

Son

A novel by

Jennifer Higgin

*To those who see spirits
Human skin
For a long time afterwards appears most coarse.*
Yeats

PART ONE

Broadmoor Hospital, 1885

*Where have I come from to arrive at this place?
It rains so much my bones are damp and will not dry.*

*I live in a mad house. It is comforting.
I am here, apparently, because I am a murderer and a mad man.*

These words are shabby things, worn thin by a language that never knew me. One that never felt the glowing heat of the sun in its face. One that never knew the strength of silence, or the unspeakable moments that inhabit every heart.

*Perhaps it is the story that chooses the man and wraps him in it until he suffocates.
For me, it was the sun that made up my mind, and the sun became my story.*

Despite the blood that persists in flowing through me, I am no longer the person I was born to be. I did not write my life, and therefore cannot tell you in simple terms what happened to effect such change.

*I have left that task to the images that have fallen from my fingers since my youth.
I have let them fall, so that one day they might be picked up.*

My pictures describe me correctly.

*I have lain my head on the grey sheets of Bedlam and was not allowed to leave.
I have dabbled in visions. This is the tiny image of me that the pinhole of people's minds has illuminated.*

But what of before?

The fulcrum of my life took place when I was 25, the year I grew old and died as others knew me. It was the same year I discovered another realm, a place inhabiting a truth that is, I have been told, no more than an elaborate fiction.

Where have I come from to arrive at this place?

*My recollection changes with every re-telling.
For the moment, this is the story that slips from me.*

London, July 1842

I have heard the heat there is so great it inhibits the singing of birds.

I have not slept for days. My head is filled with infinite lists.

Sir Toby speaks as if he were eating boiled eggs. As if they press hard against the inside flesh of his cheeks, against his tongue. Something must account for the way he forms his words. They meet resistance at every vowel and wobble into silence.

The sun, Isaac. You will not believe the sun. You will have to struggle at first to accommodate it to your skin, to your appetite, to your palette.

My ignorance of sunlight gives him inordinate pleasure, and although I do agree with him on one count, that my flesh is more accustomed to rain than heat, I cannot look him in the eye because his assessment of my ability is so skewed. Namely, I know that struggle will be unnecessary in adapting such light to my palette. The idea of sun has been growing in me since I was born, like a bone growth that affects my every movement. If I have been so far deprived of the actual experience of it, except at its most pale and withered, I have not for a moment been deprived of dreaming. I have dreamt of light through a cloth, dripping through a wing. I have dreamt in yellow and gold. I have felt my sight singe my imagination. I have leapt into consciousness so hot I cannot breathe. It will be astonishing not to have to imagine such light, but to see and feel it, to move through and feel its presence even in the architecture and the skin of the people it has chosen to live among.

My fingertips are restless and beg permission to begin.

They long to become active, to be things that undo in order to release something else: buttons, hard lines, colour, the cloth that covers us. To collect tickets, shade eyes, dance with pencils. They will insist, I know, on revealing my skin, to let it swim.

I have never ridden a camel. I have never touched sand that did not lead to water. I have never been surrounded by a language I do not speak.

Will sweat change the colour of cloth I wear? Is Egyptian dust more difficult to remove from a collar, from a waistband, than the grime of Piccadilly?

Time

Finally. It is time. The clouds disappear and the sky heralds my future with unencumbered sunlight.

The sky smiles down at me.

The crowds at the dock resemble a flock of gulls fighting over fish.

My sisters and brothers are convinced I will come home dead or worse. Arthur John has already inquired as to whether he will be allowed to join the rescue party, when I am made a slave.

Little John Alfred begins to sniff and rub his nose, Sophia, resplendent in blue, droops. Her eyes are so wet and desperate I can hardly bear her presence. Recently, she has gazed too often at me with such a look. She is growing so fast I find her hard to recognise. Fifteen. Her mind is too quick for her wits, for her body to keep pace. She trips herself up all the time. Her legs are no longer hers. She does not know how to occupy her hands. She tugs at her hair, distracted, until it comes out in thick, sad strings.

Sir Toby, who is in effect my employer, pats her reassuringly and stresses she will not even notice her brother's departure. He will be back so soon.

My job is to be companion to Sir Toby and to draw pictures for him of everything we will see.

Sophia recoils from him.

I am used to her honesty, but flinch at his words for a different reason my return is something so distant, so unasked for, I cannot imagine it.

All of my energy is absorbed in my leaving.

Sophia looks at Sir Toby with opaque, bewildered eyes. She will not be patronised and presses closer to me. Sarah, cool Sarah, shakes her head and steps away, as if to distance herself from Sophia's heat.

Are all families so formed of opposites as mine?

Sophia clings to my arm like someone adrift.

Oh let him be, Sophia. He will need to breathe if he is to embark.

Jane clicks her tongue in annoyance. Sophia glares at Jane, averts her face and clings all the harder. I wink at Jane. She looks at me with lowered lids and sighs through thin lips. Sarah adjusts her bonnet, rearranges an invisible hair and rolls her eyes. I cannot bear their dreadful primness and touch Sophia's elbow. It is hot and her skin is twitching.

The blue of her dress shines like a bruise.

Father's face is a welcome distraction from my bickering sisters. He looks at me as if he cannot hear them.

His pride makes my throat sting.

Kisses. The tears of the girls, in varying degrees of intensity, their faces averted behind depressed dark curls. All except Sophia, of course, who looks at me as if I were a drink and she a thirsty man.

Sophia. Sophia.

Her hot worried hand slips into mine and her lips approach my ear.

I feel the hair lift lightly from the skin at my temple at her closeness.

Her voice is as quiet as a sigh.

Isaac. Perhaps you should reconsider.

I pull away from her and admonish her softly.

Sophia!, please, do not do this to me. Not now.

I will not listen to her.

Father gazes at us with curious eyes.

She has irritated me with her darkness, but knows me too well, and, sensing my displeasure, swallows and attempts a smile instead. I stroke her cheek.

My arms feel stiff in their new coat.

Good girl, I say, and hold her hand until it cools. When I return you will laugh at yourself.

She arranges her eyes and gazes at me, her face blank and hard.

I turn away from her.

A handshake with father, his good, glowing face. Sophia puts her hand in my pocket.

She feels like a stone inside me. She will not let me leave. She would drown me in the bay with herself in the sack.

Father takes my one hand in his two and holds it tight.

I wait for your letters Isaac.

If you have to wait too long, father, it will not be my fault. You must remember this: the horse must have fallen, the boat sunk.

We laugh.

He wraps an arm around my shoulder and I breathe him like a child and turn to John Alfred who is begging to know if a ship is faster than a galloping horse.

Much faster, I say. He looks at me in awe, then away and scratches his nose.

Faster than a train? He scratches harder.

Don't scratch!, barks Jane and slaps his hand away from his face.

He glares at her and looks to me for an answer. We are all silent a moment.

John Alfred? I say quietly.
He will not say a word. He will no longer look at me. I talk to the side of his face,
quietly, so only he will hear.
John Alfred, a ship is much faster. A ship has the wind to thank. A ship does not need a
road.
He turns and beams at me. I see Jane's hand twitch. A drop of blood colours his nose.
He wipes it away with the back of his hand.
Suddenly, everyone speaks their goodbyes.
Departure has ceased to be an idea.

The noise of that farewell! Hundreds of feet stamping up the gangway, the creaking and
blowing and shouting of porters and horns, the sobs of girls with sailors, the awful brave faces
of my fractured family way below me as we, Sir Toby and I, lean on a rail and wave. Jane
with her mothers eyes, Sophia and Sarah so little, so opposed, so clutching as they strain their
faces upwards and shake their small white hands so hard the air might snap their fingers. The
boys with their mouths open, thunderstruck and envious of the size of the ship that will take
their brother away.

Fathers presence wrapped around them like a cloak.
All of their eyes linked in a common destination: me.
And mine turned towards one I do not know.
I am full of unborn images.
It is only a matter of miles before they will begin to assume shape. Pictures almost
resident in my head. Paintings almost glazed upon a wall.

The First Room

The ship is released, slips away, bellows. Faces stained with leave-taking avert naked
eyes.

We retreat to our cabins, to wash, to prepare for supper, to regain the expressions we
wore before such emotion made its mark. Sir Toby has a cabin next to mine.
Meet you in an hour Isaac? In the saloon?

