. She had exhibited at Tate Modern, Irish Museum of Modern Art, Museum Folkwang and Fotomuseum Antwerp, as well as being published widely in newspapers and magazines such as *The Guardian*, *Sunday Times*, *Financial Times*, *Harper's* and *Le Monde*. Her first monograph, *Shot at Dawn*, was published by Ivorypress in 2014. Earlier this year *In Search of Frankenstein* was published by Kodoji Press, which will be followed by *Caspian: the Elements* (Aperture / Peabody Press) in October. The book is the culmination of five year's work in the Caspian region.

**Philip Oltermann** is *The Guardian's* Berlin bureau chief. He is currently writing a book about the Stasi's secret poetry programme.

**Trevor Quirk** is a writer living in Salt Lake City. He has written for *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *New Republic*, *Harper's*, *The Point*, *Boston Review* and others. More of his writing can be found at [trevorquirk.com](http://trevorquirk.com). He is working on a book.






**Adnan Sarwar** grew up in Burnley where he joined the British Army, and served in the Iraq war. He won the The Bodley Head/FT Essay Prize for 'British Muslim Soldier'. His work has been published in *The Guardian*, *The White Review*, the *LA Review of Books*. He joined *The Economist* as a thirty-six year-old intern, rising to Community Editor. Given time off by his editor-in-chief, he presented two critically acclaimed television documentary series for the BBC. He lives in London, and his website can be found at [adnansarwar.com](http://adnansarwar.com).

**Martha Sprackland** is editor at Offord Road Books and a founding editor of multilingual arts zine *La Errante*. She was previously assistant poetry editor at Faber, and before that was co-founder of *Cake* poetry magazine. Her own poetry has appeared in the *London Review of Books*, *Poetry London*, *Poetry Review* and many other places. A pamphlet, *Glass As Broken Glass*, was published by Rack Press in 2017, and a second, *Milk Tooth*, is forthcoming from Rough Trade Books in 2018. She is a poet-in-residence for *Caught by the River*. In 2018 she joined Poetry London as associate editor.

# What Is It Good For?



The most disturbing section of a recent book about drone warfare comes right at the beginning. If you'd like to understand the legal framework of drone strikes you'll have to investigate Grégoire Chamayou's *Drone Theory* at length, but for just a brief unforgettable taste of where we're at – what we've come to – start with the prelude, reprinted below. And while you're there let the incidental details sink in.

Here's a world in which guys in the dusty Nevada desert eat Doritos and M&Ms while aiming at targets overseas. Chamayou has gathered excerpts of dialogue from a recent mission. As the men watch footage from the far side of the world, these voices consider a few of the eternal questions of warfare: what are the intentions of the person in my sights? Should I take his or her life at this moment? But what's new here is the nearby snack food and the unhurried nature of the exchange, the casual rhythm that unfolds over the course of the conversation. This, according to Chamayou, is a new world of violence and retribution. These dialogues can happen in cases where there's an unimaginable distance between those with the capability to kill and those who have become targets.

After Chamayou's prelude you'll find an interview with the Man Booker prize-winning author Pat Barker, who has dedicated much of her career to the examination of the rippling effect of warfare in the 20th century. She is wise on many subjects. Her new book, *The Silence of the Girls*, examines what becomes of the unheard in war, specifically the women of the Trojan Wars, those voices excised from the grand narrative of *The Iliad*.

Silence continues to be relevant today. We have the voices of those drone operators but not those of the figures on their screens. At one point in the interview, Barker speaks about the distancing effect of warfare. The process was already advanced when that great warrior Achilles stepped onto the bat-

tlefield. He wasn't, after all, killing Trojans with his bare hands.

'Drones are the ultimate end of a trend,' says Barker, 'which is that human beings have distanced themselves further and further from actual violence. Even a spear, of course, is at a distance. A sword is up close. But even a sword, it's not throttling somebody with your bare hands.'

'And it gets further and further removed. The long bow, the tank, further and further away. And whatever residual inhibitions about human violence we have as a species are rendered inoperative by the fact that you cannot see the person to whom it's being done. So, it becomes violence without limit.'

As a historian, Antony Beevor came of age when military history had evolved enough to include the voices of the unheard, specifically the voices found in contemporaneous diaries. For him these voices, brought out of the silence, were integral to a more panoramic view of warfare. The silence gave way to a surprisingly honest chorus. As he points out, the diaries of women in warfare, in particular, were free of self-aggrandizing statements.

'There's no doubt about it,' Beevor says in the interview, 'the best diary writers in the Second World War were women: in Italy, Iris Origo; in Germany, Ursula von Kardorff and the anonymous diary of a Berlin woman; and so forth.'

'Often in Russia, too, the women were much more reliable observers because they were not trying to make themselves feel big, like some of the men.'

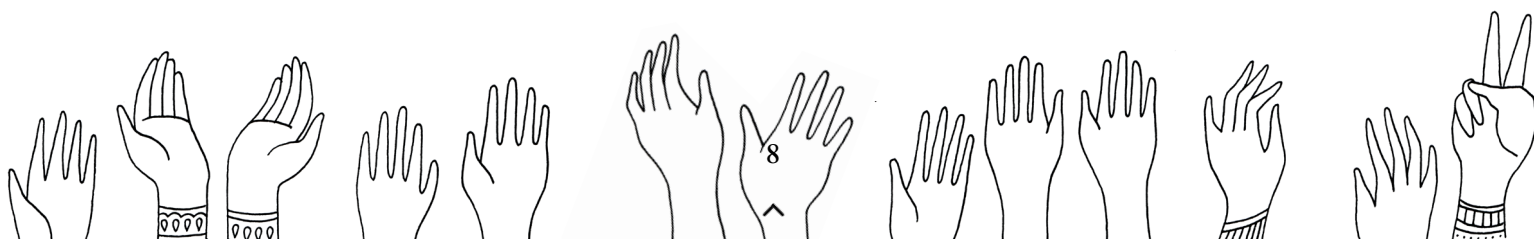
The interview with Beevor will interest those who believe there's a thrill in sifting through archives. As Beevor was researching his epic, *Stalingrad*, he examined the materials of the recently opened Soviet military archives. His account of this research is filled with intrigue and a sense of urgency. He had to shuttle his research out of the country before the Russians sealed their files.



Elsewhere in the issue, the link between literature and the surveillance state is explored in Philip Oltermann's examination of how the Stasi infiltrated a poetry collective. Journalist Adnan Sarwar discovered a journal he kept as a British soldier in Basra back in 2003, and he's picked through it to find remnants of a voice still relevant today. And in honour of Vice President Mike Pence's choice to focus his attention on plans for a Space Force, rather than many other worthwhile subjects, we present Trevor Quirk's short story about a surprisingly eloquent astronaut.

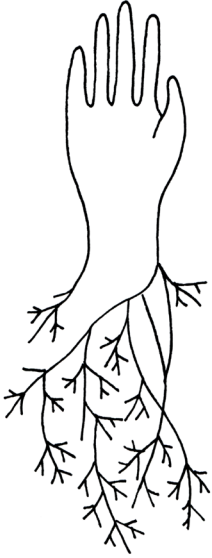
In this issue you'll also find Martha Sprackland's poetry and a visual essay by Chloe Dewe Mathews, who examines another kind of silence – that of the landscape decades after it has served as the setting for warfare. Her photos are connected to acts of desertion. She shot the images at first light, the hour when deserters were executed. And while the photos capture the stillness and eerie calm of the landscape, Mathews realized she was trying to impress meaning on the silence. 'In *Shot at Dawn*, it is the landscape that bore witness,' she says, 'so by making a photographic record of these landscapes, I am highlighting what happened there, attempting to stamp the presence of forgotten people back onto the land.'

But first, here's that conversation between a drone pilot, sensor operator and mission intelligence coordinator. Read on.

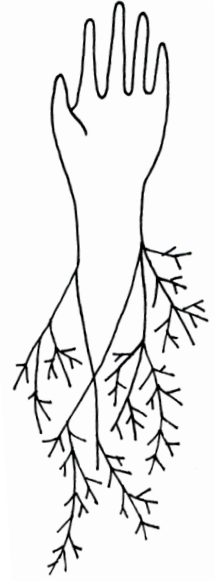


# Death From Above

From Grégoire Chamayou's *Drone Theory*



*In 2011 alone, the US deployed one drone strike every four days in Pakistan, spearheading a radically new form of warfare in which supposedly hostile targets could be eliminated with zero risk to the attacker. Employed both in areas of armed conflict and in countries officially at peace, the use of armed drones has become emblematic of US anti-terrorist doctrine – ‘kill rather than capture’ – and has placed entire populations under potentially permanent lethal surveillance.*



## Prelude

That night, shortly before dawn rose in the Afghan mountains, they had noticed unusual behavior on the ground.

PILOT: Can you zoom in a little bit, man, let 'em take a look?

SENSOR OPERATOR: At least four in the back of the pickup.

PILOT: What about the guy under the north arrow? Does it look like he's holdin' something across his chest?

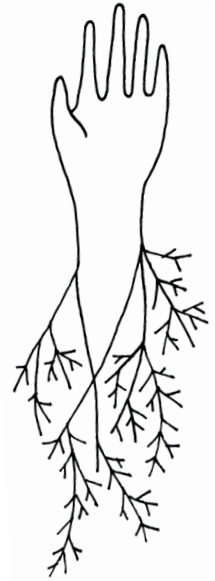
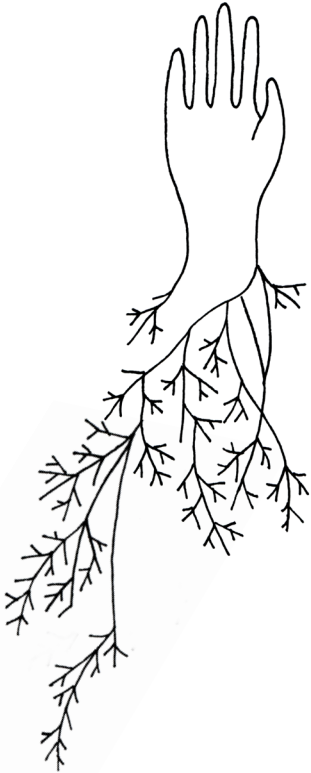
SENSOR OPERATOR: Yeah, it's kind of weird how they all have a cold spot on their chest.

PILOT: It's what they've been doing here lately, they wrap their [expletive] up in their man dresses so you can't PID [positively identify] it.

The pilot and the sensor operator scrutinize the scene on a monitor. They wear khaki uniforms with a shoulder badge— an owl with outstretched wings against a red background and ashes of lightning in the talons. Wearing earphones, they are sitting side by side on fake-leather seats. There are warning lights everywhere. But this place is unlike an ordinary cockpit.

They are shadowing something thousands of miles away. Images of vehicles, captured in Afghanistan, are relayed by satellite to Creech Air Force Base, not far from Indian Springs, Nevada. In the 1950s, this was where the American nuclear tests were carried out. The atomic mushroom cloud rising in the distance could be seen from Las Vegas. Today, drivers on Highway 95 regularly catch sight of other shapes above their heads: oblongs with rounded heads, like fat, white blind larvae.

Creech AFB is the cradle of the U.S. Air Force fleet of drones. The soldiers call it 'the home of the hunters.' But the antiwar organization CODEPINK calls it 'a place of disbelief, confusion and sadness.'



The work here is extremely boring. Men pass whole nights watching a screen on which, for the most part, appear unchanging images of another desert on the other side of the planet. Eating Doritos and M&Ms, they wait for something to happen: ‘months of monotony and milliseconds of mayhem.’

In the morning another team will come to take over the controls of the apparatus. The pilot and sensor operator will return to the steering wheels of their SUVs, which will take them back to their wives and children in a peaceful residential suburb of Las Vegas, forty-five minutes away.

The passengers traveling in three vehicles that, a few hours ago, left their little village in the province of Daikundi have no idea that for quite some time now, dozens of eyes have been watching them. Among those invisible spectators are not only the pilot and sensor operator but also a mission intelligence coordinator, a safety observer, a team of video analysts, and a ground force commander, the last of whom will eventually give the go-ahead for an aerial strike. This network of eyes remains in constant communication with one another. And on this night of February 20, 2010, their conversation is, as usual, recorded:

**00:45 GMT**

**(05:15 in Afghanistan)**

PILOT: Is that a [expletive] rifle?

SENSOR OPERATOR: Maybe just a warm spot from where he was sitting. Can’t really tell right now, but it does look like an object.

PILOT: I was hoping we could make a rifle out, never mind.

...

**01:05**

SENSOR OPERATOR: That truck would make a beautiful target. OK, that’s a Chevy Suburban.

PILOT: Yeah.

SENSOR OPERATOR: Yeah.

...

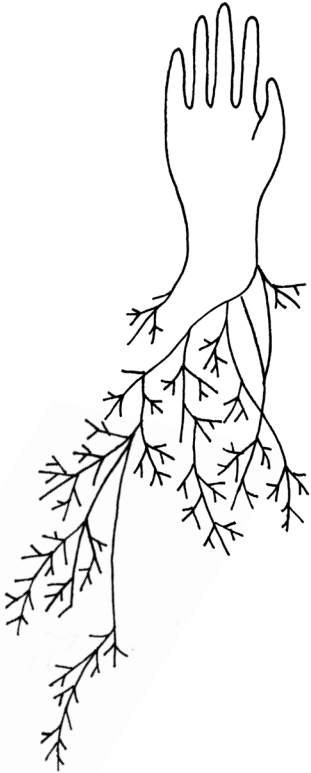
**01:07**

MISSION INTELLIGENCE COORDINATOR:  
Screener said at least one child near SUV.

SENSOR OPERATOR: Bull [expletive] ... where?

SENSOR OPERATOR: Send me a [expletive] still, I don’t





think they have kids out at this hour, I know they're shady but come on.

...

SENSOR OPERATOR: Well, maybe a teenager but I haven't seen anything that looked that short, granted they're all grouped up here, but...

MISSION INTELLIGENCE COORDINATOR: They're reviewing...

PILOT: Yeah, review that [expletive] ... why didn't he say possible child, why are they so quick to call [expletive] kids but not to call a [expletive] rifle?

MISSION INTELLIGENCE COORDINATOR: Two children were at the rear of the SUV.

...

**01:47**

MISSION INTELLIGENCE COORDINATOR: Looks kinda like blankets, they were praying, they had like ...

PILOT: JAG25 KIRK97 We get a good count, not yet?

SENSOR OPERATOR: They're praying, they're praying. ...

This is definitely it, this is their force. Praying? I mean seriously, that's what they do.

MISSION INTELLIGENCE COORDINATOR: They're gonna do something nefarious.

...

**01:50**

MISSION INTELLIGENCE COORDINATOR: Adolescent near the rear of the SUV.

SENSOR OPERATOR: Well, teenagers can fight.

MISSION INTELLIGENCE COORDINATOR: Pick up a weapon and you're a combatant, it's how that works.

**01:52**

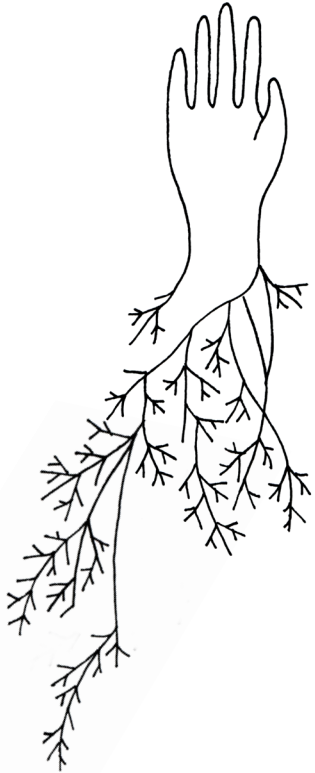
SENSOR OPERATOR: One guy still praying at the front of the truck.

PILOT: JAG25 KIRK97 be advised, all pax [passengers] are finishing up praying and rallying up near all three vehicles at this time.

SENSOR OPERATOR: Oh, sweet target. I'd try to go through the bed, put it right dead center of the bed.

MISSION INTELLIGENCE COORDINATOR: Oh, that'd be perfect.





SENSOR OPERATOR: Well, sir, would you mind if I took a bathroom break real quick?

PILOT: No, not at all, dude.

...

**03:17**

UNKNOWN: What's the master plan, fellas?

PILOT: I don't know, hope we get to shoot the truck with all the dudes in it.

SENSOR OPERATOR: Yeah.

[The Predator drone has only one missile on board—not enough to target three vehicles—so two Kiowa helicopters, known as 'Bam Bam 41,' are ordered to take up an attacking position. A plan is agreed: the helicopters will fire first, then the drone will finish the job by firing its Hellfire missile at the survivors.]

...

**03:48**

MISSION INTELLIGENCE COORDINATOR [speaking to the drone pilot about the helicopters]: . . . at ground force commander's orders we may have them come up, action those targets, and let you use your Hellfire for cleanup shot.

PILOT: Kirk97, good copy on that, sounds good.

...

**04:01**

SENSOR OPERATOR: Sensor is in, let the party begin . . .

Tell you what, they could have had a whole fleet of Preds up here.

PILOT: Oh, dude.

...

**04:06**

PILOT: As far as a weapons attack brief goes, man, we're probably going to be chasing dudes scrambling in the open, uh, when it goes down, don't worry about any guidance from me or from JAGUAR, just follow what makes the most sense to you. Stay with whoever you think gives us the best chance to shoot, um, at them. And I'm with you on that. So I'll brief you up on the launch profile, we'll hit a weapons attack brief when we know what we're going to shoot.

...



**04:11**

HELICOPTERS: Kirk97, Bam Bam four-one has you loud and clear.

PILOT: OK, Bam Bam 41, Kirk97 have you loud and clear as well. Understand you are tracking our three vehicles, do you need a talk on or do you have them?

HELICOPTERS: 41 has them just south side of the pass of the reported grid, white Highland[er] followed by two SUVs.

PILOT: Kirk97, that's a good copy. Those are your three vehicles. Be advised we have about twenty-one MAMs, about three rifles so far PIded in the group and, ah, these are your three.

...

**04:13**

PILOT: It's a cool-looking shot.

SENSOR OPERATOR: Oh, awesome!

...

HELICOPTERS: [unintelligible] weapons and ICOM chatter with tactical maneuver. Break. Um, understand we are clear to engage.

PILOT: Okay, he's clear to engage so he has Type Three. I'm going to spin our missiles up as well.

...

**04:16**

SENSOR OPERATOR: Roger. And, oh, . . . and there it goes! [The helicopters fire at the convoy] . . . Have another guy . . . did they get him too? Yep.

PILOT: They took the first and, uh, the last out. They're going to come back around.

...

**04:17**

MISSION INTELLIGENCE COORDINATOR: Do we want to switch back to the other frequency?