Our doors slam, the room sways, a cup jiggles on a saucer. I whistle. My head is as light
as a single hair. I could dance with anticipation.

A bed with a small rail. I have never so immediately loved such a small room. A dear,
round window. It is like seeing the world through a looking glass. Seagulls enter and leave its
circumference, flung about like scraps of paper.

I shall take an image specimen of the ocean and the birds and hide it away. I may need
an ocean when I find myself in the desert.

I am dizzy with exhaustion. I am a poor man given a gift, plucked from the gloom.

The ship ploughs its way towards my pictures.

The cold grey sea never looked more like a blank thing. It could have been built to take
me away, so I will be able to see the things inside my head waiting to be released.

A Child Talks of Death

I walk fast along the deck, the sea wind pouring into me and lifting me high. Birds float
below the clouds. I have a belly full of breakfast and do not know what I shall see at any
given moment. I fairly crackle with the energy of it all, and laugh out loud.

I catch a ball that appears in the air in front of me. It is hotly pursued by a small bundle

of a boy, who stops abruptly and gazes at my new possession.

An imperious voice issues forth from his tiny, fat mouth. His hair flies up.

It is mine. Give it back.

There is something arresting about this child. Perhaps it is his rather old eyes.

I look into them, and they look into mine, filled with fury.

Tell me why I should give you this ball.

Without hesitation he replies: Because if you don't I shall have you killed.

I am taken aback.

By whom?

By my minions.

Oh. Your minions. And how shall they kill me?

Some with guns and some perhaps with swords. One or two may employ crossbows. It will hurt. Now give it back.

I hold onto the ball a little longer.

It is wrong to kill. Where is your mother?

He is impatient with me, and bored now.

It is not so wrong. You, sir, have done me an injustice. My mother is resting. Where is yours?

A good question. I think for a moment.

I am a motherless man and you are not God. Only God has permission to give or take lives.

He rolls his eyes. Kings kill lots of people and they are not Gods. And anyway, no man is motherless.

My mother died. And you are not a king.

How did she die? And how do you know I am not a king?

I pause. This is not a straightforward child.

God wanted her by his side. And you are too short for a king.

I silently hand him his ball back, and he begins, indifferently now to bounce it.

He calls back over his shoulder I shall spare your life, this once only.

I thank him, gravely.

Sea Travel

I have looked so hard at the exterior of ships that being inside one is like entering a body, or a sculpture, or the mind of someone you have admired from afar. My cabin is the revelation of a secret. I feel more myself than I have in months. Perhaps it is the sharp clean air, which has spring-cleaned my head and lungs, washed away the accumulation of too much talk in too many smoky rooms. Or perhaps it is the reassuring instability that accompanies every moment, the groaning deck and the creaking, straining sounds of the sail. It is as if a large, benevolent beast had decided to facilitate our movement from one point to another.

A ship is somnambulant, for all its apparent function, conjuring reveries in its movement towards land, hinting at stories one can only guess at. A ship is stained with the grip of infinite travelling hands and the perfumed grime of infinite ports.

So much pleasure is to be had in this floating village: the sliding plates at mealtimes; the necessity of choosing each step in a considered and balanced fashion. The look of concentration on a man's face as he walks towards me swaying; the way women's dresses billow in the wind, as their arms curve in often futile attempts to secure hats to heads. The absurd sight of men taking control via elbows, books, meal orders.

A stray curl whipping a red cheek.

I am leaving. I have left.

My family is gone from the port and I, however briefly, from their lives.

I have never been without them before.

They will grow without me. Of their own accord and in a brief few months, their height will increase and they will form opinions, the provenance of which I will be ignorant.

All will change except father. He is more permanent to me than a rock.

My father will never not be my father and I will never not know him.

Beneath us are invisible fish and sea beasts. My hands will not be still in their attempt to place on paper what I have not seen.

I have tried to draw the idea of fish. It has amused me no end.

These are not sketches I would show to Sir Toby. He would sniff out their apparent lack of gravitas. Although we have seemingly talked at length about painting, to all intents and purposes we may as well have remained silent. Our talk is richer and more real when we discuss our respective families and the details of our journey.

He is a kind man, if a little pompous.

Travelling with him will assist me in developing a rich internal world.

My lips taste deliciously of salt as I direct my pencil towards its destination.

A Family

Walking into the breakfast room, I once again encounter the small boy, but without his ball and accompanied by a lady I assume to be his mama.

He points at me and says loudly, That is the man who took my ball, mama. But I spared him.

People turn and stare. I am embarrassed, revealed to all as a ball-thief. I open my mouth but am silent. I cannot think of anything to say, but am saved by the lady, who smiles at me.

She has a warm face and small, dark-lashed eyes. A mossy green hat like something growing.

Hush, Tom. I am sure the gentleman did not mean to steal your ball.

She looks directly at me and faint dimples appear in her cheeks.

Unless perhaps you did?

Such a hat, such eyes!

I'm afraid, madam, I stand guilty as charged. I did steal the ball. I planned to sell it, and make a tidy profit.

We both laugh. Tom does not.

Mama, Papa is waiting. I am hungry.

Another smile. Excuse me. A glare from Tom.

I bow.

I watch her walk into the dining room and sit beside a man with a large, red beard, who glances at her, before resuming his scrutiny of a newspaper.

She murmurs something to him, he murmurs back and touches her hand.

She reaches for a teacup.

The boat lurches, her hand returns to her husband's, and I stumble slightly.

Tom is suddenly a little boy and clings to her arm. She gently takes his hand.

They are a family. Three people sitting at a table, holding hands as a ship sways and plunges.

When all is once again calm, they laugh, look at each other, and laugh again.

Then she fills her teacup and pours some milk for Tom.
He sips it with a satisfied face.
I do not know why, but the sight of it is enough to make me weep.

Disorientation

I cannot guess at what a sustained sea voyage would do to one's sense of orientation. I have been afloat only a few days, and, although out of sight, the earth is close enough for reassurance, in the untired birds, in the knowledge of imminent arrival, in the memory of recent departure. But to travel to the other side of the world, to not see land for months, to be suspended between the most transient, the most unstable of elements! I would like to try it one day, to see the pictures such detachment from the earth would force into my head and out of my hand. I would like to learn to use the stars as my maps. I know it would change the way I hold my pencil. It would change the way I looked at the world, the way I walked across land. It would change my relationship to the night. I would need to navigate by the moon.

It is appropriate we are on water. As if we are nowhere and everywhere, as if what will happen will happen soon.

The coast reveals itself like a rabbit from a top hat. We crowd the stern to watch its arrival, to greet it. Men give their hands permission to be foolish, and wave like children at nothing that can respond. Ladies sigh and lean and gaze.

How lovely their dresses are, when they swell in the wind.
I wonder if one has ever caused a woman to float away.
Women, to my mind, are even more mysterious than ships.

The seagulls sing their song of arrival, fly up from the decks and descend sharply into the waves. It is impossible to imagine the fear that inhabits fish at the thought of such attack.

Imagine the beak flashing through the waves, glittering, determined and blurred.
Imagine the dull clack and snap of its bite.

It is too terrible to countenance.

I would not wish the fate of a fish eaten by a bird on my worst enemy.
Had I one.

Ostend

A place of fish smells and varnish beneath a thin, grey sky. Of flat, dull bread and desolate, nagging birds. Of inscrutable fisherman in clumsy wooden clogs and wide blue trousers that seem to flap even when the men are inside, seated at the long brown tables this place supplies so well. The older women have flat faces and swollen, floury bodies. But the young girls, with their soft, bright eyes and their skin like apricots and hard eggs, I could almost nibble. They have delicious sturdy waists and busy strong hands. The boys are cleaner than any boys I have ever seen, with shining eyes. Perhaps it is the wind or the omnipresent rain that washes them so effectively. Or perhaps it is the clean presence of their God, who would appear to be a simple man of few words and fewer opinions. Their churches are plain and scrubbed, which is right for such a place.

I was so little when I first saw a live fish. My father held me by the hand and we walked by the river. My mama was just dead. My father was quiet as was I. I do not know what he was thinking. I was thinking about my mama going to heaven and searched the sky for a

ladder. I was worried. Mama was so weak and tired now she was dead, how would she ever climb so high?