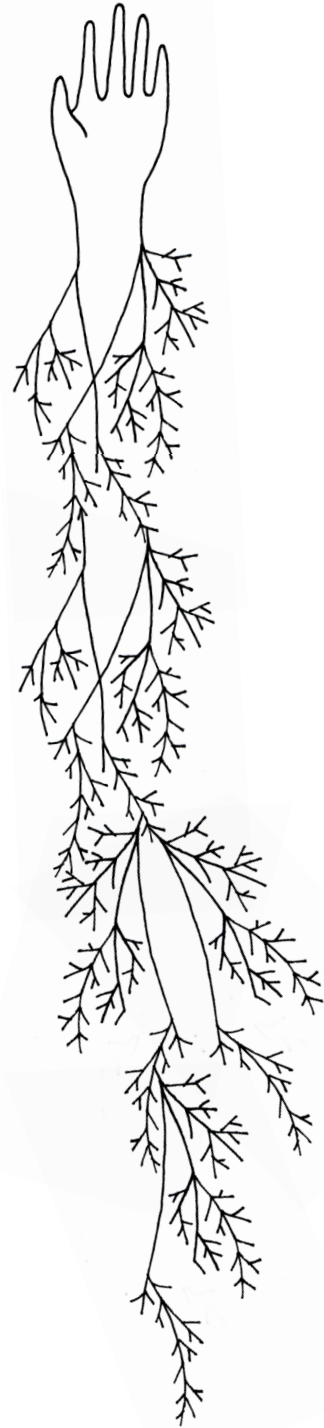
PILOT: I tried, nobody was talking to me over there.

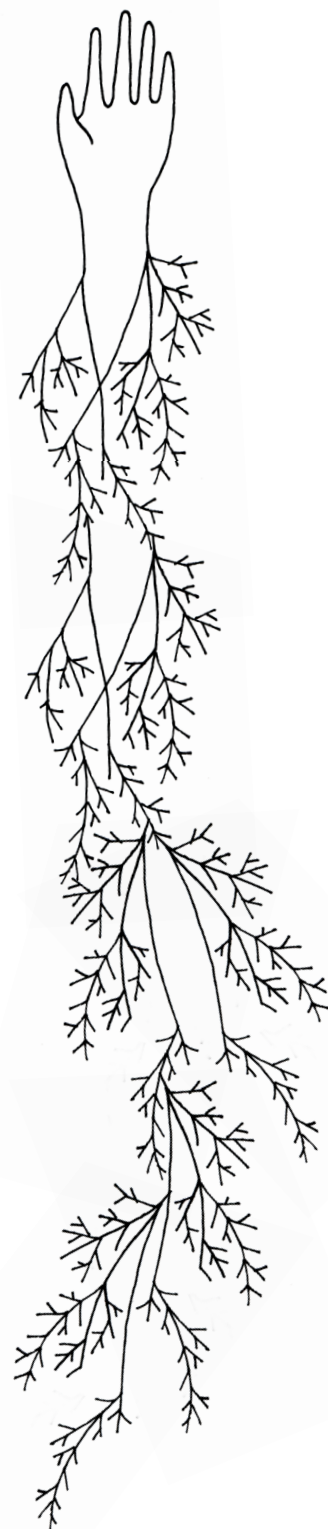
SENSOR OPERATOR: Looks like they're surrendering. They're not running.

...

**04:18**

SENSOR OPERATOR: That guy's laid down? They're not running.

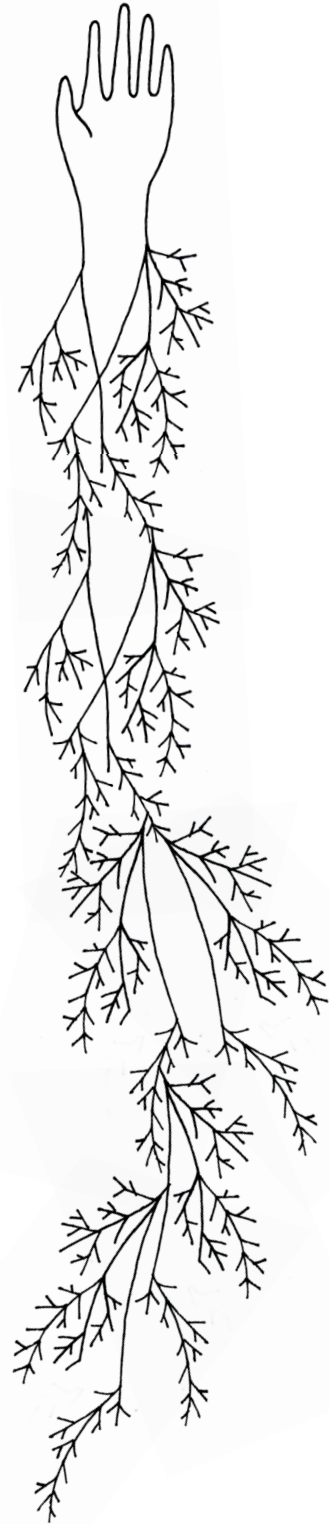




SAFETY OBSERVER: Dude, this is weird.  
 SENSOR OPERATOR: They're just walking away.  
 ...  
 SAFETY OBSERVER: You want to see if there's anybody at the back?  
 UNKNOWN: Yeah [unintelligible] outline.  
 SAFETY OBSERVER: By that third wreck.  
 SENSOR OPERATOR: A couple—two or three. Yeah, they're just chilling.  
 PILOT: Zoom in on that for a second for me. The third one.  
 SENSOR OPERATOR: The third one?  
 PILOT: Yeah. Did they blow that up? They did, right?  
 SAFETY OBSERVER: They did, yeah.  
 SENSOR OPERATOR: No, they didn't.  
 PILOT: They didn't.  
 SENSOR OPERATOR: They didn't. No, they're just out there.  
 PILOT: Yeah, that thing looks destroyed, though, doesn't it?  
 SAFETY OBSERVER: Yeah, they hit it. There's some smoke.  
 SENSOR OPERATOR: They hit it. You [unintelligible] . . . These guys are just . . . [rocket attack on middle vehicle]  
 UNKNOWN: Oh!  
 PILOT: Holy [expletive]!

...  
**04:22**

SENSOR OPERATOR: PID weapons, I don't see any . . .  
 SAFETY OBSERVER: Got something shiny on the one at the right . . .  
 SENSOR OPERATOR: Right. . . That's weird. . .  
 PILOT: Can't tell what the [expletive] they're doing.  
 SENSOR OPERATOR: Probably wondering what happened.  
 SAFETY OBSERVER: There's one more to the left of the screen.  
 SENSOR OPERATOR: Yeah, I see them.  
 SAFETY OBSERVER: Are they wearing burqas?  
 SENSOR OPERATOR: That's what it looks like.  
 PILOT: They were all PIded as males, though. No females in the group.  
 SENSOR OPERATOR: That guy looks like he's wearing jewelry and stuff like a girl, but he ain't . . . if he's a girl, he's a big one.



**04:32**

SAFETY OBSERVER: One of those guys up at the top left's moving.

SENSOR OPERATOR: Yeah, I see him. I thought I saw him moving earlier, but I don't know if he's ... is he moving or is he twitching?

SAFETY OBSERVER: Eh, I think he moved. Not very much, but ...

SENSOR OPERATOR: Can't, can't follow them both.

MISSION INTELLIGENCE COORDINATOR: There's one guy sitting down.

SENSOR OPERATOR [talking to individual on the ground]: What you playing with?

MISSION COORDINATOR: His bone.

...

**04:33**

SAFETY OBSERVER: Oh, shit. Yeah, you can see some blood right there, next to the ...

MISSION INTELLIGENCE COORDINATOR: Yeah, I seen that earlier.

...

**04:36**

MISSION INTELLIGENCE COORDINATOR: Is that two? One guy's tending the other guy?

SAFETY OBSERVER: Looks like it.

SENSOR OPERATOR: Looks like it, yeah.

MISSION INTELLIGENCE COORDINATOR: Self-aid buddy care to the rescue.

SAFETY OBSERVER: I forget, how do you treat a sucking gut wound?

SENSOR OPERATOR: Don't push it back in. Wrap it in a towel. That'll work.

...

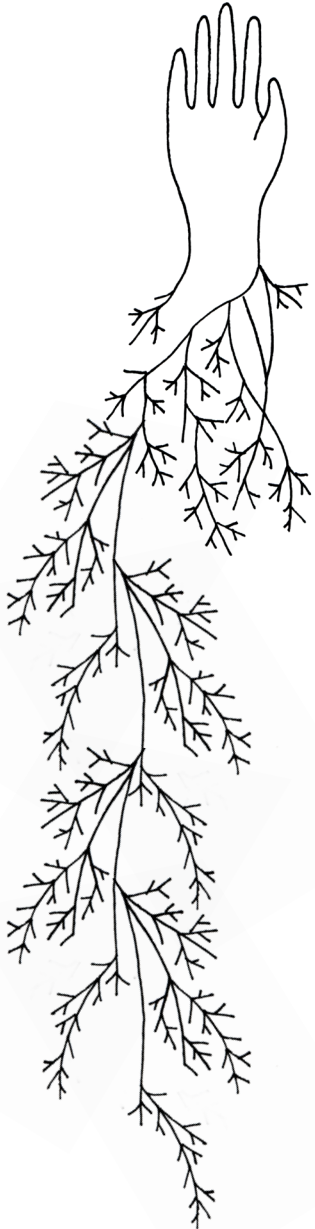
**04:38**

PILOT: They're trying to [expletive] surrender, right? I think.

SENSOR OPERATOR: That's what it looks like to me.

MISSION INTELLIGENCE COORDINATOR: Yeah, I think that's what they're doing.

...



**04:40**

SENSOR OPERATOR: What are those? They were in the middle vehicle.

MISSION INTELLIGENCE COORDINATOR: Women and children.

SENSOR OPERATOR: Looks like a kid.

SAFETY OBSERVER: Yeah. The one waving the flag.

...

**04:42**

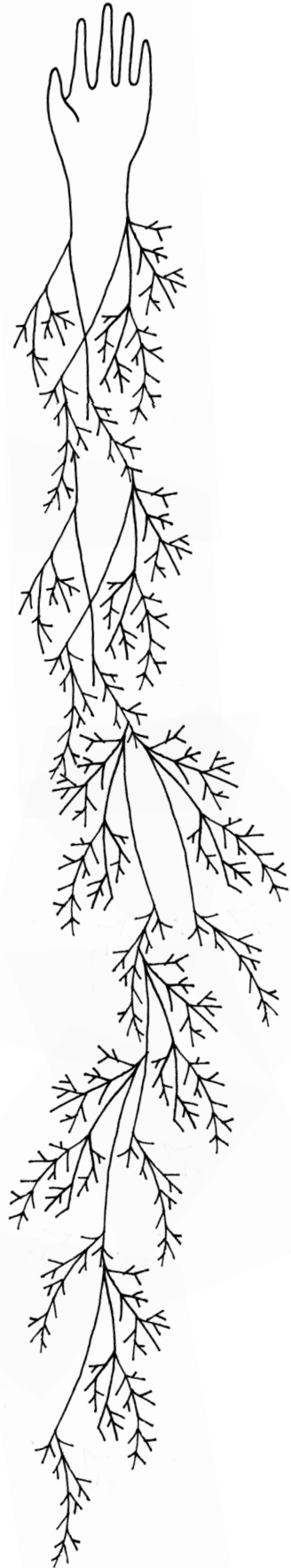
SAFETY OBSERVER: I'd tell him they're waving their ...

SENSOR OPERATOR: Yeah, at this point I wouldn't ...

I personally wouldn't be comfortable shooting at these people.

MISSION INTELLIGENCE COORDINATOR: No.

*Excerpted from Drone Theory by Grégoire Chamayou, published by Hamish Hamilton and translated by Janet Lloyd.*





# ‘I was astonished by that silence. The eloquence of the men, the absolute silence of the women.’

A conversation with Pat Barker

In *The Silence of the Girls*, Booker prizewinning author Pat Barker gives voice to the voiceless characters of *The Iliad*.

*We know the men – Agamemnon, Odysseus, Patroclus, Hector, Paris, the list continues. On the first page of Barker’s fourteenth novel, a Trojan queen named Briseis hears the war cry of the most famous and brutal of them all: Achilles.*

*After her city is ransacked by the Greeks, Briseis is captured, transformed in a moment from queen to slave, awarded to Achilles and left to mourn her dead family. ‘Great Achilles’, Barker writes in the novel’s opening lines. ‘Brilliant Achilles, shining Achilles, godlike Achilles ... How the epithets pile up. We never called him any of those things; we called “the butcher”.’*

*The men of *The Iliad* have no problem with expressing themselves, often in lengthy battleground speeches. Barker is interested in other conversations and stories left untold. What words did the women speak when alone with each other: in the laundry, at the loom, when laying out the dead?*

*One afternoon not so long ago, Five Dials took the train from King’s Cross to Durham to speak to Pat about the book. It was a sunny and optimistic day, but the conversation inevitably made its way towards the subjects Barker has examined with precision and care over the course of her career: the lasting damage of warfare. Her *Regeneration* trilogy examined the legacy of stress, trauma, dislocation and anger carried by a generation of First World War veterans.*

*From the twentieth century we eventually worked our way back towards the Greeks and the Trojans. But first it was important to clarify a tale about the beginning of her career.*

**Five Dials** I hear your husband plucked your debut novel, *Union Street*, from out of the bin.

**Pat Barker** He was very, very supportive.

**5D** Did he actually fish through?

**PB** Yes. I threw it into the bin. Under the potato peelings too.

**5D** And there wasn’t another version on a computer?

**PB** I wasn’t writing on a computer, no.

**5D** So that could’ve been the end of the book.

**PB** It was that close. That was a very big moment. It would be a trifling gesture now but it wasn’t in those days. He knew I was feeling very downbeat about it. But I always feel downbeat about my books. I’ve a great suspicion of writers who wake up in the middle of the night and admire their own genius. I just think: fraud.

**5D** You wrote three novels before *Union Street*. All went unpublished?

**PB** That’s right. It was difficult but I always made it an absolute rule that if I got a negative phone call, or somebody sent a rejection note, I would just go on and finish the sentence I was writing. I might sort of howl after that, but only after that sentence had been finished. You’ve got to be like that.

**5D** Mercenary?



**PB** It's actually a pretty tough career.

**5D** Maybe after one rejected book a person would go on to the second. But after the second gets rejected, to go on to a third?

**PB** I was getting more and more bloody-minded all the time. By the time I was writing the third I was very much writing what I wanted to write without any kind of references to the publishing industry at all. That's not a bad attitude.

**5D** What was the first unpublished novel like?

**PB** It was a slender, sensitive, middle-class lady's book and that's not who I am. It was writing that was admired at the time. And I thought: no.

**5D** How much dialogue was in the first couple of novels before *Union Street*?

**PB** Probably less. The percentage of dialogue went up as I started to find my own voice.

**5D** With *Union Street*, you're plunged into a world alive with voices.

**PB** And they're still alive. Not the specific characters, but women like that are still very much there. There's this agonizing: could you possibly write working-class characters when you yourself are no longer working class? It misunderstands the nature of writing. You're writing from a very deep place in your personality and possibly out of the sort of archetypes that were formed in your relationship with your family and people who had impact on you very closely.

**5D** I read your first book right after I read your most recent. I felt a tether between ...

**PB** You've a tidy mind, haven't you?



**5D** I grabbed it off the shelf. Thankfully they were all lined up. I could go straight to the beginning. It felt like there was a line connecting the women in *Union Street* to the Trojan women. When did your interest in the Greeks begin?

**PB** Much later. I would've said about five years ago. Actually, somebody pointed out that there's a passage in *Life Class* where Elinor Brooke is describing the Café Royale and the way the atmosphere had changed in the first days of the First World War. She says the old men were all panicking because they thought their day was over and the young men were spouting things they had read in the newspapers. And the women had gone absolutely silent. She said it was like the beginning of *The Iliad*. When Agamemnon and Achilles are making these fantastic speeches and the girls they are talking about say nothing at all.

**5D** Behind those great figures are other voices ...

**PB** That are not being heard, yes.

**5D** When did you find your way to these voices?



**PB** I had just read *The Iliad* and was astonished by that silence. The eloquence of the men, the absolute silence of the women they're quarrelling about.

It's interesting. Obviously by chance one of my neighbours two or three doors up the street happens to be an expert on Homer. I had no idea she was there. We met for a drink when she was told what I was doing. She's a classicist. She said she was reading the original Greek at the age of fourteen. She was sitting in class, a little fourteen-year-old girl, absolutely outraged by this silence. To her it was just leaping off the page. I'm sure a perfectly nice fourteen-year-old boy would read the same scene and wouldn't notice the silence. Men don't hear women's silences. They just complain about them yammering on.

**5D** Heroes – from the heroic Greek figures to the superheroes in films today – take up a lot of space. It's difficult to peer around them sometimes.

**PB** Yes. Agamemnon is definitely manspreading and mansplaining to the nth degree.

**5D** Why did you choose Briseis as the narrator?

**PB** I wanted it to be about her, because, apart from anything else, the descent from being a queen to being a slave is so dramatic.

Perhaps it would've been nice to have another character who had been a slave in her previous life, but then there's a little bit of that in Uza, who didn't care whose dick was up her as long as she was living a comfortable life.

**5D** The range of femininity in the book is wide.



**PB** And those women talking together are very much like *Union Street*. It's the same kind of conversation between women.

**5D** The language between the characters is just modern enough. Or perhaps just universal enough. Were you looking for that effect?

**PB** Those men can't possibly have spoken in fifteen-page speeches. They would not have sat through each other's speeches without interrupting after the first ten or eleven words.

The speeches on the battlefield are amazing. Because you can't actually kill the bloke until you've established who his great-grandfather was. They give each other complete genealogies. There are two men who meet on the battlefield and discover that their grandfathers were guest friends, which is a very important relationship. They'd stayed with each other and automatically could no longer kill one another. Because Granddad and Granddad knew each other well. So, they avoid each other on the battlefield.

**5D** The first chapter rings with a modern sense too. I couldn't help but think of Syria. The attack on a sun-baked city full of narrow lanes is about to begin. The sense of impending doom would be just like it is today. Is there a continuity that runs through all the novels you've written about conflict?

**PB** Nothing happens in the book that is not happening in the contemporary world. Nothing happens in *The Iliad* that isn't happening in the contemporary world, give or take changes in weaponry, which doesn't make it worse. It just makes it different.

When we, say, look at what's happening in the present, the danger is that people tend to think what's happening in the present 'out there'.

There are the women in the ISIS slave markets. But there are young women who are illegal immigrants in this country working for no money. They're working for food and if they are sexually assaulted, which they very commonly are, they cannot go to the police. They can't complain to anybody. In effect, these women are slaves. They're being sexually abused. And that is in our society, not in others.

**5D** You don't have to scrape away layers to find what's relevant.

**PB** It's right here, yes.

**5D** In terms of primary documents ...

**PB** Well, there's only one I'm looking at.

**5D** But in your career as a novelist you've conducted extensive research, whether it's the primary documentation of war or the poems written after. Does this material make your job easier?

**PB** Writing myth is much more freeing than writing history. You should not ideally have any anachronisms at all in history. Not the way I do it, anyway. People differ, people are prepared to bend history to various degrees, but I don't. If Rivers and Sassoon [historical figures who feature in Barker's Regeneration trilogy] are having lunch in the Conservative Club on Princes Street, that's what they were doing. And Rivers chooses the boiled fish because he has ulcers. Did Rivers have ulcers? Yes, he did. It's like that. Which is also stimulating. It's writing in a strait-jacket, but that would stimulate your imagination.

The freedom of myth, the freedom to be naughty and deliberately anachronistic is also very stimulating and a relief after the other. After so many years of writing in a different way.

**5D** After so many years of adhering to this sense of history, has writing myth become a freeing, joyous writing experience?

**PB** Oh, God, no. I was in agony over that book many, many times.

**5D** Did you feel freedom with your treatment of Achilles?

**PB** There is an alternative of the myth that he's shot in the back by an arrow. A poisoned arrow, possibly. Fired by Paris. A coward's weapon in a coward's hands.

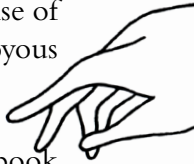
Achilles is amphibious. That's what makes him interesting to me. If he were just a sort of copper-bottomed Bronze Age hero I wouldn't be particularly interested. It's that ambivalence, actually a femininity, the fluidity of which underlies it all, which makes it interesting. I actually think he's a fascinating character.

**5D** Is this the first time that you've looked at what could be called Stockholm Syndrome? This idea of a complicated love that arises?

**PB** A very young girl, like Tecmessa when she was first bought, would suffer from Stockholm Syndrome because everything has been swept away. And there's this bloke who's done it all. Nevertheless you cling to him. You convince yourself you're in love with him; perhaps in a way you are.

Patroclus's captive falling in love with him is a bit more comprehensible. I read something that said Patroclus in *The Iliad* is simply a plot device, but I don't think he's a plot device at all. I think he's the ethical centre of the story. He's the only halfway decent guy in the whole bloody thing, and I think Homer represents him as that.

What I come away with all the time is an awe



of Homer's mind. Amazing, amazing writer, well not writer because he didn't write, of course, but you know what I mean.

And, you know, I'll probably get myself into all kinds of trouble with classicists because everybody is saying it was an endless number of people. And I think it wasn't. One man wrote Achilles's speeches. I'd go to the stake for that.

**5D** You feel that as a fiction writer?

**PB** As a writer, yes. There are many other hands at work and you can see the internal contradictions which result from that. But the character of Achilles in particular is the creation of a single man.

**5D** Patroclus is not simply a plot device in your novel. You give him a rich, complex role.

**PB** With a terrible past with his best friend.

**5D** The relationship between Achilles and Patroclus is one of the most intimate in the book. Not so much a gay relationship as we would know in our day and age.

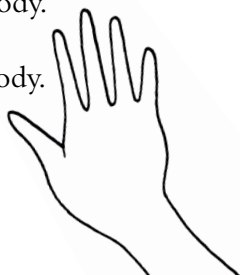
**PB** You wouldn't recognize it as a gay relationship.

**5D** Intensely fraternal, but sexual in some ways. Emotional.

**PB** Comradeship in battle. And two lost children finding each other in childhood. And possibly, or very probably, sex as well. It's the intensely physical character of Achilles grieving which indicates there has been a physical connection.

**5D** Wanting his body.

**PB** Wanting his body.



**5D** You've looked at trauma in so many different frames. Do you think trauma is different when you're talking about the children of Gods?

**PB** Does Achilles have PTSD? I think he does, actually, by most standards. There's this book, *Achilles in Vietnam* by Jonathan Shay, which, in his clinical practice with PTSD, suffering veterans, he uses the story of Achilles, and he wrote a sequel called *Odysseus in America* about the difficulties of readjusting to civilian life. They are very astonishing books.

Yes, I do think Achilles's moral behaviour does change after the death of Patroclus. He used to allow Trojan prisoners to live, sell them off into slavery or ransom them directly. And after Patroclus's death he kills absolutely everybody quite ruthlessly, no mercy at all. That is a big change.

**5D** He's plagued by some of those deaths. They come to him in his subconscious.

**PB** He has nightmares; he can't sleep, can't eat. Maybe Gods get PTSD too.

I don't know whether anybody else has ever remarked on this but the children of the Gods are a remarkably infertile lot. Perhaps it's a way of limiting the interaction between the human and the divine. Helen has one daughter, Achilles has one son, and given the amount of sexual activity that is going on it's really quite a remarkable outcome. They go on to marry each other and are incapable of having children. So, he has to go the Oracle of Delphi to ask for advice on what to do about it, and the priests of Delphi kill him.

**5D** How did you examine the sexual life of the narrator, Briseis? She has to come to terms with her new life as a sex slave. She's a sex slave to someone who we equate with heroism, being played by Brad Pitt...

**PB** The most beautiful man on earth at the time.

He has killed Briseis's husband and her brothers and burnt her home.

I don't think she'd be bowled over by all the male pulchritude in the bedroom. But I do think, too, that part of her getting pregnant is a sort of yielding to the possibility of something else between them. Because she always has this completely irrational idea that she will not get pregnant, probably because she didn't get pregnant in her marriage. But it's also that she thinks she can keep Greek sperm at bay. So it's quite a shock when she becomes pregnant.

**5D** She turns from being someone who's obviously traumatized, who's kicking against being a slave, to something else.

**PB** All the time she's recovering a sense of herself, of who she is. Coming out of this almost-catatonic trance that she's in to begin with.

**5D** You examine the casual ownership of women in the book too. A woman is a man's prize. Now, she's someone else's prize. Was that something that was prominent enough in *The Iliad*, or did you make a point of it to imbue it with more importance?

**PB** I thought about the special status of the prize women such as Briseis, because you think initially that the same disaster is befalling all these women. Actually, it's not quite the same disaster. There are all kinds. The role of a person who was a slave and was perhaps being very badly treated in Lyrnessus before the Greeks invaded. Suddenly things are not worse for them. They may even be slightly better.

And there's the very pretty girl who is a mistress and who is now higher in rank than her own mistress.

There are these two sisters who go for walks, heavily veiled and ultra-respectable, and they're in complete denial about everything that's happened to them.

There are the prize women, who are on a distinct level. They're relatively privileged in comparison with all the other women.

**5D** But always knowing their prize status is not something that will last.

**PB** You definitely don't want to lose your looks. It can be taken away. Another prize can come in and take your place, and so on.

And Briseis very shrewdly says – though she goes on hoping – you're not going to marry a slave. You've already owned the slave. You marry to forge an alliance with another royal house.

**5D** How important was the setting for you?

**PB** I did not go to Troy. Apart from anything else, the ruins of Troy are now six miles inland. The bay is silted up, so the topography has changed completely, and when you get to Troy all that's there is this very modern, huge wooden horse. I don't feel I can justify going and sitting on the shores of the Mediterranean and saying, 'I'm soaking up the atmosphere. Can I have it off my income tax, please?'

In the novel, the beach itself – that very enclosed environment – is enormously important. They are compressed, with the sea on one side, then the sand dunes, then a battlefield. It's all happening in this very narrow, overcrowded and actually squalid camp.

**5D** The squalidness is tangible.

**PB** The squalor and the riches. All these possessions, priceless possessions, all portable because



they're living in huts with inadequate sanitation, and all the rest of it. It was very important to me that here should be a completely naturalistic explanation of the plague in the rats and the squalor.

**5D** Because the Gods are both there but not there?

**PB** They're there as little as possible. Apollo's there and of course Thetis is there. I decided Thetis had to be there. Achilles is who he is because his mother was a goddess. And there are lots of mortal men who see their mothers as goddesses. They're all a bit like Achilles.

**5D** How would you describe them?

**PB** Narcissists. Too much self-adoration.

**5D** I've known a few of those guys.

**PB** And adoration – the mixture of adoration and abandonment. Achilles is also an abandoned child.

**5D** You remind us again and again of the youthfulness of war. We forget about that these days, just how young these bodies are. In one section you brutally catalogue how these young Trojans die.

**PB** How these young people died, and contrast that with what they meant to their mothers. I mean, it's a cliché: 'He's some mother's son.' But that is not just me. Homer does this. Nobody dies nameless. Very few people die without having something recalled about them. Where they lived, where their parents lived, that kind of thing. Everything that is lost is given value at the moment it disappears.

**5D** Have we lost that?



**PB** I don't know that we ever had it. Homer had it. That's part of his greatness: a very compassionate mind.

There were times when I thought, 'How do you take the reader into a world which is so unimaginably different from ours in so many ways?' And you do it through the body. Because the human body, as far as we know, has not changed or evolved in any dramatic way during our time.

It's fascinating because there's this legend – which is without real foundation – that the person who wrote *The Iliad* was blind. But actually I think he must have had quite a bit of military experience. Because he's always describing what internal organs look like. He knows where the bladder is, he knows what the bladder does. He knows where the liver is, what the liver does and what it looks like. And he didn't learn that at medical school or art college. There's actually only one place he could have learned it. On the battlefield.

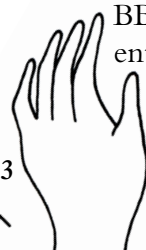
Oh, I'm offending the Classicists with every word. I'm sorry.

**5D** It doesn't solely belong to them.

**PB** It doesn't. It belongs to us all. Myth belongs to everybody. It's not the past, it's now. History is then and myth is now.

**5D** I pulled up the cast list of *Troy*, the Brad Pitt film, and it's so interesting after reading your book to see how a story can all of a sudden be tilted. How a minor figure can grab the microphone and tell her own story. After this book, it's difficult to look at previous incarnations in exactly the same way.

**PB** It's a long time ago, that film, isn't it? I mean, of course, there was *Troy*, an eight-parter on the BBC. I started it, but I think I found, well, it wasn't entirely ... conventional, I'll say.



**5D** It must be tough when you've imagined it your own way.

**PB** You don't want to be confronted immediately with somebody else's re-imagining.

**5D** Has writing violence become easier for you? This is a very violent book and the violence is dealt with in a way that is personal. Like you say, the names are listed. It's an ongoing violence.

**PB** They are fighting every day or almost every day. We're spared what happens inside the gates of Troy. I think, actually, I'm more aware of my restraint in writing violence. I do tend to keep it at a distance. In *Regeneration*, for example, there are horrific things. If you just batter people with trauma, they switch off, they stop feeling, they stop thinking. You can't afford to do that. You've got to have the violent episode [in *Regeneration* where Prior finds the eye], then you draw back and say, 'What do we make of this? What do we think about this?' But if he keeps finding eyes or other body parts on every page, people just go numb.

**5D** When you're looking at the way the Greeks and the Trojans fought, there was no getting away from the humanity of the person at the other end of your sword.

**PB** It's all single combat. In the trenches, of course, there was remarkably little of that.

**5D** Now we are dealing with drones. We are dealing with far-away warfare.

**PB** Drones are the ultimate end of a trend, which is that human beings have distanced themselves further and further from actual violence. Even a spear, of course, is at a distance. A sword is up close.

But even a sword, it's not throttling somebody with your bare hands.

And it gets further and further removed. The long bow, the tank, further and further away. And whatever residual inhibitions about human violence we have as a species are rendered inoperative by the fact that you cannot see the person to whom it's being done. So, it becomes violence without limit.

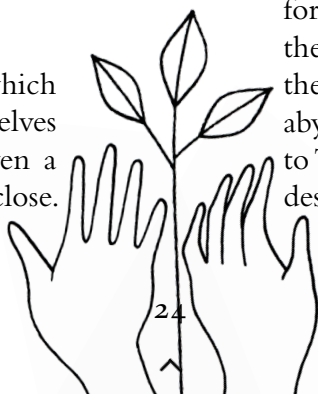
**5D** There's a way of not having to feel anything after the outcome.

**PB** Compassion fatigue. Although it is not so much out of compassion fatigue, but rather frustration at one's inability to go on feeling compassion, or to feel anything at all.

When Briseis is thinking about the young men who die, she deliberately tries to stop it being a recital of what she calls 'intolerably nameless names' – which echoes Siegfried Sassoon. This is his prose. Give humanity to those people again, so they can have dignity and so they can be mourned. The whole of modern warfare is designed to make that almost impossible.

**5D** You explore the grief of Achilles. He's bargaining with grief after the death of Patroclus. He's trying to use his arsenal to deal with what we are all defenceless against. You write: 'Grief's only as deep as the love it's replaced.' Why was this aspect important for you to get across in this book, these poetic ways to grieve?

**PB** I think it's possibly a personal thing: my grief for my husband. But also you have to understand the depth and the trauma inflicted on Achilles by the death of Patroclus to understand the absolutely abysmal things that he does to Hector's body and to Trojan men who have surrendered. It absolutely destroys him as an ethical being.





**5D** Wounds are so meaningful in this book. They have the potential to be mortal. You have great knowledge of wounds. One scene features someone pressing on a wound for the sound it makes.

**PB** Gas gangrene. He's doing exactly what people do in *Life Class*. Doctors in *Life Class* press for the crackle sound.

**5D** Ok.

**PB** Ancient physicians knew absolutely everything about it. They didn't have the modern arsenal of medicines to tackle it, but they knew.

Of course what I do, which is not in Homer, is deal with the wounded. In Homer, there almost aren't any wounded.

In every war, the wounded outnumber the dead. And that is not acknowledged. It's death or glory, which is the way it was presented in the First World War too. The lightly wounded, who were smiling and waving, and the glorious dead. And the person with arms and legs missing – forget about them. They're bad for morale.

**5D** So, your addition to Homer is to bring in what would have been.

**PB** It's a typically feminine thing to do. The long-term consequences – which is what is typically dealt with by women, of course.

**5D** You personally knew a bit about that too from your grandfather? Is that true?

**PB** Yes. He had a bayonet wound and when I was little, when I didn't know about the First World War, I assumed that bayonet wounds were very common. In fact, they were only three per cent of the overall injuries. Because of course you didn't

have hand-to-hand combat very often. You didn't get to the trenches to start doing that, because you were mowed down by machine guns long before you got there. Anyway, he did get a bayonet wound, and the guy who gave it to him was shot in the forehead before he twisted and withdrew, which makes it clean; a much cleaner, more survivable wound. It's the twist that did the damage.

**5D** Would your grandfather talk about it?

**PB** He never talked about it.

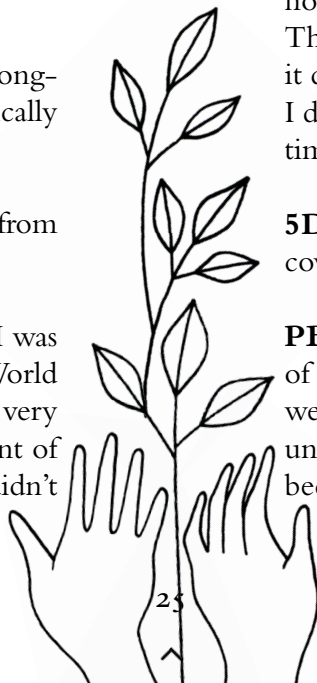
**5D** So, it was just something on his person that you would just notice?

**PB** It was this absolutely horrendous wound. Quite unlike a surgical incision, as you would imagine. I asked him what it was, but I can't remember what he said. He probably didn't say anything. They didn't. They didn't talk about it. But it was a very good start for a writer: to have a wound in silence. You've got silence. You fill it.

Which is perhaps why so many families were haunted for so long by that war. There was so much silence surrounding it when the men came home. Even then they didn't talk to one another. They enjoyed each other's company. It helped, but it didn't. They told jokes about the good times, but I don't think there was much talking about the bad times. It just helped to be with people who knew.

**5D** And yet a wound is something you can't cover up.

**PB** It's a continuing thing. My grandfather died of cancer. It was back in the days where people were not told they had cancer. It was absolutely unmentionable. So he asked the consultant, 'Is this because the bayonet wound has started leaking on





the inside?’ And the consultant said yes. He was having hemorrhages. So he died in his seventies thinking the bayonet wound had killed him.

**5D** Thinking that the war never ended.

**PB** The war got him in the end.

We’d all been through another war by then, moved on long beyond that. It would’ve been nice if he’d known the truth. That it was something else. Or perhaps, I don’t know, perhaps he felt this sense of completion by thinking he was dying of his wound at last.

Apparently, Robert Graves had caught bits of shrapnel coming out of him for ever. They were just working their way to the surface: the body rejecting it.

**5D** A Vietnam vet I know said one day he was scratching his leg and this piece came out. And I asked, ‘Did you think about it? Where it is from?’ He said, ‘It could’ve been Czech, it could’ve been Russian, it could’ve been North Korean.’

**PB** Could have been American.

**5D** Your body never stops trying to push these objects out.

**PB** And there’s the mental side. My husband’s uncle was killed on the Somme. My husband’s father was in West Africa at the time. He wasn’t there when it happened. But when he was old and his mind was starting to go, he believed he’d witnessed his brother’s death. It was very, very vivid to him.

Worse than that, he mistook his wife for the soldier who was killing his brother and he started attacking her. And he had become a US citizen by this time, so he was a very American old man, still seeing something that happened on the Somme

in 1916. And his poor wife, a tiny little bird-like woman.

**5D** Have you been approached by people who have said your writing has correctly depicted PTSD?

**PB** One man at an event in Edinburgh said, ‘For the first time I understand my childhood. Because my father was such an overpowering, angry man and there was no talking to him. I think I understand my father now.’

Mainly, it’s people’s understanding of their family history, which in many cases, in many families, was deformed in ways which were not talked about, and still are not really talked about. Robert Graves said it takes three generations for the blood to run clear. That’s true.

Similarly with concentration-camp survivors, I think. You see even in their grandchildren the marks of it.

**5D** Hidden narratives, hidden histories and subtext.

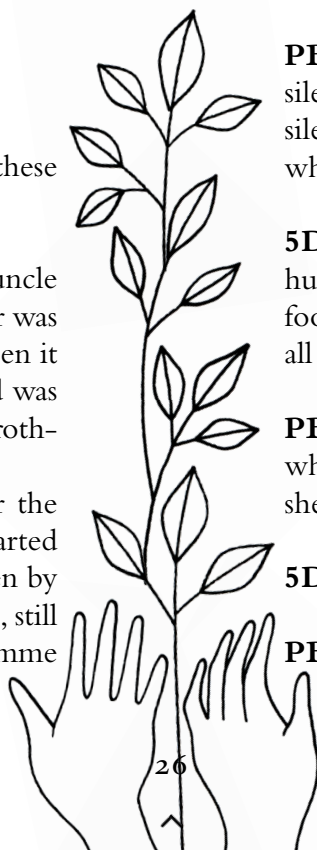
**PB** And silences. Silences, always. I mean the silence of veterans is equally compelling to the silence of those girls. Silence and absence. That’s where novelists work. History does the rest.

**5D** The book features moments of kindness and humour. There’s a great deal of sensual pleasure: the foods, the honey the grapes. Even war is not war all the time.

**PB** And Briseis has a relationship with the sea which is very nourishing. It’s one of the things that she shares with Achilles.

**5D** They see each other on the beach.

**PB** But they never speak. They’re just there.



**5D** Explain the Philip Roth quote at the beginning.

**PB** What I liked was the idea that this is where European literature starts: two men quarrelling over a girl, and after that the girl saying nothing. That's where it starts.

For men it starts with a quarrel. For women it starts with silence.

Those two responses are, as we know, quite different.



# Then and Now

A soldier returns

By Adnan Sarwar



**F**ifteen years ago I knew myself. Or I knew a version of myself. I wanted, more than anything, to be a soldier in the Iraq War. They told me I'd go there to save the Iraqis, but I wanted the war for myself. Everybody had their own reasons. I wanted to escape Burnley, I didn't want an arranged marriage, the mosque five times a day; just the idea of it felt like a prison. I could already sense the deception around me. A few Pakistani kids took drugs, shagged around and then prayed like they were the world's best Muslims.