We silently threw stones into the water and looked down and saw a small thin fish trapped beneath a rock. I crouched and saw its eyes fixed on nothing, like tiny swollen raisins. My father lifted the rock and the fish swam away. I did not think of my mother then, watching that fish depart.

It shone in escape.

My father looked up at the sky and then at the water and he held my hand and we both laughed as the fish disappeared away from us, down the brightly shining river.

Where were my brothers and sisters then?

Who was holding their hands?

I do not know.

Increasingly I have no memory of occasions I should recall.

I imagine scenes leaking from my mind and finding solace in my skin, a kinder, warmer place. Occasionally they erupt in me, beyond my control, and flow like lava through me, heating everything I have ever felt.

I do believe there are things that affect me, of my own making, which I cannot name. As if they live in me, and around me, but are ungraspable.

The people here speak like underwater creatures, in murmurs and gargles. They rarely smile but when they do, I believe they do so truthfully. But it is also possible to imagine these low land people living even lower, beneath the earth for a while. Perhaps it has something to do with the way they seem to be perpetually blinking in surprise, as if they had only recently emerged into daylight. They are earth bound, obviously in love with the colour brown and all of its cousins, despite their apparent affinity with water. They fish for a living and are, quite clearly, at home on the sea, but the colour of the sea, even at its most grim, does not spring to mind when I think of them. It is perhaps significant that it is rare to find a painting of the sea here. All that I have so far witnessed appears to be preoccupied with interiors or tables. These images often depict rooms that throb with an atmosphere of recent departure. If you listen very hard you can almost hear the squeak and slam of a door, then the sudden silence of an empty room.

Perhaps the people here have assumed the guise of fishermen. And if so, who are they truly?

I wonder who dug them up, who washed them so well.

A Woman who Weeps and Speaks English

Walking along a narrow path along the shorefront with Sir Toby, we come across an elegant woman, sitting on a low wooden chair outside a small cottage. She is quite openly weeping.

We slow down as we approach her, and do not know what to do. She is wearing a dress of silver grey. Her hair is loose and brown.

Sir Toby coughs and looks about nervously. I imitate him. I can think of nothing better to do.

She is impossible to ignore. The path leads almost directly to her, before veering away.

I assume she is a widow and is weeping at her loss. She is not weeping like a woman who has misplaced a trinket or broken a cup.

We are obliged to stop. She looks up at us and hiccups. She has narrow, pale hands and holds one to her mouth. A thin gold ring shines softly beneath a knuckle. She is panting slightly.

We keep looking at her, as we have no better plan. Then Sir Toby speaks loudly, as is his wont with foreigners.

Madam. Do you speak English? May we be of assistance?

She holds his gaze with wet eyes.

Yes, I speak English.

Her voice is low, her accent difficult to place. French perhaps?

I do not need your help. But thank you.

Sir Toby shifts awkwardly on his feet. I look at her face. She looks haunted. I speak foolishly, as if the sound of my words might aid her recovery.

Can we do anything? Surely.

She almost laughs and looks at her feet.

No. Thank you. Really, you are kind people.

And hiccups again.

I feel uncomfortable at that. I do not think Sir Toby and I are especially kind. We merely stopped because the path was narrow, and a woman was weeping.

We nod stiffly, and move on, impotent.

The sea moves beyond us like a sodden brown handkerchief.

I look back at the woman. She has stopped her crying and sits very still and quiet gazing at the sea.

Sometimes grief rejects words like a river sinks boats.

Supper and Painting

Every evening we dine simply off fish, boiled well with potatoes and washed down with harsh ale. Sir Toby busies himself after supper with letter writing, after telling me, in no uncertain terms, about who and what these people are. He treats me at once like a student, an honoured servant and even, after drinking, a friend, despite the fact that conversation with him often culminates in a rebuke. An example: these lowland people are, according to his logic, good, unimaginative, god-fearing and hard-working people, but could not be poets because the light is wrong, the presence of fish too pervasive.

But Sir Toby, I ask him in all candour, with how many of these people have you spoken?

He pulls himself up slightly in his chair and stands, his cheeks suffused with a slight red wash.

I have been here before Isaac. I know this country. People are the product of their locale. Their land forms their minds as surely as a mother gives birth to their bodies. It is a flat land. Where is the spirit of art in these buildings, Isaac? Where is the undulation in their thinking? When you see the Venetians you will understand how Art must reflect the world outside the window of the artist. There is no light here to speak of, Isaac. There is no light.

He is breathless from such a speech. I search my pockets for a pencil. Surely he must intend me to take notes?

I struggle with his logic, according to which I should make paintings that reflect Chatham's damp air and heavy earth.

(I remember:

I am small and full of thoughts.

I ask my father: what will happen to me when I am grown?

He pauses.

Whatever you choose. An occupation that suits your temperament. A wife. A family.

And if I choose to be something that does not yet exist?

He thinks seriously for a moment and then laughs.
Well then Isaac, you will bring it into being.
Chatham was never posited a possible source of my future selfhood.)

Before I could question Sir Toby further, he retired to his room, his corpulent little body moving with some efficiency out of the door.

His absence filled the room pleasantly, and left me time to contemplate a painting on the wall of the little communal sitting room. Sir Toby could not have felt justified in his comments if he had really looked at it. Such a plain little painting, but so replete with things unsaid. Practically pulsating.

A fish, but such a fish! Scales like a robe, sad eyes full of sea. Why, this fish is so perfect it must have wriggled its way onto the canvas! How the elements in it glow: a lemon, the obvious bitterness of which makes me shiver in my chair; a thin, thin glass filled with cold wine; a crisp white cloth; and three walnuts, all set against a deep dark background.

I gaze at it for a long time, and find myself perplexed. I do not know why. Perhaps it is the skill with which the painter communicated painting's most compelling paradox, namely, a close description of the real world often emphasises how unreal it is. The fish somehow more than the sum of its fishiness! A meal that will never be eaten! A meal that may not have ever existed, here before me more alive than the chairs I can touch.

I do believe that this is what a painter should be doing, presenting the world back to itself, minutely observed, yet also imagined and so altered.

I would have liked to take this painting with me, as a constant reminder of how complicated a nut might appear to someone who might look upon one with an unbiased mind.

My room is small and clean and satisfyingly foreign. I fall asleep to the tug and push of waves on shingle.

In a Coach

The next morning, Sir Toby, sombrely attired with a dark coat and a grim expression, treats me like a slightly backward student he may have met once a few years earlier.

Come boy, it is time to leave.

Of course, sir. Yes, I am ready.

You have remembered everything?

Yes. I think so.

He sighs.

Isaac, merely thinking is never enough. We will never return to this place. Do you know, for a fact, that you have everything?

I look at the earth. It holds me upright in a solid, friendly fashion.

Of course, Sir Toby, you are right. I am sorry. I do know, for a fact, that I have everything. I have looked beneath my bed and in the cupboards. I can assure you Sir, I have left nothing behind.

He sniffs.

Well then. Let us depart.

I nod.

The horses groan.

And so, we leave.

In deference, I become silent and respectful, pausing only momentarily on our way out of that convivial inn to secretly wave goodbye to my small friend, the fish.

We settle into our carriage like a couple of old women. I cluck over Sir Toby and he

begins to warm to me once again. He begins to hint that I may once again be filled with potential.

I am sure I glow.

It takes so long to reach our next destination. I cannot imagine how many decades it might take us to reach the other side of Europe. To imagine standing on the banks of the Nile is to try and imagine floating upwards, through the air, to a place beyond the sky.

The countryside is monotonous, the conversation even more so. The roads are bad. After an hour we are groaning with backache. Reading is impossible, the words leap about so, and Sir Toby is too enthusiastic in his opinions for any real exchange of ideas.

We stop for lunch in a small inn in a village flanked with forests. It is clean and friendly. An elderly smiling woman with collapsing curls and a thin mouth brings us bread and cheese and wine. It is so plain every separate taste sings. The woman speaks a little English and is proud of the fact. She asks me where I am from. I tell her Chatham and London. From England.

She says, Is Chatham most lovely?

It is very strange to hear the word Chatham in a foreign place.

I reply that it is not.

She looks a little disappointed and so I add: But there are many ships as if ships will make my birthplace lovelier.

She looks satisfied at that, and fills my glass with wine while Sir Toby wrestles with a button on the sleeve of his coat, cursing.