I'd screwed up my education and saw a shit future ahead. Fuck that. I joined the army. They gave me a uniform, gave me a gun, gave me a war, gave me the power, eventually, to decide if people could keep walking past me in the streets of Basra or drive past me on its roads, or if I should put a bullet through them. It felt both real and counterfeit. The training made me a soldier; it wrapped me in a uniform, gave me a rifle I knew how to clean and fire. I learned how to hide in a field or a building and shoot a man in the chest, make his heart explode. But what was counterfeit was the guarantee I would shoot. If they aimed for me, would I respond?

After years of training I felt alive. I was free in the army. At night in the back of Land Rovers, I wrote a diary with a head torch and a black pen. I wanted to document the war – a boy in his twenties secretly scratching away on a page, trying to set down history, even though I'd never read the great war historians. I'd never read a thing. I felt thick. I tried to be the student Mum and Dad wanted but hadn't done well after high school. They wanted a doctor, but growing up in Burnley meant playing cricket after school, going to mosque, smashing windows and scratching nice cars, returning to a house with damp up the walls and a broken toilet. It wasn't toys; it wasn't holidays or birthdays.

It wasn't reading books in the warm corner of a home. It wasn't words. I'd become a soldier who thought he could write about a war without reading a book.

At marches all around the world, people protested our mission. But what did they know? I was there in Basra with my rifle during the day and my pen at night. I wrote what I could.

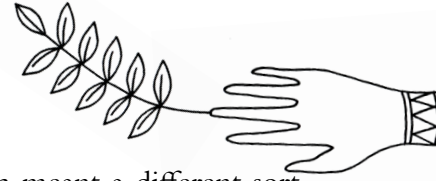
I'll be forty years old in November. I can barely remember that young boy, running away from home for adventure, abandoning his parents' dreams. I didn't know it then, but my mum and dad had worked to get me somewhere; I hated where I was and wanted change, so I pursued a new life in a way that could have killed me. Today I know I could have spoken to them, let them know I understood their sacrifice. Back then I needed simplicity, so I threw away my past and their ideas for my future.

But I admire him, that kid. It may be an ugly, solipsistic sentiment to write, but he needed that war. I'm glad his arrogance led him to think he should write a diary. He thought it could be useful. It is, now.

I would still choose to go to war. It gave me a strength and belief in myself. But it also took me so far from my parents that they became just a crackling noise on the phone. It changed my life – a cliché but a violently real one. It taught me that invading a country was within my capability. Today you can't tell me such violence and power and hubris is impossible. It taught me that when you're given an opportunity, you should never give up until it kills you. It might.

## **Border of Kuwait and Iraq, in desert, 20 March 2003**

*The drive to this location was the hardest I have ever done. It is quite unnerving to be driving a soft-skinned vehicle while artillery explodes to your right. It was a*



*tactical move with no lights bar the explosions. There is a fire that lights the sky to the north. It seems like a city on fire – it is huge and many soldiers stand and stare and realize what they are a part of. Today we sleep in full IPE and go through three suspected chemical attacks.*

**Lower Manhattan, New York,  
1 August 2018**

I can't lie. I was excited back then. It was immature; I was smiling in a war, with no comprehension of the consequences. After reading that passage back, I remember the cold, clear night – the kind of dark that descends in a desert free of street lights or buildings. Our lights were extinguished but the Iraqi troops based near the border knew we were coming: in a little metal box with wheels, two of us up front, all our lives, including a brew kit, nestled in the back, pushing our way through the desert. Mortars landed to my right. Now if I look to my right I can see Americans eating pastries and drinking coffee in the World Trade Center. People everywhere. Back then, I saw nothing but the sand exploding, leaping from the ground.

Land Rovers trundled in a line towards Iraq. The British were coming to invade. The Iraqis responded with mortars. The sand splashed, the ground vibrated. We considered our deaths here on this dusty piece of the map. We'd been making our way north every day from Kuwait, headed towards the border, but as the shells whistled in the night above, we knew someone would have had to come find us if we didn't arrive. They'd know if we failed to cross the border.

It was a wild, wide war. I don't think I wanted to die. I think I knew it wasn't the best option. I definitely didn't want to lose my legs or arms – that was certain – but death in an instant, straight and clean, seemed viable. Most soldiers thought this. Coming back home the way we went was the best option. Dying came second. None of us wanted to

come back disabled, which meant a different sort of death every day.

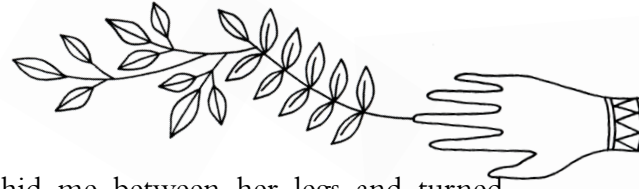
I'd achieved a transformation. In the dark I could address those white schoolmates I'd known back home: in Burnley I'd been the boy you'd kicked around at school and spat at. Now I was wearing your uniform and fighting your war. I thought of you cowards now, across the world, out beyond the mortars, beyond the stars of the Iraq sky. Where were you? I tried to imagine some banal domestic scene. That's what was driving me. I know that now.

After the war I worked as a doorman for four years. That gave me time to mull over the experience. When I wrote, I tried to be honest on the page. I wrote about growing up and in that writing revealed the other reason for joining the army. I wanted to beat these figures from the past.

You're a clean page when you're born and then people write on you in indelible ink. You can't get them out. You can tear some of that page away but in doing so you lose part of yourself. You must accept their part in your story. They wrote on me, and I wanted to write stronger words to obscure them. But their sentences remain.

After years of examining my motivations I became sure of why I joined the army. I kept it a secret, but the sand was eventually swept away and the truth revealed.

I was seven years old. Mum wanted a change and wallpaper was expensive in town, but a mill up near Trafalgar Flats sold it cheap. Pakistanis weren't welcome up there, but Mum told me to get my coat on. 'We're off to get some new wallpaper.' Mum had pushed all the way to Europe from Pakistan with a kid in tow. She'd had three kids in the Netherlands, including me, then she'd crowded us all on to a ferry with Dad and set off for England. We'd lived in spare bedrooms until we got our own place in Burnley. Now, she wanted that wallpaper.



‘Get your jacket on,’ she said. I can’t remember what I looked like, but I can remember her as she leaned over. She was warm. She smiled and kissed my face. ‘Put your hat on and give me your hand.’ She pressed mittens into my palm. She wore leather gloves. The wool mittens had a string that went through the arms of my coat. We left our terraced house and she locked the door. We dropped down to the canal and then headed for the warehouse that sold the wallpaper.

We crossed the town centre, passed ‘National Front’ sprayed on brick walls, walked over the metal bridge, up a hill where she puffed but still held my hand and laughed and smiled and leaned over to kiss my face again.

The mill was next to a petrol station. As we left with our wallpaper, they might have just finished filling their tank. There were two of them in the car; I can’t remember the colour, just isolated flashes of their faces as they sped towards us and braked – not to avoid anything, just close enough to spit and shout, ‘Fucking Pakis.’ The spit didn’t reach us but the laughter did. I’m still, thirty-three years later, able to conjure the volume.

Mum grabbed me and put me between her legs. We held bags of wallpaper. I couldn’t have done anything, even if they’d decided to exit the car and hit her. I was held still, clutched by her, on a pavement in the northern town where we’d been told we would be welcome to work in the mills, that England needed us. The equation had been simple up to that moment.

I dreamt about them. In the dream they get out of the car. They hit my mother. Then I feel fists welting my face. It’s better to die suddenly, in a flash. It’s always worse to be injured.

As a soldier, I wanted to kill them. The equation was simple. They changed my life with a few ropes of spit, a few screamed words, a few seconds of laughter.

Mum hid me between her legs and turned from them. She leant over, shielded me, until they went away. They sped off, probably laughed about the Pakis they spat at to their friends and then forgot about us, or turned us into a characters for a story meant for the pub. They went to sleep. The moment thinned, was soon forgotten, and they went on with their lives.

During my time in Iraq, I remember it went beyond just words. I wanted to kill them. I was surrounded by a nebulous enemy, but it was enemies in my own country I wanted dead – not from age, from my hands. I wanted to somehow remember their number plate; I wanted to find them one day when I was bigger and stamp their skulls into the road.

My mother shielded me. I couldn’t have done anything if they’d exited the car: I was seven. I was pulled in to Mum’s legs and she protected me.

The sand exploded. I drove while Saddam’s bombs came down on me.

### **Kuwait International Airport, Kuwait, 5 April 2003**

*Today was the day we sent our boys back to the UK. Luke’s closest friends were directly involved in carrying him. The Padre prayed and said kind words and we all felt the absolute loss as the bodies were carried in front of our eyes and on to the plane. The Royal Engineers bugler played Abide with Me and the Royal Engineers cried. Once the bodies were on and the plane swallowed all, the bugler played again – The Last Post. The guard of honour had saluted the coffins draped with the Union Jack as they passed by and when we fell out we all faced the plane and saluted. Saluted our soldiers and our friends. Our mates had gone home to rest.*

### **Terminal 8, JFK airport, 5 August 2018**

After the Americans had broken into Iraq with



us, they raced up to Baghdad leaving us in Basra where the war lulled us into believing it was all over. And then it killed Simon and Luke. Luke was a friend of mine. A short man, lovely brown hair and eyes full of friendship. He'd told me off back in the camp in England. Live your life, he said. Get out there and drink and have sex. You don't want to die a virgin. I've been brought up as a Muslim, I said. I don't miss sex because I've never had it. This was something lots of Muslims said to protect themselves from questioning. You don't want to miss it, he replied, you want it, you want it all the time, he said. And I believed him.

I promised him I would live, as I watched the back of that plane close up to make the trip back to Brize Norton near Oxford.

Back when I was laughing and excited driving into the war, I thought I'd get away with it. It wouldn't touch me or my friends. But young men have believed this self-serving story for ever.

I didn't give a shit that the US Marines had torn down Saddam's statue; I couldn't have cared less about politicians talking shit on Downing Street. I watched a friend carried past me and placed in the hold of a plane.

By the time I returned to the war in 2006-7, we'd left all the outposts in Basra and were based on Basra Air Station. The army lived on a big airfield, which meant we were one big target. The insurgency gave us our goodbye, bombing us around twelve times a day. It was over: the great British Army was being bombed out of Basra. The Iraqis hated us by then. They wanted us dead. But it was that first death, Luke's, that has never left me. I wanted to be him. A proper soldier, who drinks and has sex, but I was locked into my religion and thought that I could never leave. He broke that. I had taken a few steps to move away from a culture I felt restricted me. Meeting Luke turned my life at a right angle. I veered so hard and fast I could no

longer recognize what it meant to be a Pakistani. It hurt my parents when I called their ways backward, but I wanted to erase everything I was and start again with this new information.

I didn't want to lose him. It's at times like this, moments of downtime in an airport, I want him here to see what he has done. We might have downed drinks together at the airport bar. I'd pick him up and we'd scream about my arrival at this new place. I was here in Fucking America. Instead, I have the photos I took of him, a young English lad turning to me as I clicked the camera in the Kuwaiti desert fifteen years ago.

**Basra, warehouse near city centre,  
4 June 2003**

*We have been told that we are going home on the 30th of this month. The end is in sight.*

**London, coffee shop near Downing Street,  
6 August 2018**

I didn't get my war. I got something different. In February and March of 2018 I travelled the whole of Iraq for the BBC. In the mountains in the north I helped release a bear near one of Saddam's old palaces because a man was still fighting for animal rights and Iraqis were buying bears, lions and vultures as pets. In the city of Erbil I spoke to people still happy Saddam was gone. In Baghdad I walked the streets lined with kebab cafes. In Tikrit ISIS nearly killed me twice by dressing up as Iraqi soldiers and setting up fake checkpoints. In Babylon a sixteen-year-old girl taught me history – I predict she'll be the prime minister one day. In Basra oil workers guided me to the marshes Saddam drained. I met a man from Muqtada al-Sadr's army who had commanded a mortar team in Basra, sending rockets our way. He'd celebrated when he killed one of us.

Not many soldiers get the privilege to revisit the place they broke. I'd invaded and helped splin-



ter this country fifteen years ago. During these encounters I felt a new kind of guilt, and understood the outrage that erupted in 2003. In these conversations, I could have pretended to have been a worldly wise geopolitician back then, but I wasn't. I told them I was a boy. We can argue I helped to get rid of Saddam. The Kurds, the Shi'a, the Kuwaitis are all happy with that. But not the Sunnis, and they say ISIS could never have grown had Saddam still been around. He would have shot them with gold-plated AK47s and fed their dying bodies to lions.

That sounds like a film. The war was a sort of film – unreal and unspooling – but the reverse became true. Films were made from us. We made the material for the films of the future while acting like the films we'd watched in the past. The two consumed each other until they became one. With tanks on the sand, helicopters in the air and me standing in the desert where miles were lost into the horizon, where the sand became the sky, I had been in my own film.

I know I'm partly responsible for the violence that never left Iraq. But I wanted to be honest about it during my return. Iraq could have a decent future; it has people who are fighting against corruption. This is their new war. Iraq has spirit. It has never died. I tested myself on my recent trip; I didn't want to think it was doing well just because of my guilt. I do believe in the Iraqis. They are more than just the lines on the map that form Iraq. I know I can't stop another boy like me who wants to escape and join the military; I know older soldiers couldn't have stopped me going. I know there will always be war. Politicians will do it for one reason, soldiers for another. I didn't join to save the world. I joined to save myself. Everyone has their own reasons.





# ‘We can certainly learn from the past. But it doesn’t mean that anything’s going turn out in the same way.’

A conversation with Antony Beevor

*One day I took the train to see historian Antony Beevor in rural Kent. On the drive to his place from Bekesbourne Station, through country lanes, we passed ‘Oswalds’, the house where Joseph Conrad had once lived. We discussed politics, Brexit and what must have led Conrad to this part of the world.*

*I’d spent a week reading nothing but Beevor’s military histories. This activity leads to a mistrust of the world, especially the landscapes I saw on car journey from Bekesbourne. It’s difficult to submerge yourself in Beevor’s work and then visit the peaceful countryside. The fields bearing crops seem to be waiting to be churned by artillery fire. Each house looks like it could collapse into a version of those on the ruined streets of Stalingrad. ‘Look at all those walls,’ I thought from the passenger seat when we slowed to drive through a village, ‘unpocked by bullets.’ Beevor’s books make it clear that when destruction comes, little remains untouched. No part of the world, no matter how civilized it calls itself, is free from the potential of murder and violence. During our conversation we’d go on to speak about both icy Stalingrad and devastated Berlin, and all the pain and murder each city witnessed during the Second World War, but for the time being we drove through pleasant land.*

*Beevor’s books are not only valued amongst historians and readers of military history. Stalingrad became that rare title to cross over into pop culture. In the first series of the comedy Peep Show, hapless Mark Corrigan draws from his copy of Stalingrad to aid him in a horrendously bad attempt at picking up his next-door neighbour:*

**Mark** You know, the Red Army shot 16,000 of their own men at Stalingrad.

**Toni** OK.

**Mark** And, of course, the majority of the Wehrmacht had no winter clothing.

**Toni** I know how they feel. You buy classic but classic keeps changing.

**Mark** See, by the winter of ‘42, the whole

city was surrounded by the massed Sixth Army. It was pressing and pressing. The Russians couldn’t hold on much longer. Many wanted to submit.

**Toni** Mark, I don’t just bang anyone, yeah?

**Mark** No. No, of course not. What I mean is that the German supply lines were stretched. Zhukov countered and the siege was broken. And that’s all the story of Stalingrad.

*For a while Stalingrad became the go-to present for anyone with a mild interest in history. If you wanted to know about warfare, here was the title.*

*At Beevor’s home, we sat in his front room and spoke for a couple of hours. I told him I was interested in his research, in the stories behind the books and in how he was able to examine these places – Stalingrad, Berlin, Arnhem, the Dardennes, Normandy – and then somehow return with his faith in humanity not entirely diminished. Beevor sat on the couch across from me and led me back to the middle of the last century, but also to the crucial years in the 1990s when Russia was open, however briefly, to historians. He spoke of warfare, but also of the great transnational friendships he’d forged during his working life. Afterwards, with the bleakness of the twentieth century behind us, we opened the door. Outside the window I could see the fields were still untouched. The world was unchurned for the time being. We ate a lunch of fresh pesto and pasta with his wife, the biographer Artemis Cooper, and on the way back Beevor slowed his vehicle down so I could get a look at Conrad’s old villa, which seemed from a distance like a very pleasant place for the man who wrote Heart of Darkness.*

**Antony Beevor** I started off by writing novels, political thrillers. I hope they have been completely forgotten. I’m horrified if occasionally somebody turns up with an old copy and asks for an autograph. But it was a huge help having started in that particular way.



**Five Dials** With fiction?

**AB** Because it influenced the way I was going to write later. Obviously, the historical work does not have a single invented thing in it. You can't, not surprisingly. But you convey what you're writing about in a more visual, tactile sense. You are looking to recreate what it was like at the time, whether it's the weather, the topography, the atmosphere, all drawn from different accounts, especially personal contemporary accounts.

**5D** What was the most important book of military history for you when you started out?

**AB** The first major book – not a big book in the terms of size but a very important one – was *The Face of Battle* by John Keegan. It upended military history, which had been written in the past by retired officers. They'd try to impose the staff officer's view of the battlefield. They were always over-simplified and over-clarified and never actually reflected the chaos and the feelings and the fear of the soldiers at the front.

When I started to write military history, I was well aware I needed to integrate the history from above and the history from below. It was only when I got to the Stalingrad book I realized how essential it was. It was the only way of showing how the lives of civilians and soldiers were totally dominated. They had no control over their own fate.

**5D** In the preface to *Stalingrad* you mention how important timing has been for you as a historian. A window was opened when you were there in Moscow in 1995 to research the book.

**AB** I was phenomenally lucky because even when I started on the book, Pikoya, the Russian minis-

ter of the archives hadn't yet forced the military to open their archives. I was never confident I was going to get anything particularly great. And then we heard that they were opening the military archives as a result of pressure from this minister. That was when we started our negotiations. But they still weren't going to let us in straight away.

**5D** What sort of help did you receive along the way?

**AB** I wouldn't have been able to do it if it wasn't for the wonderful Lyuba Vinogradova, with whom I've worked with for the last twenty-four years. She was doing her doctorate in plant biology. She started to work for me.

I knew I could read a little bit of Russian but there was just so much material that even university Russian wasn't good enough. Unless you can speed-read and decipher the squiggles in Cyrillic in the margins you're certainly not going to cover the ground.

With Lyuba it was fantastic. One could see straight away that she had absolutely the right instinct, the nose. The nose is terribly important. You also need a magpie mind. You've got to be able to speed-read, to be able to fasten on the vital things. She immediately had that instinct. Others were too conscientious. There is so much material you've got to cover, that you mustn't be overly conscientious.

Before we went into the archives, we went down to Volgograd together. We started talking to the women who had been there at the time, as well as some of the old veterans. Not only did Lyuba have the right instinct in terms of empathizing with the old people and so forth, she also had a wonderful secret weapon. She had a slight stammer. This enchanted everybody. Even the crusty old dragons in the archives and the old colonels



in the military archives said, 'Labushka! Labushka!' You can imagine. They immediately became terribly fatherly. And motherly, in the case of the women dragons.

There were still some old loyal Communists who were appalled at the whole situation. There was one dragon lady. She had no less than three portraits of Lenin in her office.

**5D** You've got to put something on the walls.

**AB** Some things don't change.

**5D** And what was she like?

**AB** You can imagine. Very gruff. A fairly large lady with dyed black hair, who hated the idea of foreigners being in her archive.

It wasn't so much the Director who had the power; it was quite often the Deputy Director in the old Soviet sense – the number two with the strength.

I remember while we were working in one archive, Lyuba was getting nervous because I was angry. We were told we were allowed ten files a day, which is not a huge amount. Five, or six, or seven of them were being refused even though they were marked as open in the catalogue. We want to see the Deputy Director. So I said, 'We are only allowed ten files a day, and for some reason five or six of them are being blocked. If they're closed, why isn't it marked in the catalogue?'

Back came the reply: 'That would make the catalogue look untidy.'

Lyuba was beseeching me, saying, 'Don't cause trouble, Antony. Don't cause trouble.'

**5D** This seems to be one of the unsung attributes of a historian: the ability to deal with the personalities of the various gatekeepers.

**AB** That was quite often where the stress came from. Not knowing how things were going to work out. It was not a high-wire act in the sense of personal danger or anything like that. But still.

**5D** What were your days in Moscow like with Lyuba? Did you stay in a hotel?

**AB** I slept on the sofa in Lyuba and her mother's apartment in north Moscow. Then we would take the metro at about four in the morning, certainly by five, because the journey took about three hours to get down to Podolsk, which is south of Moscow. It had been a closed secret city, completely forbidden to foreigners because of all the military establishments. Podolsk is where TsAMO is based, the central archives of the Russian ministry of defence.

It took five months before we even got in, as we were negotiating with the general staff in the ministry of defence. They controlled the archives.

There was a wonderful moment when a colonel said to us, 'We have a simple rule in our archives. You tell us the subject. We choose the files.'

Eventually we'd get down there by 8:30 a.m., when it opened. The trouble was we only had a limited period of time. Also, I would find that the strain in researching in Moscow was such that I could do two to three weeks and then I'd have to have a break and come back.

**5D** The strain because of the social elements or because of the overwhelming weight of the text?

**AB** The very fact of having to work so hard and so fast. But also sometimes having to play games.

**5D** What sort of games?

**AB** The Russians always have this slight confusion – a mixture of paranoia and naivety. I remember



the first day we went to Podolsk and were finally allowed in. They had selected the material for us to read, marking the pages we were allowed to look at. Everything else was forbidden. So, for that first morning we were under surveillance. We actually had to work on the opposite side of the desk from the deputy director of the archive.

**5D** He was watching you at work?

**AB** He was watching us. And then, in the middle of the morning, this other colonel arrived. He was clearly GRU because he spoke perfect English and had obviously learned that abroad. He asked if I was looking for (*he switches to a Russian accent*) ‘negative material’. I had to try to give a deliberately boring treatise on the duty of objectivity of a historian, which had no effect whatsoever, as you might imagine.

He then sent us off for lunch saying, ‘you can leave your bags and papers here’, and they went through them.

Later that afternoon we were suddenly put in the lecture hall unsupervised with all the files, so we could pick and choose. We were extremely lucky. We were able to look at material which was forbidden.

There we would sit, side by side, and Lyuba would be speed-reading through and I would say, ‘Hang on. What about that?’ And she would say, ‘No, no. But *this*.’ And immediately focus in. That way one could work far faster than one would ever be able to do otherwise.

**5D** These were the scribblings and the cues a native speaker would pick up?

**AB** You needed to be a native speaker, but also you would need to be able to understand some of the, well, in-jokes is probably wrong, but some of the

references which a foreigner wouldn’t pick up on. Lyuba herself was learning, learning, learning the whole time.

We had to be very careful indeed, but it was the opportunity. I’d always thought that this was where the commissar’s files, the political department’s files were, and I always guessed that that was going to be where the good stuff would be. And it was. You can imagine my feeling of euphoria that evening thinking, ‘Are we really going to be able to carry on doing this?’

We had got away with it for just over a week before they then started to get very nervous and suspicious. But that was the vital period, because we managed to get through all the files of the Stalingrad front political department during that particular period.

It was absolute gold because it was unvarnished. You had the real heroism and the scandals as well, which started to give one a pretty good impression of what it had been like. And that was aligned with the personal accounts and the diaries, letters, and so on.

The letters were never very useful in a sense, except in a very general way, because they tended to be terribly formulaic: ‘Hello mama, hello papa, I am well, I’m ready to die for the motherland.’

But then we managed to find the NKVD file on censorship, which quoted some of the more outrageous things from these letters. Those who were caught out, including these incredibly naive Ukrainian boys, for example, one of whom had said, ‘I’ve heard from my family’ – even though the family members were on the other side of the German lines – ‘and they say the Germans aren’t so nasty; they’re really getting on very well with them.’ Unsurprisingly, this guy was immediately seized by the NKVD.

That first night I was staying with a Canadian diplomat called Chris Alexander. When I arrived he



said, 'By the way, do you want to ring your wife in London?' So I rang her and said, 'I cannot believe it! We've actually got the stuff which I never thought we'd see.' I suddenly saw signs from Chris saying 'Shut up!' I'd forgotten that even in the new Russia, diplomats' telephones were likely to be bugged.

Afterwards Chris said, 'Listen, when we go out to dinner, don't talk about what you're finding in the archives or how you're finding it.'

They did start to get suspicious later on. The GRU colonel, having heard that we were spending too long on certain things, suddenly started to get aggressive and said, 'We demand to see all your notebooks.' And, thank God, I'd been very, very careful. I'd always used those wire-bound notebooks because you can rip out the pages without it being obvious something is missing.

I said, 'Of course you can see them. Most of them are back in the apartment where I'm staying.' I certainly didn't say I was staying with a western diplomat. 'I can bring them in,' I said, 'You're allowing us until the end of the week,' and so forth. 'Why don't I bring them all in then, and your interpreters can look at them.'

What I had guessed was correct. They didn't have any interpreters down at Podolsk. Because of the length of the journey each day, it was unfeasible for them to come back and forth to check the stuff. They accepted my suggestion. They'd look at the whole damn lot at the end.

But when I started to see that there was so little material which came from the permitted pages, I started to get slightly worried. I almost started wondering, 'Do I have to start writing letters of praise to Comrade Stalin myself?' In the end it was all right. I'd ripped out all the pages of the really interesting, good stuff, which was from the banned bits.

**5D** And put them where?

**AB** I kept them all in a folder. They were all in Chris's flat. That was a huge relief. On the very last day, Chris said, 'Listen, they can find out when you're flying back. We'll go into the Canadian embassy and we'll photocopy all your notes, because at Sheremetyevo airport they can confiscate every single piece of paper you've got, and there's nothing you'll be able to do about it.'

So I said, 'Thank you!' We went in, we photocopied all my notes, and he kept a whole batch at the embassy. He could have got them out if the worst came to the worst. As it happened, I went with a light heart and a light step towards the exit where they went through your bags, mainly checking to see whether you were taking out icons or caviar. I was able to go with a clean conscience, if you like.

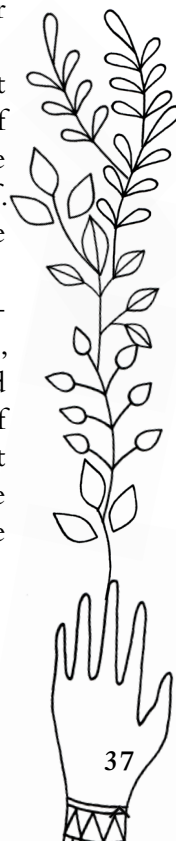
**5D** That must have been a great flight home.

**AB** Absolutely. I kept on coming back because there were a lot of other important archives. But that was, as I say, where the real gold was.

**5D** Has the window closed? What is it like now?

**AB** There are one or two archives which are still open. For example, there's RGASPI, the Party archive, which is very important. It's the Russian State Archive for Social Political History. But the military archives are closed. Especially Podolsk. I think it was closed in 1999. It was before Putin came in, but already there was pressure. There were protests in the Duma by Communist Deputies and others, saying, 'Why are foreign historians allowed to traduce the Soviet Union by having free access to our archives?'

A wonderful Swedish historian called Lennart Samuelsson got in touch with me and said, 'I don't know if you realize that the FSB have now installed





computers to be able to check on the files taken out by foreign historians.’

For me, there were no computers at all. None of the catalogues were computerized. They hadn’t yet managed to cross-reference. Catherine Merridale, who wrote an excellent book called *Ivan’s War*, was the one who then tipped me off. She wasn’t allowed into Podolsk. By then the barrier had come down.

It wasn’t as if closing the military archives was brought in by Putin. It was that change of feeling, this reaction against the liberalization of the nineties following the fall of the Soviet Union. This was when the pendulum was really swinging back in a big way.

**5D** Do you think Putin, in the years since then, has benefited from this idea of controlling the narrative, not allowing westerners to frame Russian military history?

**AB** There are still places where you can get good stuff. Tim Snyder is a good example. He got it from the Ukrainian archives. You’ve got to be quite clever in the way that gets you round the obstacles.

People often ask, ‘Are there still huge secrets to discover?’ I think, on the whole, we’ve got a pretty good idea, but there’s always going to be extra material, good explanations for things we’re not quite certain about. And, of course, there’s a huge amount of more human detail.

What’s truly worrying is the way that the paper – such poor wartime-quality paper – is crumbling to pieces. However carefully you turned over the pages, you’d see brown dust and crumbs accumulating, no matter how painstakingly you did it. The big paradox was that the documents which survived were those where the Russians had got large quantities of German maps. They’d cut them up. They’d used the backs for their paper. Those were very good quality and were surviving very well.

**5D** So German paper keeps Russian history. Speaking of that relationship, I’d like to ask about the progression of your work. Did your Russian book lead organically to *Berlin*?

**AB** There is never any logical progression, I’m afraid.

**5D** But in the intro to *Berlin* you quote a Red Army officer who taunts a group of German prisoners in the ruins of Stalingrad and says, ‘That’s how Berlin is going to look.’ I wondered if there were other organic links like that. In this case a link through retribution.

**AB** What would have been ideal, in retrospect, would have been writing the books in chronological order, but that is certainly not the case. There was a logic. You’re quite right about *Stalingrad* then turning to *Berlin*, because of this idea that the two were so closely linked, both in the Russian and in the German mind.

It was a hell of a strain, Berlin. In fact, partly because there was so much more material, certainly more archives to cover. I was under such stress. There was pressure to finish. But I did. You’ve got to stop being pathetic and get up and get on with it. But it was a hell of a strain on that one. Also, there was the horror of the material. There is this problem. How do you actually deal with the danger of the pornography of war?

**5D** In *Berlin* you were dealing with source material recounting horrible behaviour. How do you do that with sensitivity?

**AB** I was incredibly lucky, because Catherine Merridale, who I admire enormously, was preparing to do her book *Ivan’s War*. And I explained to her about the material on the mass rapes, because I





was still trying to get it straight in my mind. In fact, it wasn't at that stage terribly clear in my mind, but it was starting to become clearer.

When you take, say, Susan Brownmiller's great book, *Against Their Will* – which is an urtext, if you like, on rape in warfare – it's defined. Very much rape is defined as, not an act of sex, but an act of power or an act of violence, or whatever it might be.

Then I started to realize that that was partly true, but it wasn't 100 per cent true. It was absolutely true when they hit East Prussia. It was just an act of violence more than anything else. But by the time they got to Berlin, they were trying to choose the most attractive girls. They were picking them out carefully.

**5D** What was the Russian reaction to how you portrayed this behaviour of the Red Army?

**AB** I underestimated that, I have to say. I had already been condemned by the Russian ambassador, and this is before he'd even read a word.

*The Telegraph* wanted to do a two-page spread on what was going to be in *Berlin*. They asked me to contribute. I said, 'No way. I don't want to have controversy six months in front of the book being released.' So, they went and basically guessed at what I was writing. It was outrageous.

I couldn't fight it legally. I insisted on being able to write a letter in protest, which they had to publish. The Russian ambassador had written a letter saying that this was libel, slander and blasphemy against the Red Army. I insisted on having my letter published, complaining bitterly at the speculation that had been put into this article, which I refused to have anything to do with.

After my letter, I got a telephone call from the Russian ambassador, Grigori Karasin, now Lavrov's Deputy, saying, 'Antony, it's Grigori. We must have lunch together, just the two of us. A vodka lunch.'

I promise you, this is true. I promise you, these are his words. You can imagine I certainly won't want to forget that.

In a very nervous state I went to the Russian residence. He gave me a little tour. It was a vodka lunch, one bottle each: Stolichnaya, but not the very big ones. Fortunately, I had had a pint of full-cream milk just beforehand so as to absorb the alcohol. But it was during this lunch, Karasin said, 'You've got to understand that the victory is sacred.' And I suddenly twigged, therefore, of course, that even for those who had been in the gulag, even for anti-Stalinists, the victory of May 1945, over the 'Fascist beast', was the one thing which every Russian could actually feel proud about. And, of course, the mass rapes completely undermined that, and that was why there was going to be a visceral rejection, even by those who hadn't been involved in any of the rapes.

I'm referring, for example, to Professor Rzhizhevsky, who was the President of the Association of Second World War Historians, an Academician and the Chief Historian in the Academy of Sciences. He had actually been a huge admirer of *Stalingrad*, and then started sending me material on all the rest of it. But when the *Berlin* book came out, he immediately turned against me, saying that this was, again, lies and slander.

So, I really did find myself in a shitstorm. And, since then, about five years ago, Sergey Shoygu, the Minister of Defence, brought in this law, saying anybody who denigrates the Red Army – which at one point he said was equivalent to Holocaust denial – is liable for up to five years' imprisonment. That's a reason why I don't go back. It's just not worth the risk of going back to Russia. It's just so unpredictable. So unpredictable.

**5D** *Arnhem* opens in a different time and place: Holland, 1944, with the image of shire horses pull-



ing the wagons of the German 719th; and there's this line about how Germany at that stage was now fighting a poor man's war. Is there a unique challenge to write about a confident army as opposed to writing about a poor man's army?

**AB** It entirely depends on the material on both sides. I love that image because I've come across it in some degree before, especially in the Ardennes; this feeling that they were fighting the poor man's war by that particular stage. Of course, it was true.

But I was also trying to show the total hypocrisy of German Nazi propaganda. There was the idea that somehow it was unfair to use superior weapons against them though they'd, of course, been using them against everybody else who was so much weaker.

There was the arrogance of the Nazi occupation of Holland and the belief that the Dutch should have remained loyal to them when they had violated Dutch neutrality. They had looted the country. And then, that it should be treason for the Dutch to help the Allies when the invasion comes. Again, it's this total confusion of cause and effect, which I think is rather important in understanding the right-wing German mentality.

**5D** Does the source material change, though, if you had an organized, confident army where everything is functioning well?

**AB** *Berlin* was difficult at times because, of course, by then they were in retreat, they might have lost their typewriters and they didn't have bureaucratic backup. They didn't have what they did in the more confident, successful days. But, on the whole, this was compensated for by many more people keeping diaries as they saw the war reaching a climax.

There's no doubt about it, the best diary writers in the Second World War were women: in Italy, Iris

Origo; in Germany, Ursula von Kardorff and the anonymous diary of a Berlin woman; and so forth.

Often in Russia, too, the women were much more reliable observers because they were not trying to make themselves feel big, like some of the men.

I remember a conversation in Moscow with [historian] Anne Applebaum, when Anne said, 'Is it just because I'm a woman? But when I'm interviewing gulag survivors, they say, "Sit down. Don't interrupt. I'll tell you what happened."' And I said, 'No, I promise you, I get the same sort of thing from Red Army soldiers.'

It was only afterwards, when taking the Metro back to Lyuba's flat one night, that I realized the truth, which was that the men had been so humiliated under the Soviet system. Now, here they were, telling foreign historians what happened. Also, it was the men who read all the official histories and then filtered their memories through what they'd then read. 'Ah, I remember Zhukov! Zhukov was...' You can imagine all that sort of stuff. But it was still worth doing some of the interviews in those days, because you would get explanations of things which sometimes were not clear in the archives.

But as far as reliability went, women were, without any doubt, far, far better. They'd kept their eyes open and their mouths shut at the time. They weren't like the men, who were now trying to re-establish their position in history.

**5D** At the end of the war, the official sources decreased and the amount of diaries increased. Is that because people get a sense that they're in history?

**AB** They know they are. *Arnhem* is a very good example of this. At the very end of August, there was a Minister in the Government in Exile in London who broadcast to Holland through the BBC,



saying ‘Liberation is coming. Keep a diary.’ And that explains the quantity.

I had Angelique Hook, a Dutch researcher and helper, for *Arnhem*. We started working through the Dutch archives, NIOD in Amsterdam, which is a major Second World War archive. The material there is fantastic. I can read a little bit of Dutch, because of its similarity to German, but I would never dare do a translation or anything like that. It was enough for me to be able to skim a few diaries, while she was skimming others. But, also, it was a good way for her to get used to some of the sort of material to look for and all the rest of it. Rather like with Lyuba, as I say, right from the first moment she knew exactly what to go for. But with Angelique she was more nervous and far too conscientious, recording absolutely everything. I said, ‘You’re never going to have time. Look how many thousands of diaries they’ve got in this archive alone.’

Then we went to the Arnhem archives: the one in Nijmegen, the one in Eindhoven – all of these were not as large as NIOD, but they were still quite large. They all had local diaries of people.

Usually you can tell on the first page whether a diary is going to be good or not. You can tell from somebody’s observations how reliable you think they’re likely to be. You can pick it up quickly.

**5D** I’m always impressed by the quality of some of the prose in these diaries.

**AB** And also when you get ones that are slightly amusing.

I was amazed to find in NIOD the diary of a paratroop officer at Arnhem, which must have been written down day by day. I was astonished because it was totally illegal to keep a diary on the front line. The number of these diaries that were kept at Arnhem – partly recorded because they

thought this was going to be the last operation of the war.

There’s a guy who was one of the Pathfinders. The British Pathfinders in Holland were the ones who dropped first to set up the landing zones. At least 10 per cent of them were German or Austrian Jews, who’d been interned in England, which was certainly a good twenty out of this strong company. Many of them went into the Commandos. They had to have dog tags with Church of England written on and they were given English names, which quite often they held on to after the war. These guys were screaming insults at the Germans. The Germans didn’t know what was happening. ‘Who are these Germans shouting at us from the British lines?’

**5D** I notice in *Paris* you described the street warfare. We’re accustomed to hearing about trench warfare. It’s a change to hear of fighting where people are applauding troops from the balconies of Paris; and there’s also the image of people going off to lunch and coming back.