I feel obliged to compliment on her village of choice.

You have a fine Inn here. And your village is charming.

She looks at the floor with pride, then speaks quietly.

Yes. We have good spirits here.

Sir Toby snorts.

I am taken aback.

What kind of spirits?

A man at the next table calls out impatiently for service and so she nods to me, and leaves our conversation adrift.

I feel an urgent need to know.

What spirits?

But the woman disappears into the kitchen and we do not see her again.

Back on the road, I long for air, and would like to travel with the door open, to hang my head out of this cramped space and breathe in the strange light that unifies such tedious countryside. In truth, I would like to be attached to a large balloon and be pulled along behind the carriage, and hear Sir Toby's thin alto from a long, long way away. His questions are interminable.

I gaze out at trees, and look for spirits.

I do not see any.

Isaac, how would you best render that brown?

Tell me Isaac of your assessment of your teachers at the Academy.

Isaac, what criteria do you employ to choose your images out of so many available passages from Shakespeare's plays?

Isaac, do let me tell you an anecdote about my sister's youngest child.

Isaac, I tell you, that coachman is a scoundrel. Don't ask me how I know, I have more

experience than you in these matters.

Isaac, keep your eyes trained on our luggage, if you can. I know it is on the roof, but do your best. Can you not strain your neck a little further to see out a little more clearly? He may have an accomplice tucked away somewhere. He may have hidden him behind our cases.

Oh Isaac, please do not look so sceptical. You are an artist Isaac. I know you feel the world keenly.

Oh Isaac, are you awake?

Isaac, is your energy fading? Are you tired Isaac? We shall be stopping soon. Why, you are pale Isaac, while I am as robust as I was at the moment of our departure.

Much laughter.

Ad Infinitum.

A painting, I feel suddenly like shouting, is no more than a suggestion, a product of the imagination expressing itself truthfully, and is never, except in its crudest manifestations, a lecture.

But I do not utter a word.

His voice increases in intensity as night begins to fall, as if he must convince himself, via me, of his lack of exhaustion, his capacity for being interesting. We are surrounded by darkness, bounced about like two stale loaves in a widow's basket.

I cannot sleep yet do not want to stay awake. I choose, instead, to look upwards, and watch, with tired eyes, the stars die.

I begin to hallucinate beds.

First Night in Germany

Dumb and sightless with exhaustion we stumble into some nameless Inn, a dimly lit place in a tiny village. Not a dog barks, not a word of welcome is uttered. An old sighing man staggers out grumbling incomprehensibly to meet us and carries our cases inside. I am too far gone to assist him and feel his resentment of my youth and empty hands. I do not care. I am beyond compassion. Sir Toby has finally, wonderfully, lost the power of speech.

We do not wash before our meal, we are too feeble and too hungry. Sir Toby is almost white with tiredness and a little ashamed of his defeat as a result.

I silently give thanks to the spirits responsible.

We are fed by a woman whose face I forget as soon as she has placed our soup in front of us. Two men argue in hisses as the next table. I do not understand a word they are saying, but their eyes, which thrust themselves occasionally in our direction, are full of vitriol. The soup is watery, none too hot, and punctuated with the occasional thin hair.

I eat like a sleepwalker, my back still trembling to the rhythm of the coach. My face has another skin, stuck with foreign dust and unuttered words.

I can hardly lift my head and take it to my room. I do not remember saying goodnight to anyone.

All I notice is that everything in my room is wood, except me. My flesh shines pink in the moonlight before it slips into darkness.

The Feeling When You are Almost Awake in Another Country

Is it possible birds sing in different languages? I do not recognise the muffled song that floats into my sleepy head. The wind sounds hollow. My room is clean and bright. I have no memory of it from the night before. All I remember is my aching back, which has decided to stay with me. My bones are sore, my muscles stiff. I could sleep for a week.

A tree knocks on the window. I hear faint, affectionate, masculine mumbling. I think it

is a man with cows. I cannot help but wake up now. I hear words I do not understand and am filled with the thrill of incomprehension.

I am in a country I have never slept in before.

Now a knock on my door and not a tree but a girl with eyes so low I cannot see their colour enters my room and takes my water jug and fills it with water from a pail. Her hands are quick and red. She has obviously filled many a water jug in her time. Her yellow hair is covered with a white cap. She murmurs something I cannot understand. I am filled with a sudden urge to ask her about her family, to have her look at me. But I do not know how to begin conversation with this girl, the likes of whom I have never encountered before, and sink back into my pillows and feel my tongue crowd my mouth. I watch the slow movements of her back, which is broad and round shouldered and wonder what she must think of me, if she thinks of me at all. A foreigner in his nightshirt, not much older than she is, and still in bed so late in the morning, staring at her.

Her large behind moves from side to side beneath her dress, and comes to a stop, wobbling.

What is your name?

My voice startles me.

She turns and looks away, blushing, silent.

Why will women so rarely speak truthfully with men?

I persist.

Do you speak English?

She shakes her head and refuses to look at me. I am irritated by her coyness, but after some thought have to admit that I would not like my sisters in such close proximity to me if I were not their brother.

Brothers and sisters. Each one different from the other. None of them in most likelihood the person I assume them to be.

I reverse the thought: what do they know of me?

They know me only by the words I have spoken in their presence, and by the movements that have propelled me around them. But I am, of course, and in all modesty, so much more than I appear to be. As they are.

But what remains if you strip a man of his words and his body?

Do they question this too? What is left of me when I am not with them?

Do they doubt their knowledge of me?

I am sure they do not. They behave towards me as if they own me, and that such possession is a god-given right. But knowledge and ownership is, of course, more than proximity and biology.

Where, for example, do they travel when they sleep? And who, in their true hearts, would they like to touch?

I do not know. Except for Sophia.

Everything is different every day but still Sophia and I talk to each other's heart, without acknowledgement.

We are often silent together. Such silence makes other girls, and in particular other sisters, appear shrill.

But then, sometimes they could be shouting, but I would not hear them.

Without a doubt, at this point in time, right now, unless she is sleeping, Sophia will be looking very hard at something and thinking about it. However insignificant the object of her attention, Sophia's gaze will always transform it into a something magical.

It is a thought I find reassuring.

But I am in a foreign room. I will not let myself forget this.

I will not travel backwards.

Memories can be terrible transporters.

This solemn girl clutching a water jug, this girl who I have already forgotten and who I do not know, slams the door on her way out. She still does not look at me. She either loathes me or would like to kiss me. Perhaps it is the same thing.

She is not my sister and does not care for me.

My bed is warm and soft and I slip down between unfamiliar sheets and am swallowed by a large foreign animal.

I think about kissing that girl whose eyes I cannot see. I imagine her small soft tongue on my silent one, her fat round breasts in my hands. She would whisper to me and I would not understand what she was whispering. The thought is intense and unsettling.

I shake myself and stretch and my dream tumbles on top of me, as sudden as an avalanche, as clear and as awful as when I was asleep.

In my dream Sophia is crying and crying, standing in the middle of a sunny, empty room. I walk up to her, to hold her, to comfort her, but she does not see me, and I am aware that five men have cursed her and must be dealt with if she is to be free. I ask them to leave, so I might speak to my sister. They do not reply. I am filled with rage. Sophia cries all the more loudly. I grab hold of her hand and pull her towards me, but her hand falls apart and disappears and I am in a river floating towards the sun that is so bright I assume it will explode. But I do not mind the thought. I am so happy to be away from that dreadful room that I cry into the gentle tide as I stagger ashore. The sun dries my tears.

I am hot and alone. Sophia is nowhere to be seen. I know the men are dead.

Another knock on the door rescues me. A loud knock this one, from an apparently large fist.

Isaac, are you awake?

I am, Sir Toby.

Good lad. Sleep well?

He shouts as if he were waking me from a midnight sleep, a thousand miles from where he is standing. I laugh into my pillow and cough.

Thank you, Sir Toby, very well. And you?

Like the dead, boy, like the dead.

Much laughter through the door.

It is time for breakfast, Isaac, time to eat. Please hurry up.

I imagine him with his hands cupped against the wood of the door, spraying the cupola of his fingers with spittle.

I will be with you Sir Toby, I will be with you. Allow me ten minutes.

Ten minutes, boy. We must be going. Yes. We must be going.

An Alpine Way

We can hear the horses panting and straining as the road becomes more and more steep. We are tilted back against the seats as surely as if a boy were holding our feet high. We have left the long, brown road of the Rhine behind us. I have memorised the ambiguous beauty of its castles. We are alone in the carriage. It is difficult to sense the countryside we are travelling through because the windows are too thick with grime. The sky is obscured by mountains grown dim with dust.

You will feel like a young Apollo Isaac, when we have scaled these heights. You will feel like Apollo both in body and in mind. For a mountain, Isaac, is like a poem that has lifted your body high into the sky.

Sir Toby blushes at his sensitivity and modestly lowers his eyes.

These mountains, he continues in a hushed voice, will prepare you for the heights I know you will ascend on your return, Isaac, those artistic heights we all know you will not disappoint us with.

Us? Who else is sitting in this carriage? I look about me. As far as I can still see, it is only Sir Toby and I in the carriage but his comment has filled me with an anxiety I cannot name.

I smile weakly at him and say nothing. My toes press against my shoe leather. I pinch myself hard on my arm beneath my coat sleeve.

Inspiration boy. Inspiration. Spring is on its way! You are in the springtime of your life boy, so much to grow in that head of yours! Are you inspired Isaac? Are you ready to be elevated?

Sir Toby is over-excited. I counter-attack.

Sir Toby, do please tell me the story of your first visit here. Was it springtime, when you first visited the Continent?

He laughs out loud, happy at my question.

My dear Isaac, it was not spring, but autumn! My trip had been delayed, but in hindsight, it was a blessing. The colours, Isaac! The colours! I read verse in a forest

I am allowed once more to retreat inside myself as his story continues. It is interminable and soothing, and demands nothing of me but the occasional admiring eye and nodding head.

A painting is not a mountain. Nothing is more paralysing to me than the idea that a picture is something to scale. A picture is something to be crept into, peeled back, dug away, clothed, undressed and dreamt. There are no mountains to be scaled in my pictures and never will be. My pictures are places to hide in.

A New Place To Sleep

Our Inn, which we reach after what seems to be an eternity of horse changes, precipices, staring strangers, claustrophobia, hunger, backache, tedium and unfamiliar languages, is more, to my mind, like the Idea of an Inn than an actual Inn. How is it possible that every splinter of wood, every blade of grass has been washed? Every pebble polished? Every breeze dusted down before it was allowed to blow so freely? Waking up here is like stepping into a story I do not understand. Although a good imitator of human-ness, this alien author had not been properly informed of how grubby we human beings really are. I look everywhere for a sign that warns: enter this place and be filled with the scents and sounds and surfaces of a world that bears an uncanny similarity to the real world we think we recognise so easily, but is, in fact, a beautiful fraud. I could not paint such a place. Such beauty is somehow inaccurate. I would be called a liar, a sentimentalist, an idealist, and that would not do.

Mountains, the tips of which are touched with a faint white brush, frame the sloping roof of our Inn, which was built to facilitate the removal of snow in winter. I cannot imagine snow in such a place, surrounded as we are with such growth and such gentle sunshine.

An Exercise

An exercise: I have decided that I will try not to think about anything that does not present itself to my immediate eye. My head is tired of travelling back and forward, in and out of memories. It is difficult to halt a conversation one is having with oneself. Instead, I will deflect the energy of these exchanges. I will become a better observer. I will learn to understand the world by examining it more closely. The rest will follow. It must. Where else could it go?

I want simply to observe the different shape of petals and the muted colours of leaves. To spy on the occasional deer that stares at us through pine trees. To notice how the mouths of girls form their words differently from the mouths of boys. How the old men scratch their eyebrows. To try and commit to memory how the mountains fill my eyes, and not think too hard about why they confuse me.

To understand how such an underworld place can reach so high up.

Did He Exist?

One morning I was lying beneath a tree examining this foreign sky to see if I could discern any difference between it and the sky I am so familiar with in London, when a man came up, with goats. I heard their bells and sat up. The man was whistling and looked at me. I looked back at him. He had a face like polished wood. His age was impossible to guess. The goats leapt about him but he seemed oblivious to their antics.

I smiled at him and he smiled back and touched his cap. I touched mine in return before realising my head was bare. The goatherd laughed and I laughed back and then he went on his way.

I could not speak to him, but nonetheless we communicated clearly.

I lay down and slept without dreams for the afternoon.

When I awoke, I was deeply rested.

Then I remembered the goatherd and wondered, did he exist?

And then realised I had no way of knowing from where it was he came.

Small Things

Although smaller, there are things here that are more complex and heart-rending than mountains, despite their inferior visibility. I will learn to look hard at them, these objects that litter the world and so easily become states of mind. For example: the sun tugs the wildflowers skyward, where their petals wither. Birds are playful and busy. Women beat dusty mattresses and sing songs that sound like the movement of little rivers over rocks. Farmers smoke carved pipes and blow their smoke long and hard above their heads as they converse with each other. They pronounce their words with such measure and concentration it is difficult to believe they are talking simply about cows or cheese or the weather, the subjects I imagine Alpine farmers talk about. I have never seen grown men enjoy a glass of milk more. Clean white sheets blow in the wind. Young girls wear their hair in buttery plaits, and dress in bright colours, which they cover with pinafores. Their lips are often glossy. I glimpse their smooth plump calf muscles when they run. I am convinced their skin is soapy. It must be. It is soft at the edges, like something seen through water.

The bread here is shaped like mushrooms and is as heavy as rock. It fills me, scours me, cleans me. We eat it thick with cheese and sour jam for breakfast. I carry it inside me for hours like the presence of a friend.

Shutters fling back to reveal checked curtains which are always about to billow. The air trembles occasionally with the drifting sounds of cowbells.

The boys glance away when I say hello. They wear small gold earrings and have legs built for leaping. I have never seen such aggressive agility. They do not speak to the girls, who are also proud but, I feel, feign their shyness. They realise that I notice their eyes sparkle as they watch me eat my meals. They do not sparkle quite so hard at Sir Toby. When I sparkle back, however, they look away. Like most girls, they do not know what it is they are looking at, what it is they are looking for. That, I suppose, is because they have never been told. They do not know the names of the things they need in their hearts, and in their bodies.

What Sir Toby Loves

Sir Toby loves this place, and simply to walk up a hill and sit on a bench and order something refreshing fills him with a feeling akin to ecstasy.

We sit outside an inn and he pulsates with sheer joy at the raising of a tankard to his lips. I am touched, for once, by his hunger for living and burst out laughing, because at this moment in time our travels are filled at once with a sense of possibility and a sense of achievement.

Sir Toby, I say, we have already travelled so far, and still have so far to go, and he laughs out loud as well, and puts his ale down on the table and looks at me.

Is this what you expected, Isaac? Is there anything better on earth than this?

No, Sir Toby, I doubt there is. I will drink to that, and so I lift my glass and he lifts his and we crash them together.

To travel, Isaac!

Sir Toby, to travel

And Isaac, to art! To the knowledge you will take back to London and transform the world of painting!

I toast this one in a manner that is a little more subdued. Oh, that I could do such a toast justice.

To art, Sir Isaac. And to knowledge. To the things you love.

Ah Isaac

His eyes fill with happy tears.

Another crash of metal, the slopping of liquid.

The foam of the beer as he drinks sticks to his moustache, and transforms him, for a moment, into an old man I do not know.

Families

Families here group together around the mountain like litters of puppies suckle a sweet, fat bitch. They know where they were born, and they know where they will be buried.

Families marry other families, and so this community becomes, truly, one big family linked by flesh that weaves its way around the village like a vine made from skin.

I imagine these families embracing the hills and mountains and giving birth to clouds and never speaking a word about it.

If you were happy to be embraced by these families, they would feed you well and nothing would be better than such closeness. Yet if you disagreed with them, to live here would be like being imprisoned by overwhelming flowers, the petals of which would make your hands bleed as you tore at them.

There must be families here who live in the mud and filth, but they are hidden from the Traveller. There are moments, however, when I am sure I can hear them mutter.

Nonetheless, it has occurred to me that I would like Sophia to live for a while in the sunlight and air of such a place. Such solid parameters could only do her shaky ones good. I think of her next to these girls and imagine how wan she would appear. I would like to see Sophia run panting up a hill. I would even like to see her kissed, briefly, by a strong brown boy, if only it would make her smile. I will write to Sophia and attempt to make her laugh. I had not realised how simple her problems really are. Perhaps some sun might bleach her darkness blonde. Some laughter will fill her with light.