**AB** You’ve got to have a sense of normality, but also you want to have a sense of the absurd; and let’s face it, you’re going to find tragedy in war, and all the rest of it, but also, slightly, to alleviate the horror and the suffering, you’ve got to find the odd amusing thing, because quite often there are some very funny things which happen in war, not surprisingly. You’ve got to provide the occasional bit of light relief to the reader.

In *Arnhem* the British, of course, are always trying to joke and never take war seriously. And there was another reason for the humour; it was also showing the difference between the British, the Americans, the Poles and the Dutch. The British would treat every battle as a party. ‘Well, one more party to go . . .’ Things like that. And this



British mentality of never really taking things terribly seriously: it was rather ungentlemanly to do that, which, funnily enough, was picked up on by the soldiers too, who were compulsive jokers.

The Germans couldn't quite understand the humour. There's another one. One of the gliders is shot down. I got this out of a Dutch newspaper of the time. There's a German officer who cannot understand why this British glider, which has been shot down, has scrawled on the side, 'Is this journey really necessary?' – which was one of the wartime slogans to civilians trying to persuade them not to travel. The Germans read it, scratching their heads, trying to work out if this was a special code or something like that?

**5D** To be fair, the Germans had, as you've detailed a couple of times, this dark, dark humour. The first paragraph in *Berlin* is full of bleak humour.

**AB** But that's Berliner humour. Berliner humour was always very dark, and, interestingly, the Berliners were the least Nazi of the lot.

**5D** What was the coffin joke? 'This Christmas give a coffin ...'

**AB** Yes, 'Be practical. Give a coffin.'

**5D** Were there other cases of German humour?

**AB** This wonderful American poet, Simpson, he couldn't get over the very strange, dark German humour. He came across a little trench dug out in the shape of a coffin, with a cross at the end and an American helmet on top with a bullet hole through it, saying 'Welcome, 101st Airborne Division'. He said, 'They're ghastly. The Krauts are a funny lot. Just all of the effort which has gone into this one joke.'



**5D** There seemed to be a difference in humour between the Germans on the Eastern Front and on the Western Front. In *Stalingrad* you mention returning soldiers carrying a handout for life back in Germany, which roughly said, 'All dogs don't have mines attached to them, so don't shoot every dog you see.'

**AB** That was a samizdat. That was a joke. There were some quite good anti-regime jokes, but this particular one was not so much anti-regime as just pure German cynicism.

**5D** 'If you come across a locked door, use a key instead of a grenade through the window.' It's another example of how soldiers react to pressure.

**AB** Going to back to *Arnhem*, what was also interesting were the different notions of, say, patriotism. In the case of the Americans, they basically wanted to get the war over as quickly as possible and go home, but, if possible, make quite a lot of money on the way. Going into Holland? Well, that's a country of diamonds, so let's take our bazookas and see what safes we can liberate on the way.

The Poles, on the other hand, theirs was a burning spiritual flame, their patriotism. By God, they were gonna kill every bloody German they would ever come across. The Germans were terrified of the Poles. In fact, even in the hospital, when Germans found out that that there were some Polish wounded there, they were really shaking with nerves and they said, 'Oh, no. We are fine with the British, but not the Poles ...'

**5D** Your books are full of these small, personalizing details. But do you trust all the details you come across? When reading these archives are you ever suspicious?



**AB** You've got to have a good nose, because sometimes a story will be too good to be true. You know that it is. For example, on *Stalingrad*, I remember when I started doing my background reading, one of the great books was *Letzte Briefe aus Stalingrad*, which translates as *Last Letters from Stalingrad*. It was one of the great bestsellers of the 1950s. It was massive in Germany.

I remember while I was reading it I thought this is too good to be true. It's fantastic. There was an account of this concert pianist whose fingers had been broken and he was never going to play again. I thought, 'Hang on.' I wondered if it was published by reputable publisher. Had they checked their sources? Then I found that the real name of the guy who'd put the book together and he was, in fact, the commander of the propaganda company of the Sixth Army.

Goebbels had given an order after the defeat at Stalingrad that the letters, the last letters flown back, should be assembled and some day they should make a wonderful, heroic book out of them. Because Stalingrad had been the most grotesque disaster, the project was slapped down. Well, this guy then had the idea of taking some of the ideas of the letters, but then embroidering and rewriting them as genuine letters. They were probably 90 per cent fiction. I remember at the time thinking, 'Hang on, this is wrong.' Then as soon as I got to Freiburg, to the German archives, I found that they did have some of the genuine last letters from Stalingrad in their files.

Some of the letters printed in the book were two or three pages long. A: they were all far too literary; B: they were far too long, because they were all suffering from the most appalling frostbite in their fingers and they could hardly hold a pen; and C: they'd only been given about a half an hour's warning before the last aircraft was about to go – if you want to write a letter it's got to be now. And



so many of them would just write a couple of lines to say goodbye and no more than that.

You could immediately see that the published letters were all total fakes. So, fortunately, that's when your nose starts to get that much more active sniffing out the false.

**5D** That's the thrill of a historian's detective work, realizing something practical, like the cold fingers, mean a source can't be trusted.

Let's talk about how history is viewed these days. Obviously, there's the American President, who seems to love the fact that he doesn't know any history. What are your thoughts on the danger of this situation that we're in?

**AB** I'm slightly torn and mildly embarrassed. It's been a huge bonus for historians, the fact that radio and television try to bring in historians on almost all modern crises. What I try to do at every single opportunity is to say that history does not repeat itself.

It's very dangerous, the way that politicians compare a figure, for instance, Saddam Hussein to Hitler. We get it all the time. And when they want to sound Churchillian or Rooseveltian, they tend to invoke the Second World War, which is always totally wrong. The circumstances are wrong, and it can be extremely misleading and dangerous.

We can certainly learn from the past, and we must learn from the past, but that doesn't mean that things can reproduce themselves in a similar way.

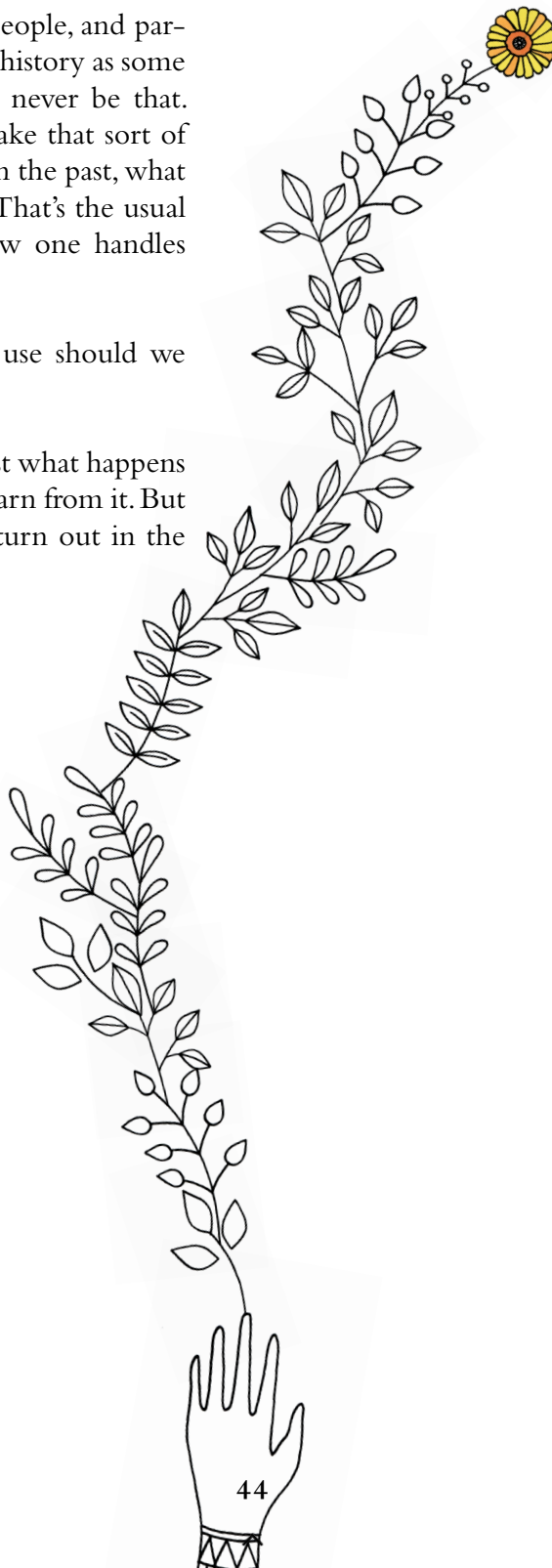
I was astonished when I went to Spain after the new version of my Spanish Civil War book came out in 2005. The Spanish journalists would say, 'Do you think we'll get another civil war in Spain?' Then you have to explain, 'Hang on a second. Circumstances have rather changed. One does see one or two worrying echoes of the past. There are

echoes. There are rhymes. But it doesn't mean that the past is ever going to repeat itself.'

What is worrying is the way that people, and particularly news programmes, tend to see history as some form of predictive mechanism. It can never be that. And nobody should ever, ever, ever make that sort of mistake. Based on what has happened in the past, what do you think's going to happen now? That's the usual thing. One has to be very careful how one handles those things.

**5D** If history is not predictive, what use should we have for it right now?

**AB** We can certainly learn from the past what happens when bullies are encouraged. We can learn from it. But it doesn't mean that anything's going turn out in the same way.






# The Giant of Murom

In the final years of the Berlin Wall, the Cold War increasingly became a battle over culture, and in East Germany the communist party expanded its surveillance of artists and writers.

Philip Oltermann on the moment an East German novelist came face-to-face with his spy




The beige Wartburg is waiting under the street lamp in complete silence, as if its wheels had never moved an inch. Only the pulse of the yellow taxi sign on its roof throbs through the December smog, like a pair of nervous eyes. Neumann stumbles the few steps across the icy pavement. The chrome handle is cold to the touch, even through woolly gloves. Neumann pulls the back door shut and sinks deep into the brown leather.

‘All the way to Leipzig, eh?’


‘I have Westmarks,’ Neumann mumbles. ‘Just go.’

It’s easily a three-hour drive from East Berlin to Leipzig, East Germany’s second-largest city. Neumann has never taken a taxi all the way before. But tonight he is too exhausted for the train.




In 1987 more than three thousand people successfully plotted their escape across the border into West Germany. Thousands more dreamt up plans that were dashed by bad timing, the watchful eyes of a border guard or simply their own lack of courage. Neumann, however, has just spent the last six months agonizing over whether he would be able to cross the border in the other direction. In June he accepted an invitation to western Europe, one stipend in Amsterdam, another in Rolandseck, near Bonn. Every interview, every dinner party, every reading over there had seemed like a potential trap. The room in Amsterdam he was accused of having wrecked after staying there for a few nights, the provocative questions from the audience at the reading inside the disused train station, dotted with the jargon of the Stasi cadres: all of them surely designed to trigger a scandal that the party could use as grounds to refuse him re-entry into the East. Every human encounter was a trap, but he had dodged them all, and made it back across the border. And now he is as tired as a dog.

The taxi jolts as the engine stalls at a traffic light. Neumann’s back is killing him. At work,



they called him ‘the hunchback of Notre-Dame’ because his posture is so bad. The doctors said it was a mystery illness: tension in the back and neck, triggered by mental stress. If only the bloody springs in this backseat weren’t so worn through; if only the driver learnt to shift his gears properly. He squints to make out the features of the man in the seat in front of him, but the glow of the street lamps is too weak. Perhaps when they get to the motorway he’ll get a few sweet minutes’ shut-eye.

Gert Neumann, forty-five years old but looking fifty plus, is an oddity even in the increasingly surreal land of ‘actually existing socialism’, as the Soviet Bloc referred to its political system in an attempt to distinguish itself from the Chinese Maoist brand. He is the author of two novels the East German state censor spent so many years trying to decipher that Neumann eventually lost patience and told the publishers he considered their silence a rejection. After he smuggled them across the border in dispatches, the two books were picked up by Fischer, the biggest literary publishing house in West Germany. Now no one in the East can read Gert Neumann, but West German writers love him. The novelist Martin Walser, one of his biggest champions, bumped into the East German culture minister at a hotel in Leipzig and told him that Neumann had such force that he would defeat them all: ‘If you are against this human being, then you’ve already lost!’



The irony of it all: Neumann would much rather stay in the East than jump ship to the capitalist West. ‘Opposition is true friendship’: isn’t that what William Blake had said? He believes in solidarity. And living in a socialist state has taught him things about humanity he doesn’t think he could experience as a refugee, or a migrant, or whatever those people who cross over to the other side become. His second novel, *Eleven O’Clock*, may now be marked by the state censors in the East and the critics in



the West as a work of dissident literature, but in actual fact it is literature as the founding fathers of the socialist German Democratic Republic had once envisioned it: art made by working people, for working people, among working people. ‘Pick up the quill, comrade’: wasn’t that once Ulbricht’s motto? Neumann wrote his second book while he worked full time as a locksmith at a department store. Every day at 11 a.m. Neumann had put down his spanner and picked up his pen – hence the title. The ‘separation between art and life’, the ‘alienation between artists and the people’ that the Party had spent the last forty years worrying about – he had found his own formula to overcome it long ago. He had created a social realism, much more social and a hundred times more real than the Socialist Realism decreed by the state.

Neumann is a locksmith by trade, and he writes like one. His novels are like rooms with keys that have gone missing. To unlock them, the reader has to engage with Neumann’s philosophical struggle against a state that has corrupted language, ‘murdered’ poetry and ‘occupied’ his own consciousness. ‘The collective of individualities has a silent interest in dissolving potential intelligence into a dumb and blind form of observation,’ he wrote in *Eleven O’Clock*. No wonder the state censor had hired as many as three literary academics to try and decipher his book. Every month he had stayed in the West, Neumann had double-locked himself behind another door. His wife had travelled with him across the border, but after a few months he told her to leave. ‘You are a nuisance to me, please go back,’ he had said. She had said something in response, but he hadn’t understood what she meant. This journey had been such an exhausting puzzle for him, and his spouse had had no idea what was going on. When he finally got back into the East, Neumann had stayed for a few days at his son’s flat on Linienstrasse in Berlin. But he knew he had to go back to

Leipzig, to break up with his wife for good.

At least he has earned enough Westmarks over the last six months to afford himself a taxi: earlier in the year, East Germany’s central bank had printed so much money that the exchange rate had briefly gone through the roof: for the first time ever, one Deutsche Mark got you ten marks in its East German equivalent. Neumann puts his sleepy hot head against the cold window. They are in Babelsberg, almost on the A9. From there on it’ll be a smoother ride.

‘You’re in luck,’ says the driver. ‘I know all the short cuts. I used to drive between Berlin and Leipzig all the time when I was studying literature there.’

Suddenly, Neumann is wide awake.

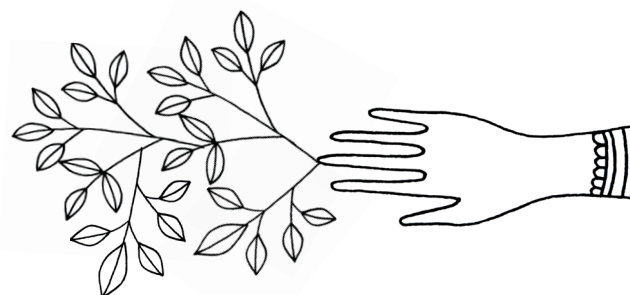


Michael Lindner is a good taxi driver, just impatient. He was only fourteen years old when he first took his father’s moped for a spin while his parents were out at work. A few years later he came eighth in the national motocross championship. Flying down the motorway on his MZ, the wind punching the smell of pine forests into his lungs: it made him feel like he was a bird migrating out of the cold and into the eternal summer. ‘We were flying / Until the sun / hung red on the horizon / like a full-face helmet’; he’d once written in a poem called ‘Spring Birds’. A critic had singled out that line after Lindner read it from the podium at the young poets’ seminar in Schwerin. ‘Who says our technological age does not allow for original images from the poetic reserve forces?’ the newspaperman had asked in his review, and then announced that East Germany needed more of this eighteen-year-old printer apprentice’s *Sturm und Drang*.



If driving was his passion, he had always thought that writing was his destiny. As the only child of a senior officer at the Defence Ministry and an author of children's books, with a long-running party membership, few doors had been locked to him. His first poem was published when he was in year five, barely in his teens, and others appeared in all the leading literary journals, national newspapers and on state radio. Twice he was a runner-up for the Berlin Literature Prize, he received the Free German Youth's annual incentive award and later he got a place at Leipzig's prestigious Institute for Literature. His teachers thought he was the greatest talent they had ever seen. But things in Leipzig hadn't worked out. His marriage had fallen apart, he hadn't turned up to classes, and eventually they had chucked him out – just like Neumann a decade earlier. So he started driving taxis. A collection of seventy-two pieces of writing Lindner had prepared around 1982 had never been published. He can still remember the end of one of the poems: 'Go ahead!', it reads. 'You keep on searching for your true selves! / Dig up your own navel, / immortalize the sighs of your bedfellows / Go ahead. / Meanwhile I go out into the world'.

Michael Lindner tells Gert Neumann his whole story as they zoom through the December night. Or almost his whole story. He doesn't tell his passenger that Michael Lindner isn't his real name. He doesn't tell him that Michael Lindner is only the code name he adopted when he signed up on 3 March 1984 as an 'informal collaborator for political-operative infiltration and securitization'. Michael Lindner also didn't finish reciting his poem, which is called 'In Anger', and doesn't end with the line 'Meanwhile I go out into the world', but has two further lines: 'TO THE GIANT OF MUROM / I want to wake him'. Ilya, the giant of Murom, is the mythical hero of a Russian fairy tale, who defends the medieval kingdom of Rus against foreign invaders.



Neumann's thoughts are racing. How did this happen? He had asked his son to call a taxi – had the phone been bugged? Or did the Stasi keep people sitting around in call centres these days? Maybe this guy had just been waiting outside the door on spec, and Neumann had unwittingly walked into the lion's den. Earlier in the year, the government had made the radical move to legalize the black market in taxis: if you had a car with four doors and a few spare hours after work, you could plonk a taxi sign on your roof, switch on the state-regulated meter and pick up a couple of passengers. Until then, taxi drivers in East Germany had enjoyed a privileged status thanks to chronic shortages: taxis didn't wait for you, but were being waited upon. At Friedrichstrasse Station people were used to queuing for several hours. And because the taxi market was as planned as every other part of the economy, drivers had to meet daily quotas and were only allowed to drive ten kilometres between journeys in East Berlin, meaning few drivers wanted to journey too far from the city centre. Now that 'black taxis' were legal, it was easier to book a long-distance trip, but it also meant anyone could impersonate a taxi. Neumann wished he had looked at the number plate. He knew exactly how to spot a Stasi car. There was a system; you just needed to crack the code. Outside the Leipzig Book Fair there were always Volvos with the numbers three to four. The lower ranks had number plates that always added up to ten. Ten and it's the Stasi, he was sure of it.

Neumann tries to calm his thoughts. He had feared this moment, but in an odd way he had also been looking forward to it. He'd always thought the job of a snoop for the Department of State Security must be strangely fascinating. Effectively,



these were state-commissioned literary critics, constantly engaged in a process of interpretation. Meeting one, he always thought, could result in a wonderful dialogue in meta-language, and in Neumann's philosophy dialogues they were not real but actual, outside the imagination, outside the corrupted language of the state.