Fathers and Sons

Everything is ordered here, and everything appears placid, but for the crucifix on my bedroom wall. The artist of this object has insisted I be made aware of every detail of Christ's torture, and how he suffered in a very human way for his otherworldliness. His eyes are twisted upwards, full of the knowledge that his father let this happen. His broken body, denied its natural collapse towards the earth, writhes in suffocation. Nails skewer and torment his splintered flesh and bones. His ribs leave no room for his breath to escape. His throat is full of congealed life. It is a terrible, moving image to have above one's bed, to sleep beneath, to wake beneath. When I wake I turn my eyes heavenward and see the souls of Christ's feet, bleeding, above me.

What kind of a Father was God to let his son suffer so?

Why did he not protect His only son?

What result could be worth such a sacrifice?

If God were mortal he would never have let anyone push nails through his own skin.

What then gave him licence to let it happen to his son?

The thought of it fills me with fury.

He is God. When I look at the world, I know he is the greatest artist, and, as such, was possessed of a terrible imagination. If he had wanted to, he surely could have invented a better way to communicate his message.

We will stay here a while. Sir Toby wants us to climb more mountains. He says again and again how much he enjoys the ale.

Climbing in Germany

We pull ourselves high and breathe the air hard.

There is little time for drawing, which does not worry me as perhaps it might elsewhere. I have realised this is not a place that lends itself easily to lines. Gradations of colour and tone stretch far beyond any line a person could draw, even in their heads, where the possibility of drawing is always infinite. My head is so fit to bursting with images, it seems almost unnecessary to apply them to paper. They are so vivid in front of me. Soon, however, I know I must or my hands might suffocate each other from boredom.

(Something preoccupying me: where does an image go if it is not drawn?)

A thought has wriggled its way into my mind and will not rest or resolve itself. It is this: if the mountain is in itself a perfect creation, why should I bother to recreate it, in a manner that cannot help but be inferior to the original?

This is a thought capable of dangerous seduction. It stumbles me in the dark recesses of my mind, fills me with lassitude then picks me up and continues: what, it whispers, in your field of vision, exists that only you could make?

I will mull on this problem. I will not let it take me over.

I reassure myself: A drawing is simply another type of mountain to scale. Another valley to explore.

The colours are predominantly cold or brown in this country, but they are colours that are occasionally lent some warmth when they bleed. The green here is not to be trusted.

Blue lends itself to variations on the theme of blue. This blue stretches high and fades away, into cloud, wet like a watercolour with too much water. Like the hand of a heavy-handed artist has been at it.

Up in the sky, on the top of the mountains, we look down and the villages radiate like inconsequential ships. Clouds touch my face. Such hungry vertigo feeds my imagination. I

draw a line with my finger in a pocket. And another. Sir Toby holds his bony, thinning head up and laughs. He cracks his walking stick against the hard, high earth and slaps his thigh with his large spare hand. I don't doubt he would plant a flag if he had one. He laughs from deep inside himself. The sound of his laughter (I can hear Sophia's description: a sustained *cackleato*. She would linger on the words, then smile her laughter loud at me over the heads of others who cannot see her as clearly as I), wraps around my throat and stops my eyes and stills my fingers as surely as a cork in a bottle stops the spilling of liquid.

Sir Toby puffs and groans and grins and swells at his victory over gravity.

He has climbed a hill!

Almost twice your age Isaac, he shouts as if I were on another peak.

In my head my voice is dry and commanding: I am but a foot away, Sir Toby, a foot.

I veil my wince and look up and feel the air on my skin. Permission granted to breathe again. I feel my legs. My hands touch the air that has fallen off my face. It is good to have such aching muscles. Muscles are, I have discovered, a distraction. I have not walked this far, or so high, ever. I have begun to make acquaintance with my limbs and lungs. They are more connected to each other than I ever knew. My blood must surely be bubbling now with all the air I have allowed it to drink. My belly presses hard against my innards. My back is full of spine, an arrow to my head.

I bite the air, the air bites me back.

I am almost happy.

We climb down and feel faint and proud but too tired to talk or boast.

We retreat to our respective rooms, and scrub the mountain flush from our cheeks, perform our ablutions. I hear Sir Toby sing through the wall, a line from a popular operetta. His German is clumsy and his voice booms and trembles. I smile at his pleasure. The peace in my room is tangible. Lie back awhile empty and clean and contemplate the ceiling, the blessed, silent relief of my dear companion, the ceiling.

A knock.

Isaac, he calls, Isaac. Ready for a small pre-supper refreshment yet boy?

Bid farewell to the ceiling.

Drinking

The tavern is as knotty and as dark as the inside of a tree.

Sir Toby calls me fellow conqueror and cracks his tankard against mine.

We sing songs together, I make up the words, we laugh, he links his arm in mine and we sway on a worn, wooden bench, grinning at fellow revellers, other travellers, artistic types I strain to distance myself from.

Please Lord, I pray into my beer, do not speak to me of pictures.

How marvellous, Sir Toby bellows, and blows the froth from his ale into the air.

Oils? Delivered with a roar.

A fresh young face turns to him, looks at me, looks away, turns back.

Yes, oils, at home, but here of course, I use only watercolour and pencil

I do not hear anymore, his voice is drowned in smoke and song anyway, I do not want to hear it.

A thousand eyes, a million ears. We are close in intoxication and in the blurring of vision, if not in language or outlook.

My hands are rough things, clumsy, strong, unfamiliar appendages on the ends of my arms, transformed here to accommodate rocks and tankards and holding stout sticks. Not a brush in sight.

But what of my fingers, and the blood that connects them to my head?

Nights in a German Inn

We sleep in rooms of wood and lace beneath fat crisp sheets, stuffed with the plumage of a thousand slaughtered birds.

I can hear Sir Toby split the night with his snoring in the room next to me. He makes the wall between us vibrate with his exertions, and I cannot sleep, and so watch what happens around me when the world thinks me unconscious. My arms are heavy and pin me to myself, my legs as still as old logs.

I feel the slyness beneath my lids, how my eyes might look closed to one who didn't know to look.

This is what I see.

A small soft feather escapes and drifts away, a white thread curls in the cold night breeze. The miniature feet of tiny German mice whisper and tip toe around me.

(They were also born. Every living thing born.)

The wood floor creaks. The suggestion of trees against the far wall, undecieved by my heavy lids, waving and bowing like old friends.

The night moans gently. I smother my happiness with my pillow.

(How was it I came to be born? Out of what coincidence or calamity? From what confluence of spirit and lust? My father's? My mother's? It is unthinkable. They were always clothed, even alone, I am convinced of it.)

I hear my father's voice. He whispers to me, so my sisters cannot hear, Isaac, are you drunk?

He smiles beneath the sentence.

Father I reply, I blush, I am simply becoming myself.

I do not know what I mean.

The room moves slightly, as if it is afloat. It is not me, it is the walls. They sway and laugh at the floor.

My father created me. Surely he would understand. I send him a thought, which I am convinced he will receive and reply to, when the wind's soft lips kiss mine as it creeps through the window and lies beside me.

I forget my father, and leap between tenses.

Time throws me to the wind and she catches me adroitly.

I murmur to her, tell me a story. She replies at once, and with wonderful clarity:

Oh! I have come a long way to reach you. From rocks. From stars. From the mouths of long dead gods.

My night room is filled with such an amiable crowd! A sleepy excitement fills my heart and mind, to be honoured by such company.

The wind draws breath and begins. She tells me so many tales, my eyes begin to nod with the strain of hearing her whisper, but I cannot fall asleep with such words in my ears. If only I could embrace such a storyteller.

I am filled with loneliness.

The wind tells me how she wraps her thin arms around the hats of young girls and lifts them off their heads and flings them into rivers. She tells me how she has blown a jewel into the path of a beggar, a bullet into the heart of a banker. She has tickled the cheeks of babies, been filled with fury and dashed ships against rocks and then, consumed with remorse, pulled survivors ashore by their coat tails and petticoats. She has fanned fires, destroyed towns and then comforted the cheeks of fire-fighters with a breeze. She has boiled water for the tea of explorers, melted ice caps, irritated old women damp with rain, blown curtains open to reveal illicit kisses, pushed back the petals of flowers to show a child a dancing fairy, cooled the

brow of the Prince of Denmark when he was a child. Her stories jostle for space in my mind until I beg her to stop. I can only hear so many tales in one night. As she leaves me, lamenting my exhaustion, she tells me, sighing, she is lonely again.