If only this guy had made more of an effort with his backstory. Why did he have to lay it on so thick? That they had both gone to the same university would have been plausible. But both of them expelled from the same university? And then this guy also said he lived in Hohen Neuendorf, the same suburb where Neumann had gone to school. Give it a rest. He's almost asking for his passenger to realize what is going on. So Neumann decides to play along, rails against the state, says he wants to head over to the West, not to go quietly but with a bang. He speaks using the informal *du*, which he normally hates. 'So you're a writer too,' he says. 'What a coincidence. I am involved with two literary magazines in Leipzig, we always need fresh blood.' When they finally arrive in Leipzig, he says: 'How about you submit a couple of your poems? In fact, I am back in Berlin next month to do a reading, at the church on Zionskirchplatz – why don't you come along and give me one of your poems in person?'



On 7 January 1988, a report from branch IX, the arm of the Stasi responsible for investigations of political significance, lands on the desk of Erich Mielke, the Minister for State Security. It details proceedings at a literary event inside the Zionskirche church in Berlin's Prenzlauer Berg district, four days before Christmas Eve. The Stasi had tried

to prevent the event from taking place by sealing the front door, but one of the invited writers, Gert Neumann, had been able to open the back door to the church hall thanks to his training as a locksmith.

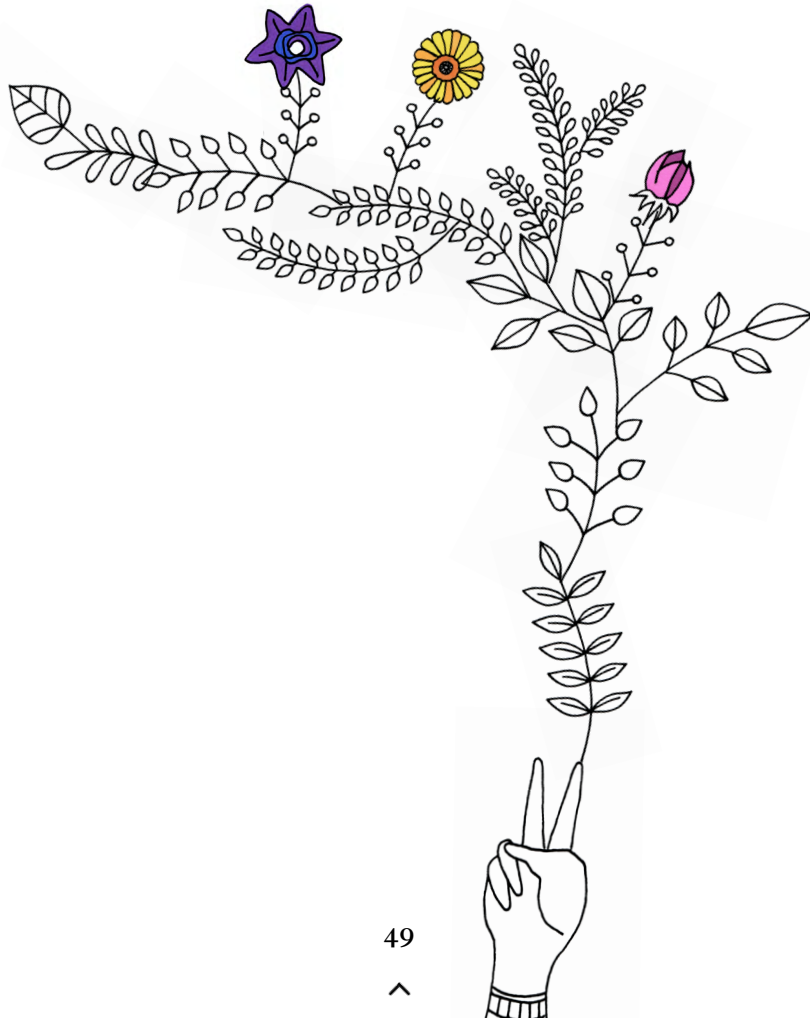
According to an informal collaborator present among the audience, the event was 'poorly attended', with no more than fifty people, some of whom left before the end. 'Reason for this was probably the poor acoustic conditions, but also lack of interest in Neumann's texts,' said the report. The author had brought along photographs of dilapidated buildings in the inner city of Halle, which he handed out to be passed through the rows during the reading, because the organizers hadn't been able to procure a projector. The texts, the informant reported back, 'were so cryptic that even persons with a literary bias had trouble understanding them'. The author was informed of this in the ensuing discussion, 'but refused to accept it'. In the view of the source, the reading was 'not a success for Neumann'.

The report gets filed away to gather dust in the Stasi archives in Berlin. Six months later, though, the matter is picked up again. A note from Stasi headquarters to the local branch in Marzahn: was the informant not supposed to have passed on some of his poems to the writer Neumann, to be considered for publication in one of his literary journals? 'Has the informal collaborator received any feedback on his works? If so, what kind? If this does not apply, is there a possibility of contacting the suspect with the aim of enquiring whether the poems were of use, or have potentially already been accepted?'

It takes the informant's handler a month to reply. The request has been received and the suggested questions would be considered when the informant accepts his next instructions. Doing so could take some time, however. 'Michael Lindner', resident in



Hohen Neuendorf, could not be contacted until the autumn as he had reconsidered his decision to quit his studies and re-enrolled at the Institute for Literature in Leipzig. Lindner has been re-inspired to search for his true self and dig up his own navel. The giant of Murom had gone back to sleep.



# Chloe Dewe Mathews

## On the meaning of *Shot at Dawn*



### **1. What are we looking at in these photos?**

The subjects of these photographs are the sites at which soldiers from the British, French and Belgian armies were executed for cowardice and desertion during the First World War. The project comprises images of twenty-three locations at which the soldiers were shot or held in the period leading up to their execution. All are seasonally accurate and were taken as close as possible to the precise time of day at which the executions occurred.

### **2. You've said this project is 'the opposite of war photography'. What does that mean?**

Conventional war photography is usually concerned with capturing a moment or event in a conflict, and conveying it directly to the public. My project has no sense of urgency. On the contrary, I arrived at the scenes of events a century after they had taken place. Everyone involved has died and no visible trace of the execution remains. And yet the places still hold meaning. What happened there was important. Photojournalists are said to 'bear witness' to events. In *Shot at Dawn*, it is the landscape that bore witness, so by making a photographic record of these landscapes, I am highlighting what happened there, attempting to stamp the presence of forgotten people back onto the land.

### **3. When you are in these landscapes, do you find anything that connects them to this long-ago act of violence?**

For the most part, the locations of the executions are obscure. They aren't included on WW1 battlefield tours or marked on tourist maps, which is why it took me two years of research to find them. Some people question whether what has happened in each spot can still be felt, almost in a kind of super-natural way. I am more interested in how the visual perception of a place changes once we learn what has happened there, even when communicated through a photograph. Despite the fact that these photographs show blank walls, empty fields, forests and yards, I think when you look at them in conjunction with the names of the soldiers and dates of their death, you can't help but visualize each execution.





#### **4. What is your approach to your photographs?**

Every few months for two years, I travelled to Belgium or Northern France. Military protocol determined that soldiers should be executed at ‘first light’, which suggested an obvious name for the project *Shot at Dawn*. Each morning I’d get up in the darkness, drive through the countryside and walk to the site of an execution in time to take a photograph just as the sun came up. My primary instinct was to document the sites themselves. But once I arrived, I realized I was probably standing in the same position as the firing squad, and directing the camera towards the spot in which the soldier was actually executed. It was only then that the linguistic connection between guns and cameras – devices intended to ‘shoot’ – really became apparent. In staging these lonely, imaginary, re-enactments I found myself empathizing with the firing squads, as much as the executed soldiers. After all, they were being forced to kill one of their own comrades.

#### **5. Why do you think these young men acted the way they did?**

Some of the executed men are well-documented to have been ‘shell shocked’. Certainly many of them were suffering from extreme exhaustion, and there are all sorts of individual cases where a soldier had just received bad news from home, or even fallen asleep at the post. Many of the soldiers had definitely planned to escape, having tried a number of times, but conditions in the trenches were so dreadful, as we now know, that attempts to escape don’t really seem surprising. I decided not to include the details of individuals’ stories in *Shot at Dawn*, because I didn’t want to bring the soldiers to trial for a second time. Once the project was published, I realised how dramatically attitudes towards these men has changed: soldiers that were condemned as cowards and degenerates are now, a hundred years later, acknowledged by many to have been victims of ‘the Great War’.

Chloe Dewe Mathews: *Shot at Dawn* is commissioned by the Ruskin School of Art at the University of Oxford as part of 14–18 NOW, WW1 Centenary Art Commissions



Private Joseph Byers  
Private Andrew Evans  
Time unknown / 6.2.1915

Private George E. Collins  
07:30 / 15.2.1915

Six Farm, Loker, West-Vlaanderen





Private James Graham  
07:22 / 21.12.1915

Private John Docherty  
07:12 / 15.02.1916

Private John Jones  
Time unknown / 24.2.1916

Private Arthur Dale  
Time unknown / 3.3.1916

Private C. Lewis  
Time unknown / 11.3.1916

Private Anthony O'Neill  
Time unknown / 30.4.1916

Private John William Hasemore  
04:25 / 12.5.1916

Private J. Thomas  
Time unknown / 20.5.1916

Private William Henry Burrell  
Time unknown / 22.5.1916

Private Edward A. Card  
Time unknown / 22.9.1916

Private C. Welsh  
Time unknown / 6.3.1918

Abattoir, Mazingarbe,  
Nord – Pas-de-Calais





Soldat Eugène Bouret  
Soldat Ernest François Macken  
Soldat Benoît Manillier  
Soldat Francisque Pitiot  
Soldat Claudius Urbain  
Soldat Francisque Jean Aimé Ducarre  
06:30 / 7.9.1914

Soldat Jules Berger  
Soldat Gilbert Gathier  
Soldat Fernand Louis Inclair  
07:45 / 12.9.1914  
Vanémont, Vosges, Lorraine





Soldat Ahmed ben Mohammed el Yadjizy  
Soldat Ali ben Ahmed ben Frej ben Khelil  
Soldat Hassen ben Ali ben Guerra el Amolani  
Soldat Mohammed Ould Mohammed ben Ahmed  
17:00 / 15.12.1914

Verbranden-Molen, West-Vlaanderen





Private Herbert Chase  
04:30 / 11.6.1915

Sint-Sixtusabdij, Proven, Westvleteren





Private Henry Hughes  
05.50 / 10.4.1918

Klijtebeek stream, Dikkebus, Ieper,  
West-Vlaanderen





Soldaat Jean Raes  
Soldaat Alphonse Verdickt  
Time unknown / 21.9.1914

Walem, Mechelen, Vlaanderen



FEATURED ARTIST




Second Lieutenant Eric Skeffington Poole  
07:25 / 10.12.1916

Prison cell, Town Hall, Poperinge,  
West-Vlaanderen



# The Numinaut

By Trevor Quirk



Let me understand. You mean to make me *your* pioneer? I was born a captive, your captive, whose life's purpose was a journey beyond his meagre reckoning. Is this what you meant by 'sacrifice'? I once mistook this sound for the one you assigned me: 'Prometheus.' That cost me weeks of confusion. You would sound it, 'sacrifice', and chuckle darkly, all three of you, as I looked up oblivious to my peril. And now you have left me here, in the head of the White Monster, as I cringe with this dawning realization. You looked into my eyes as you fastened me into 'flight couch', tousled my thin hair, and left me to face down the night sky that fills me with terror and longing. You send me into the Dotted Void? *Me?* The almighty unfairness of it! You send the most helpless among you to heights beyond his every reach, and in the Monster you built, no less. What gall! Despite all the impressive toys you fashion, I often wonder if you cannot see the most basic realities. Surely you recognize my terror. But then again, sometimes, in my bleakest scepticism, I doubt whether you care.

What use. You could never understand any of this. Not truly.

Restrained as I am, my eyes glazed with fear as I look onto what will be my death or transcendence (I don't know which), the White Monster growls and tremors, preparing to exalt itself in a fiery boom. Did you think me ignorant of my destination? I have seen it foreshadowed! I have seen these White Monsters hurled skyward, kindling, thundering, trailing arcs of smoke under the blue veil of the world, vanishing into its woof. I have seen them go all my short life, when you brought me into the brightest light, outside our proximal home. I know where I am and whence I'm aimed, though my final destination proves unimaginable to me, as the Dotted Void blinks, silent and foreboding as ever.

Where is sweet 'Jen'? The one with the intoxicating smells, motherly manner and the breasts? The one who held my tiny hand as we clattered over the metal bridge that hurt my feet, into the White Monster's belly? Her betrayal hurts most! Is this what she meant to convey two slumbers ago, when she brought me outside, to my favourite field just nigh of 'facility'? Sublimely, she had stroked my back and sang under the blue dome and the bright sky-fruit that hung above. Had I, in my ignorance, failed to understand her meaning? Worse, had she confused my meaning for consent? Because I do not, I do not consent!

Oh and *it would* be a 'failure to communicate' that finally claimed me. In truth, I do not regard the strange rituals of my adopted family – the ones assigned 'Jen', 'Ben' and 'Phen-Wren' – I do not regard their sounds and gestures as 'language' at all – not technically. What they do seems more a recondite puzzle to me – a game of minimal relation to the world. Though, I admit, through brute force 'Ben' has taught me a few points of reference; connections I see but do not comprehend. I know my home is 'facility'. I have learned the terms of survival: 'banana,' 'water' and 'sleep'. I also know the sound 'rocket' is of great but unclear importance. I've heard the sound 'science' bellowed in your ructions. In all the years I've known him, that is near the totality of what 'Ben' has taught me. He is an imbecile, a deeply unserious creature. He has a crown of hair the colour of dirt and a ratty mane that hangs from his face and smells foul. He wears silken clothes of garish colour with exotic trees on them. And he is fat. He eats greedily, with sticks usually – who eats with tools? – from white cartons that reek indescribable. There is a spinelessness, a lacking primal instinct in him (and a cheerful unwillingness to correct for this) that I despise. The only way I can bear my sessions with the one called 'Ben' is to imagine his death. He



once spent two weeks teaching me my sound. He placed me before a big surface in which I could discern my reflection, then reclining to assess my reaction, grinning stupidly. I became bored, lacking a clue of what he expected from me. He then placed a white dot on my forehead and angled me at my reflection, which now had a white dot on its forehead. It itched, the dot, so I removed it. 'Ben' replaced the white dot and pointed to the mirror. 'Prometheus', he sounded. 'Proh-ME-Thee-US.' Was this what the dot was called? It still itched; so I removed it. He clapped his hands – which startled me – and laughed, a grating and phlegmy noise. He attempted replacing the white dot on my forehead but I batted him away. Again, he orientated me towards the mirror, pointing at my reflection, sounding 'Prometheus'. He did this for hours, and over time I began to understand that this sound – 'Prometheus' – was assigned to me. 'Proh-ME-Thee-US.' Fine, could we now terminate? Perhaps he would appreciate that I didn't much care what sound he associated with me. I failed to see the point of galling through life naming objects as though the act dispelled their mystery, as if these sounds subsumed the world in its entirety. Such insanity.

But my torture was hardly over. For years, 'Ben' kept me awake through auburn-lit, tedious nights, eating things and pointing to his own chest, looking down to me as he bellowed 'I think, therefore I am'. There was something incredibly patronizing about this. What was this silly idiot trying to convey? It almost seemed like he was affirming himself, his own reality, to himself, pointing inwards, forever inwards, as though there existed some infinite darkness within his ribs – absurd as the thought is.

But that is their nature, these three, isn't it: creatures that doubt their own reality. A surfeit of regret throbs in my little heart, and I cry out for 'Jen', my appeal lost in the White Monster's grow-

ing thunder. Had the studious man, 'Phen-Wren', tried to warn me? How could I have missed the signs? I am to believe that all of 'Phen-Wren's' odd trials were prologue to this moment? A training, of sorts. And yet I do not feel prepared! Yes, 'Phen-Wren', that yellowy and calm man, does not strike me as a frivolous creature. So what else am I to make of my labours on 'treadmill', walking nowhere, of breathing heavily into tubes? What do I make of the thousands of painful shocks I received when evidently failing to sort various shapes and colours during 'oddity problem,' or of the nauseous whir of my episodes with 'centrifuge'? What horrors were you preparing me for, 'Phen-Wren'? My imagination strains!

Or have I misjudged you? I consider myself a creature of intuition. Within moments I can ably retrieve any heart's most primal contents: love or terror. Over the years, I had discerned in 'Phen-Wren' a benevolence, or at least indifference (they are not much different to me), in a man who however was not without respectability. There was something serene about you, the serenity of true confidence, and something of your interest in me that seemed . . . genuine, as though I were a mere component of something greater.

Too, it was 'Phen-Wren' who exposed me to the wider world, to the illusive context of it all, when we travelled (or I deduced from our new environs that we had travelled; I had fallen asleep after a sharp agony in my right buttock) to another 'facility' in what you all called 'city,' to visit his grim and whitely-caped colleagues. It was there I met my comrade in compulsion, designated 'Nim Chimpsky'. My impression of him was of an ambidextrous and utterly miserable creature. A pained and reluctant philosopher, Mr 'Chimpsky' would



abruptly question the possibility of communication between distinct intelligences, but only because he had been compelled all his life to consider such things. ‘They’re training me to think like them’, he said. ‘I am always confused. Half my thoughts have no meaning to me. Like you, Prometheus, I am a prisoner of a grand investigation divorced from my nature.’ He then, as he would, screamed ‘Abominable!’ I asked that he relay all information he knew of my ‘investigation’ and he promptly shrugged. He looked at his captors, ‘They stupefy me.’ He questioned whether mankind had language at all, because the sounds and gestures they made never seemed to refer to the concrete world of trees and White Monsters and sky-fruit, but to some other plane he could not access. ‘They are wizards’, he said, and I described the remarkable things they’d built near my ‘facility’. ‘They are wizards, yes, very stupid wizards.’ ‘Chimpsky’ knew a variety of intricate gestures that would compel his captors to action. ‘It’s as if they have no will at all’, he conveyed. ‘I do this with my fingers – just you watch – and they fetch me a banana.’

Clockwork, the banana arrived moments later and he ate it with contempt as they scribbled. ‘I drop the peel and they remove it without fail, too. My enduring opinion,’ he told me, ‘is that they barely perceive their own existence. And what they do perceive in themselves they *project* onto the world, as though they were some sort of spell. They assume everything is like them, rendered in their image. See, they believe they’ve educated me but in truth they’ve ruined me, and they haven’t a clue. Abominable! How can a creature rectify its sins if it cannot perceive them, hmm? Between us and them there is not enough *overlap*, you see.’ This strange word – ‘overlap’ – I did not quite understand. I asked him to explain but he waved away my curiosity. ‘What use. They’ll never understand you, Prometheus. Never truly.’