I keep the window open, to hear more clearly the movement of birds. There is an owl out there. It, too, is alone. It sings like a foghorn. A strange bird to hear here, it sings the same song it did in Chatham, but is, without doubt, a different bird. I suspect its wings are browner and touched with a trembling hint of red. I would laugh if they were. Imagine, nature applied so accurately to geography.

Do birds adapt their plumage to the place in which they are born?

How would a bird choose a colour for its feathers in London?

No wonder the pigeons in Trafalgar Square are so dull.

Wood in Germany

There are so many things growing here, things you cannot see, you would doubt the possibility of cold, but despite the warmth that fills the air it is a cold place.

This food must have fought hard to be born, to push through such earth, which must surely remain cold even as the sun shines hot on its surface.

For this, I have realised, is a frigid country, even in summer. There is grass, of course, green grass that covers the brown earth, but I do not believe in it enough to credit it with real colour or any warmth.

As a matter of fact, it has occurred to me that the grass here is full of deceit, too pretty, too full of spring to be real. Its green is too consistent, too constantly applied.

It is like rouge on an old cheek.

I could never lie on this thick, soft grass.

There is an undercurrent of secrecy, of violence in the genial faces of our hosts. It is best to be alert. Of course, their language is not necessarily secretive. Perhaps it is only my lack of knowledge of the words they use. But their sunburnt hands are as sly as they are strong. It is wise to be aware of the places they could go. Of the things they might touch without permission.

As our landlord speaks to us of breakfast options, his fingers drum the leather of his trousers. His face and his hands tell me different things, as they move in different directions.

I prefer bodies unified in their messages.

Our plates are obscene and nourishing. Grinning sausages, shiny potatoes, beer. Eggs with yolks like orbs. Milk that coats my tongue, and makes me cough. Cheese it takes a strong wrist to slice.

However, notwithstanding my reservations about the honesty of this place, I must admit I have never so deeply enjoyed the sensation of swallowing, or the feeling of a full, tight belly. I am all body and appetite, and arrive at the table like another might arrive for a fight he secretly craves.

I have a picture in me of all this, but cannot place it, cannot put a colour to it, nor a line, nor a true word.

It is to do with a sensation that sets my bones shivering and my mind racing in a direction I find hard to follow. It is to do with wood and spirits, which are more evident here than at home. On the wall of the breakfast room, faces come at me from wood knots. Small, leering faces, with slurred shoulders and peaked caps and gnarled fingers. It is difficult not to imagine how their limbs might swell beneath their undergarments, quite despite the fact that the image of them, their carved images, stop where their shoulders begin.

I have been forced to sit and chew with my face averted from their fixed, over-spirited,

impish stares.

Children roar and laugh at their repellent features, but I would warn them of their seriousness, if their mamas weren't so close and protective, their fathers so brimful of misguided confidence in an art that might pretend to be cheerful, but is, in reality, an accurate rendering of possibility.

I shake Sir Toby off me, and walk in the woods alone, to try and imagine the man who carved such compelling aberrations. There is a very present feeling of metamorphosis in these German trees, a metamorphosis that is transferred into the carvings the artists mould from their limbs. Of speechless creatures coming from wood, curling out from under the dormant flowers, from beneath the wings of flying things.

Where are the fairies here? Are they as busy as they are at home?

Perhaps it was not an artist who built such sculptures.

The thought starts me shivering.

He first hit me in the forest, when I could hardly walk I was so little.

I had seen a cat, a large, dark cat and told him so, and he told me there were no cats in this forest, and I said no, he was not right. And he hit me. He was not much older than me, but I can still feel his fist on face, whenever I walk beneath trees. He called himself my friend. Then the memory fades, and once again, the branches become somewhere to hide. I trust the watchful birds to keep guard, as the small animals burrow more deeply into the earth, for safety.

Sir Toby has laughed at me for what he calls my fancy in seeing anything in these wooden figurines.

They are simply toys, Isaac, carved from dead stories. Ah, boy, wait till we get to Italy.

A smirk, followed by dismissal. These stories are alive in me, and in the people here, and they almost shout out to be heard. Sir Toby cannot hear such things. He blocks himself from them. He may travel extensively, but travelling for him is simply a reiteration of what he thinks he already knows. He travels to see his prejudices carved in stone. But he is easy to block. I look away and he is not there. I do not doubt for a second that there is something in these shapes beyond the delineation of the carver's tool and eye. A story gluts each blade of grass in this strange country, stories we are not privy to, not having been born here. These stories come from somewhere true. Why, otherwise, would they be born in someone's mind? Who put them there? Images are bled from me in tiredness.

Drinking songs drift up through the floorboards and lull me to sleep.

Guilt

Sir Toby is so good and healthy after his climbing I am filled with guilt at my churlishness at his pleasure. I must give him his due, his lack of complication is not always an irritation. Sometimes, it is rare, but just sometimes his jolly face and manner are a tonic to my head, which lately has been as tired as my climbing limbs.

Without any intention on his part, he has let me glimpse the possibility of a simpler world.

I remember: walking to make pictures of the boats in Medway. The heavy way their shapes docked inside me, and how I struggled to extract them. How the water lapped beside my easel, and how its rhythm frustrated me in its possible combinations.

I know there is a confused logic to every thought I have. This is a clear, good, reassuring

feeling because it tells me that every idea has a counter-idea, every fear some solace in its very human fallibility.

All that aside, I must say: Sir Toby is in awe of the mountains in the same way another man might be in awe of his bank manager. The Idea of Italy.

Germany is a strange apprenticeship for Italy, which disturbs me in anticipation. Here it is not lines that are so apparent in nature but shapes and undercurrents. I cannot imagine the laying on of colour in such a place, but know some have done it well.

In Italy I predict a clear light, a mastery of line, a marriage of idea and colour, of spirit and intention, the transformation of rock into marble.

But I do not wish to wish too much.

The Rhine is the brown wash across an old painting. I feel we will need to travel south to strip it clean from the images it obscures.

I have dreamt and shivered the paintings I expect to see. I have seen them in my minds eye, I think, and yet not believed them. But perhaps my mind is wrong. How could it possibly anticipate pictures I have not seen? Perhaps my anticipation is to do with a kind of self gratification. I need to see the images that will confirm the correctness of my path. Perhaps my prejudices are as firmly cemented as Sir Toby.

We stride along narrow streets, my travelling companion and I. It is inevitable, perhaps, that sometimes we do not notice the windows that we pass.

Sir Toby delights in my trepidation and is smug in the knowledge of his previous visits. He has seen these images and speaks of them with propriety, as if he invented them himself.

If his face could rub itself together in glee it would. His stout little nose curls up to his eyes, which squint at me with a knowing geniality. He has seen them before, he tells me again and again and again. He knows what is to come, but I would prefer not to listen to his preview. The words he employs when he speaks of pictures are all wrong. His is a mind filled with images that stack together like the dry leaves of a ledger.

I admit he is a kind and generous and harmless man, but that does not mean he is not wrong.

The intimations are too clear to ignore. In truth, Sir Toby would shout with as much joy at the sight of cool pale ale as he would at a correct line, the perfect intimation of another's experience.

(But then perhaps he is right in this. His is a life certainly filled with more light-heartedness than mine. His enjoyment of the world makes me thin and tight with jealousy.)

At moments, I believe he forgets himself and cannot see who I am.

Different Architects

Italy. The word has become associated in my mind with another arrival. Another room, another ceiling, another sky. Different architects, different sounds from different mouths. I am filled with awe at the infinite permutations of travel. The infinite combinations. The infinite reworkings of a well trod path.

Strange to think of the horses pulling the carriage the same way every day, and each day smelling and seeing something different.

I would like, I think, to converse with the horses, to ask them about what they have seen, how the cold, hard bit feels between their teeth, the difference between pulling a man and a girl. I would ask them if they do their job gladly, or if they long to be a different beast, a milking cow perhaps, a lap dog, or a kitten. I would ask them if they ever plot revolution, or

can smell the different grasses as they canter down a rocky hill. I am curious as to whether they miss their mothers and in what way the men who drive them so hard differ in cruelty and intent. If they ever bolted or are whipped hard. If they long to read or to look at pictures.