Oh, innocence: I would not condemn my adopted family with such alacrity. ‘Perhaps’, I told Chimpsky, ‘but what are their *intentions*? I concede we may never understand each other, and they are certainly an inbent variety. But surely that does not obviate our cohabitation. Surely, love could cross the murky chasm in our comprehension. As you must know, there exist two universals: love and terror. Under that consolation, I desire to learn my part in their superior mission. What do they intend for me, sagely Chimpsky? I must know.’ A look of total sadness spread across his wrinkled face, and he raised his tiny chin, reticent. His eyes glimmered. At the time I had thought ‘Chimpsky’ a curmudgeon, pampered into his pessimism, but I am beginning to suspect otherwise. Behind his countenance of grief was a vision of my fate: strapped beneath the eye of the White Monster that would carry me into the Dotted Void.

Yet before he could divulge, ‘Phen-Wren’ scooped me off to the wheeled creature that took us over hardened black rivers. We journeyed home. I was not mysteriously sedated this time. The bright sky-fruit was still high and blinding; and I could observe this ‘city.’ A tiring, contradictory vision: a dark and busy swarm, ever flowing with denizens who seemed lethargic, bored. What joyless straits among those towering monoliths! Gloomy men and women scuttled to and fro, briskly, never copulating, despite their numbers. Perhaps ‘Chimpsky’ was correct, I mused. Do they know they’re alive? Sometimes they would even collide without acknowledging each other, blind as stones!

The Dotted Void is nigh changeless, it blinks





patiently as the White Monster rumbles before its ascent. The fear! Had they not recorded it during my first exposure to the Void, two months ago? I was not warned or prepared for its terrible majesty. After a taxing day of training (back-to-back ‘oddy problem’s with ‘Phen-Wren’), ‘Jen’ unlocked my metal abode after the high bulbs of my windowless room had flickered and dimmed – normally, a signal for slumber.

She carried a basket with an excitement that seemed for my sake, somehow. ‘Facility’ was a deep blue as it always was during the time I slept; but I saw the auburn glow seeping from underneath ‘Ben’'s office door and felt a surge of rage as I pictured his hideous face. When ‘Jen’ opened a door that permitted a chill, I balked. I looked up to her and made noises of (hopefully) concern. She cooed, assuaged me, but still I hesitated. I had no memory of this door or what it harboured, and the frigid air it sealed was not encouraging – my hairy mass bristled! What part of ‘facility’ had I not hitherto explored? Its depths, previously familiar, seemed anew, infinite. Against wiser judgement, I allowed soft ‘Jen’ to raise me into her arms and carry me out into the mysterious vault, which I soon recognized as the outdoors, but in quite different form. Everything now across the plane was moody and sable. I could see the bare gleam of the White Monster slumbering on the big pad near the edge where the sky-fruit rises. There was a mystical hunger about it. The field’s grass was wet and shivered with occasional gusts. You see, in my captivity I had never been outside during the time designated ‘night’. Darkness was merely the absence of the light emitted from ‘facility’; I had no idea it was *natural*. ‘Jen’ released me and I pattered cautiously around. The feelings of curiosity and astonishment were nothing, though, compared to the torrential feeling that came when I turned my gaze skyward. No longer the home to the bright sky-fruit, it had

become a yawning maw – utterly black! – percolated by white dots. The Dotted Void – black as the gaps in my understanding.

I am not a creature of hard distinctions. I struggle to think in black-and-white terms. I believe in a world of particulars: a world of strange but implacable facts, the world of White Monsters, metal abodes and fair ‘Jen’'s ample bosom. I fail to *organize*, I suppose. So to see the blue dome under which I grew in my short years transformed not into another colour but into a sort of non-colour, an unending blankness or lack . . . this was a religious experience for me. I felt I had pierced the veil of the numinous. The small, pervasive twinklings contrasted the great void, amplifying my reverence. I hadn’t a clue what this sight was, but I intuited it was of great importance. I began to shriek and holler, waving my long arms as I gambolled in a trance: what a strange world to live in! I wished that ‘Jen’ could understand my gratitude. But to my immense confusion – it is nearly my perpetual state of mind – the lovely ‘Jen’ became panicked and lumbered after me, fetching me by the scruff with her hand (I may or may not have bit her in the bedlam) and hugged me tight to her bosom, petting my head with motherly strength as she retreated to ‘facility.’ And it was back to my metal abode. But I could not slumber. I lay on the hard cold ground and dreamt of that horrible, beautiful, annihilating, comforting void. I rolled and turned and whined. I urinated in rebellion where I knew I

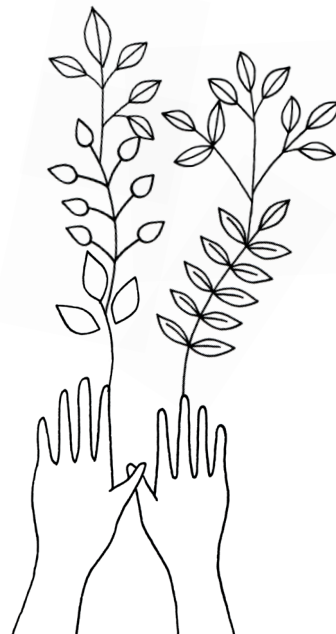


shouldn't. I could not understand her actions. Why would she show me the very face of the numinous only to rip me away before I could study it, query it, marvel at it? That long wracking night, I resolved to see that dark sky again before my end.

And see it again I did! I am deliberate by nature, and I scheme when I must. Through observation, I inferred that the sky deprived of its blue light was the true source of the periodic darkness in which I slept. I had not pondered this before. It was, then, a matter of time, which itself (time) I only understand in the palest way; the subtleties of change are lost on me. Never mind, I would concentrate! I was, as all animals are, determined to escape my material prison. I knew almost immediately that my opportunity would be found in 'Ben', that feckless clown. I recalled many a time when the fool had fallen asleep while I stood unrestrained in his office. Lucky me, two weeks after my dark reverie did he again nod off after torturing me well into the later hours.

He began by presenting me with a rectangle whose glassy resemblance was of a creature like myself. 'Picture!' he sequenced, no less than seven times, in deliberate fashion. He then held it before me, forever it seemed, before he made the noise 'father', leaving his finger's oil on my resemblance. As was typical of our interactions, apathy consumed me. 'Father', he sounded and then pointed my way. I returned the gesture to highlight its trivialness and 'Ben' sounded, 'No, Prometheus. *Your* father. I watched him go, too . . .' and he made a long arching gesture in the space above his head, a descending whistle from his lips. I pointed at 'Ben' yet again. He shook his head vigorously and rummaged through his belongings at the other end of the room, returning with a new resemblance, but this time of a creature which more resembled the odious 'Ben' himself. '*This* is my father. Well, *was* my father.' My boredom would soon froth into

rage and I pointed at 'Ben', finally, hoping I'd done what the fool wanted, feeling ever more his jester in this bizarre existence of mine. 'Yes, Prometheus. *My* father. I look more and more like him every day.' He sighed and gazed into the glassy resemblance, touching his face all around, dabbing, as though searching for something he'd lost, or didn't want to find. He seemed to forget my presence. I confess, I glimpsed genuine terror on his face, then, as though in that resemblance he could see his own death as he hurtled towards it – a strange thought. The boredom of this moment I could endure, but when the man began whimpering I became incensed. I grabbed the previous glassy resemblance and hurled it at 'Ben's' face, missing direly, the thing shattering on the ground. 'Ben' excitedly retrieved it, bringing it back to my eyes. He made the sounds, 'Yes, Prometheus. Exactly! You'll fly, up, up, just like him!' He smiled, baring white teeth, and made a slow arcing gesture with his finger. In a surreal celebration, he then lifted me as high as his jiggling arms would reach, making a low rumbling sound all the while. When I had escaped his grasp, he proceeded to feed me his repulsive viands, which I chewed and spat onto his floor. My purpose in this mystical world could not be to make this ridiculous man giggle. Steadfast, I endured untold humiliations. And near the point where I



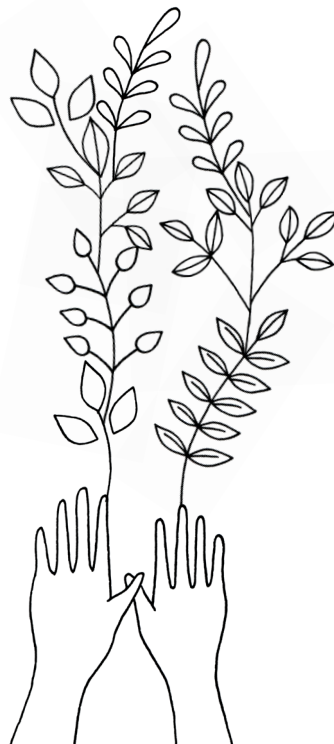
imagined spearing an eye with his eating-stick, he slouched and slipped into oblivion, with a burp. After that it was child's play. I had always excelled at 'Phen-Wren's' puzzles and found the brass knob on 'Ben's' door to be of a similar nature. Once that door opened I was pattering along the marble floor of 'facility', happy to see that the bluish dark had returned to its halls. I could barely contain my anticipation. After hiding from a mysterious man who smelled vaguely of the solvents that 'Jen' used to bathe me, I determined which was the door I wanted by feeling for the coldness behind them. I found it, and its knob turned and opened like the first.

It was as horrifying and glorious as my initial exposure. The blue veil pulled from the world, revealing the Dotted Void, minifying me in its splendid infinity, the long pale shadow from the White Monster fallen over 'facility.' The night sky had lost none of its potency. The twinklings had shifted, it seemed, in both position and brightness, but the black they studded was as undefinable as ever. I lay in the cold grass and bathed in its dark radiance, until my heart could not contain the feeling, and I again surged into the air, whooping and shrieking like a war priest. Soon enough, though, I saw a few soft-yellow lights switch alive in 'facility', and I heard 'Jen's' plaintive cry from across the field. Commotion and panic. I stood and recognized you three, 'Ben', 'Phen-Wren' and 'Jen' standing at the fringe where the grass grew suddenly tall. This was my chance! I whooped and cried and threw my long arms into the air, skyward. Did they not see it? Could they not see it? I executed three summersaults. I would find some way to communicate its profundity, however dense they proved. They believed they must teach me; surely I had something to reciprocate. But as I began my display and dance, 'Ben' and 'Phen-Wren' split their paths and soon flanked me from opposite poles. Too late, I

tried to flee. I would die before I let 'Ben' pinion me with his mossy girth. But it was 'Phen-Wren' who proved more agile than I would have guessed, and he caught my ankle as I ran. He wore thick hides on his hands so my biting was no use, but I flailed in my confusion and rage, nonetheless. I calmed somewhat when I saw gentle 'Jen' kneel at my side. She cooed and stroked me, and when I had tired she sang my favourite melody. I of course did not understand the sounds' meaning, but can recall their mouth-shape:

'As your bright and tiny spark  
Lights the traveller in the dark  
Though I know not what you are,  
Twinkle, twinkle, little star.'

I settled, doused in the lambent air, nigh swooned by her melody. I looked to stolid 'Phen-Wren', who himself gazed upwards, and I was roused again. I struggled and 'Jen' held me tighter, to the point of pain. I knew 'Phen-Wren' recognized it. He made sounds: 'You picked a beautiful night to escape, Prometheus.' He paused. 'No wonder we still call them *the heavens*.' 'Jen' sang again,



until I felt a sharp agony in my right buttock, and I looked to see sweet 'Jen's hand on some alien implement, plunging a liquid into my muscle. I became drowsy but recall you three angled at the sky, in the same reverie, if only diminished, that had enlivened me. You feel it, too, I realized then, though differently. I concede that your understanding of the Dotted Void must be of greater depth than mine, for you seemed not to regard it with love or terror, but a cool suspicion, I would guess. You doubt its reality much like you doubt your own; but I promise you, the Dotted Void is *real*. It is as though you see it as another creature, not unlike yourself (unsurprisingly), and you lack only a portion of the necessary alphabet to consult it. You three, you stare, on the cusp of receiving its profundities. My memory blackens as sweet 'Jen' embraced and rocked me, weeping at the Void.

Upon waking in my metal abode, I witnessed the glorious admonishment of the one called 'Ben.' It was clear 'Ben' had jeopardized something, but I didn't care to know what. Both 'Jen' and 'Phen-Wren' berated him, though it felt as if they did so for different reasons – 'Jen's contention seemed more emotional. 'Phen-Wren', who was nigh bellicose, seemed concerned only pragmatically. 'Ben' sat slouched and pathetic. He would raise his hand in protest but such gump-tion only increased his agitators' loudness, and his protest would wilt. I prayed a good beating would follow. I discerned the sound 'science' emanating from 'Phen-Wren's tight mouth and my own sound from 'Jen's. She seemed very anxious, which in turn upset me and I railed against my abode. 'Phen-Wren' was unfazed by my ferocity and looked upon me with disdain. Contension knew not our typical barriers. And here precipitated my wariness of your motives, dear 'Phen-Wren', and the subsequent doubt of my intuitions. Was it ruthlessness I detected in you, born of a

willful blindness? It is hard not to lend credence to the notion, given my current situation. For how could a man who saw me as I was allow my terror to persist? In 'Phen-Wren's withering gaze, I felt suddenly small, demeaned, as though this man all along had only considered me an assemblage of bits, of names, but was not concerned with me, myself, somehow. A feeling of foolishness engulfed me. Responding to my tantrum, 'Jen' knelt at my abode and laced her hairless fingers through the wire. 'I'm so sorry, Prometheus. It isn't fair . . .' were her sounds, incomprehensible, her face wet with



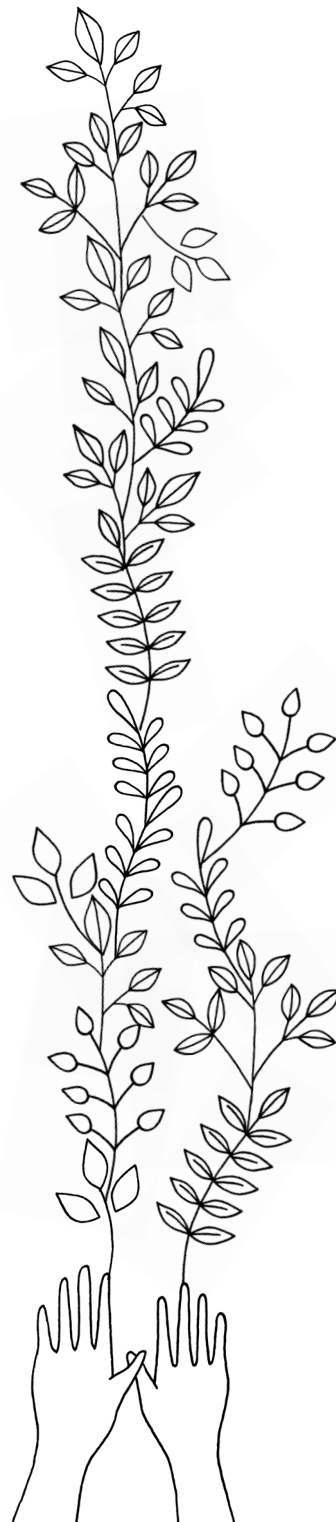
tears. The Dotted Void had exacted its toll upon her. Perhaps, I mused, this explained their shared condition: a constant religious sadness. Awesome isn't it, I futilely thought at her. 'But we're cowards, you know.' 'Ben' slid lizardly from his seat and crawled to us. He sounded, 'I'm sorry too Prometheus!' And 'Jen' pushed him away by his face.

A strange and potent sorrow washed over me as I gazed at 'Jen's' face, flushed as it was. I believe I understand now: I pitied her, her alien plight. For what odd pain it must be to exist on the verge of communion with the Void, on the verge of their transcendence, the feeling just before the fall, the terror, the absolution. What a creature, trapped in some infinite progress, designed, as it seemed, to believe they were going somewhere but to have no idea where. I am reminded of 'Phen-Wren's' 'treadmill' – curious. And what a strange creature I was myself, able to perceive her plight but unable to understand it, and doubly unable to communicate so. All the world's creatures must be arranged in various and mutual degrees of misunderstanding – of each other, of the world itself. Whether this arrangement is purely accidental or latent with a purpose none of them can comprehend is the matter of my most urgent inquiry. Am I about to disembark on my part in a great mission, or will I be scuttled into the careless cold and unthinking dark at the heart of this world? I would like to know.

Because I am afraid.

And I am beginning to notice something eerily familiar about my current predicament – though I cannot describe it. The inside of the White Monster smells of my whole life. Its tremor has grown and my heart thunders against my ribs. Let me understand. Will this Monster carry me to my death or to my transcendence? Or are they the same? Or do you not know? I would give both my thumbs to learn. I am, have been, at core, a creature of confusion. But no more. I will accept your final designa-

tion. I will be your pioneer. I will halt my shivers and quell my fear, titanic as it is. I shall ride the White Monster into oblivion and perhaps someday return to you with the knowledge you seek – the





missing letters of that divine alphabet. I consent to my mission! I will be a sacrifice in your spiritual quest, you curious creatures. For I recognize that if any species can depose whatever is responsible for this strange arrangement, it is you! So I will play my part. Hear that mighty boom! Wild eyes open, I am underway, friends! Rolling plumes and a long breath of fire at my back. Oh, sweet 'Jen' I recall your melody: 'Twinkle, twinkle, little star. How I wonder what you are.' If only I knew its meaning! I will play my part but you must play yours. I will return with the numinous codex and you will decipher it. Am I certain of my return? No. But have hope my friends! Surely you of all creatures know that nothing can survive without it. Hope! Hope!





# Martha Sprackland

## 'The Pre-Persons'

You live if you count –  
a sound algebra is all the proof it takes

I welcome a discussion  
of my function  
and of my value

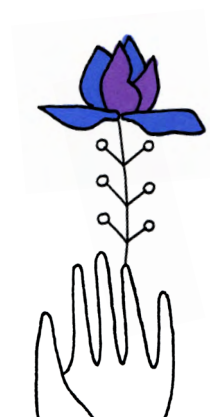
and of the white abortion van  
taking the corner on two wheels

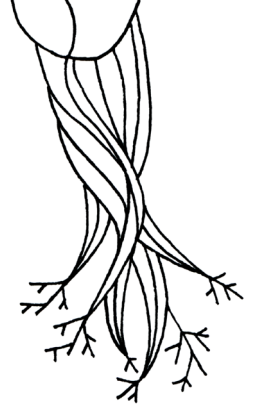
and crushing the dahlias of the suburban lawn.  
I want to have a calm talk with you

I have a number of questions  
including: why are all these aborted children male?

If you want to go north  
you should just go

and the women  
will not try to stop you





### Surface Tension

The birds are stoned with the humidity  
in the sluggish air, the element  
condensing on their feathers like beads.

It must feel to them as though their world's  
capsized – it does to me – the dark ground  
of lavender clouds, their claws trailing

through the rain pooling in hollows of the sky  
warm as an afternoon bath. Smaller air-dwellers  
have it worse; lepidoptera, unable to keep

their powder dry, drape over a surface  
like a woman sitting down, suddenly, in her dress,  
on the steps of the house

with her hair sticking to her forehead, her shoes  
lifting from her heels and falling away  
like spring's spent husks.

A collection of gnats become a clump,  
all stuck together underneath a leaf,  
a dragonfly's sheeny tissue paper loses its ply

its translucence, everyone stripping off  
and mopping themselves, shining with portent,  
your fingers slick on the back of my neck.

Try the trick with the glass, the one in which water  
is pushed beyond its talent and doesn't break.  
Dare to hold that invert sea over your head.

FIVE DIALS