I share another carriage with Sir Toby. We have already been in so many together.

I never spent so long in such proximity to another human being.

We know more about each other now than we did before. For example: we know to ignore each other's moans, which increase without our permission, when the journey becomes interminable. We know how to remain silent for long stretches.

This has become our modest, if shared talent.

We also now know that we do not share the same vocabulary.

Another Arrival

We leave Switzerland behind us. We pass through the border, which is filled with young men, loitering in uniform.

A sense of unrest is present in the glances soldiers direct at us.

We make it clear to anyone who will listen that we are not French, but English, the defeaters of Napoleon. We gave them back their country, Sir Toby repeatedly informs me, but it has once again become, it would seem, many countries. Fighting is in the air.

The gradual stripping away of officialdom is like the countryside loosening its collar. With every village we pass through, the eyes of the inhabitants become more indolent, more charming. The girls look up into our carriage, their mouths parted slightly. They smile at me as if I were buying them. It is rather unnerving. I look away, and look back again to see them once more.

Oh, despite its vulgarity, such a soft place!

The women have heated skin.

The air is almost laughing.

Birth and Death.

I am so immediately intoxicated that I do something I rarely do.

I speak my mind.

Sir Toby and I are drinking in a small Inn. We look at each other and smile, hearing the sounds of Italy around us.

It is a noisy place, but the voices are not speaking German, and so the atmosphere is noticeably different to anywhere we have come from.

In Germany, voices sounded like chopping carrots.

In Italy, they sound like bubbling oil.

I drink and my head becomes immediately light.

Sir Toby, this may perhaps sound foolish, but I feel we have arrived in a place where everything seems to be in the process of both being born and dying.

Sir Toby laughs as if I have said the funniest thing in the world. I think my seriousness makes him nervous.

Ah Isaac. Surely the same could be said about London?

I think for a moment.

But in London, transitions are separate. A child is born. Someone dies. Here, everything seems to be happening at once.

In the midst of Life, Isaac, we are in death. Do not forget that.

Lord, the man tires me. He does not ask me what I mean. I ask myself, and realise I do not know.

So I change the subject and talk about the quality of wine. Sir Toby once again breathes

easily.

But, I cannot help but notice it everywhere, dead things surrounded by eyes and mouths brimming to overflow with life. Italy is a place of tumultuous noises and yielding colours, of gazes that slip and hold. There is a feeling here not of deceit, but of concealment: in the copious skirts of women, in the deep pockets of young boys, in the eyes of everyone. I can imagine a hand moving smoothly into mine and grabbing it so tightly it would still the veins in my wrist.

Everything is soft that breathes here, and everything brutal is hidden in every soft breath.

Lakes fell from the mountains we came from. Like the descent into laughter from the sermon of sedate Switzerland, a place of measurement and excellent ale, of churches empty of images. Churches full of a quiet, good faith, but no eye.

Italy. The joyfulness that touches every sound in every alley, even in the sound of a weeping child.

A pot clangs, a donkey glares at me with a sardonic eye.

Hands fly up to argue, the eyes merry, theatrically tragic.

Here every gesture is a song.

Mothers and Fathers and Children

In Chatham I grew up to the sound of hammers.

I recall slipping into the great sheds where the mighty men of war were built, to draw their interlocking lines and masts, or running, beneath a wet sheet of a sky, to the cornfields or orchards or hopfields with my water-colours. I hid damp and cold, and looked close at the shape and colour of bark or apple or blade of grass, and attempted to describe an ant from memory, or a pebble, or clod of thick earth. I searched for nests and never disturbed the eggs but wondered how best to render their shape, which begins nowhere and is never finished.

I hunted elusive light to escape the squalid streets that surrounded us.

My father asked me again and again, Isaac, where do you go?

I could not tell him. My images were powerful because they were invisible to everyone but myself.

My sisters, my brothers, my life chorus: Isaac, where do you go?

My father loves to look at pictures. I could not show him mine when I was little. I was too ashamed of the lines that did not go where I wanted them to go.

I have seen fathers here swell with pride at the sight of their ragged offspring doing nothing more impressive than eating. Such sights make me look away. A father's love is knotted in me tight, too tight to draw, whereas mothers are a mystery to me, and fill a space I do not know how to describe.

Italy is a country in which it is unimaginable not to have a mother.

If your mother is no longer alive, in every church, another mother with a gentle face and open arms can be found to kneel before.

I realise I am an aberration, a twice motherless man.

My mother died, to be replaced by another, who also died, and when I was little there were no mothers in any churches, only angry fathers and bleeding sons.

Perhaps in England mothers are weaker, or, perhaps, gentler, than fathers.

The sounds in the street are even louder than the hammers, but the noises are touched with exuberance. I envy these children. I envy their smooth, warm plumpness and their odd

elegance, the smothering arms and wet kisses of their mothers. The urchins of Chatham would look like drowned kittens next to these young gods.

Perhaps my admiration for the way they look is the merely the sentimental ramblings of a traveller. It must be true that they have their fair share of weeping behind closed doors, their fair share of beatings. Even so, no sentiment on my half alters the fact of the ubiquitous sunlight. These are children born into sun.

I no longer remember her face, although I know I carry it inside me.

Where is mother now?, I asked my father.

Father was sitting, doing nothing, looking at a wall. He shook his head to my question.

I am your mother now, Isaac he replied.

I was shocked.

Father, you are not my mother.

In a swift, violent movement he smashed his fist onto the delicate table beside him. It cracked and buckled.

A maid came to the door and stood and looked and scratched her leg.

Father ignored her, and slumped in his chair.

Your mother is no longer here. I will have to suffice.

I stood my ground.

So if she is not here, she must be somewhere. Where then, Father, can I find her? If she is not here, where has she gone?

He sat again, his hand bleeding.

She is dead and gone to Heaven.

I cried then.

Well I shall go there too and fetch her back. How do I get there?

You have to die, Isaac, and then you might arrive, but only if you have been good. But you can never bring her back. People do not return from Heaven.

He continued to stare at wall.

I did not move.

And was mama good?

Silence.

Yes, she was good.

He did not look at me, and I, suddenly, did not like looking at him.

And so I left. The maid touched my hair but I did not know the touch of her hand and pushed it away.

I did not know where to go.

Religious Sense

Despite the abundance of churches and the opulent crucifixes that adorn the necks of every female, there is surprisingly little religious sense here. Although priests abound, their faces do not indicate great self-denial. The women pray with hands that would just as happily cook or stroke. They would swap this God for another without a thought, like a vegetable exchanged for a fresher one, in a corrupt market.

The devil, I can almost hear them mutter, what would the devil matter, if he made our lives more pleasant? After all, he too was once an angel, like we are.

It is enough to know he was once good.

I enter a church and see the worshippers stained by the reflection of the glass windows. At first the sight is beautiful, but the closer I look, the more it becomes apparent, the rainbow light lends their skin the appearance of violent bruises. They look touched, damaged, wrong.

I would not like to suggest that God was making something apparent to me, but must admit, it did occur to me. Why would people look so damaged in a church if God had not willed me to see it? Why, unless they were meant to be punished?

It is all very beautiful and very worrying.

Venice

Venice could not have been designed by a mortal. I would not believe it even if an angel were to inform me it were so, and showed me the paperwork to prove it. Even the beggars are perfect, with their soulful eyes and elongated, supplicating hands. The lower class of people is far more picturesque than anywhere else I have been: their grace of motion and noble carriage are striking. I have tried to make pictures of their likenesses and in doing so compared them to my mental images of their equivalents in London. The comparison is nothing short of ludicrous. They are so far removed from the sickly pallor and whining gestures of the English poor as to be from another planet. Perhaps in England, having had only one God, we never had enough God to go around. Here they have had such a plethora of gods, and these gods, if we are to believe our Ovid, were so easy with their affections, it is no wonder the mortal population inherited something of their beauty. Gods and their blood must have somehow filtered through to the populous, but whatever the reason or cause, it is difficult to imagine where such lowly people found such aristocratic bearing. Perhaps from the swans and trees the gods became to couple with women, perhaps from the delicate clouds they hid in.

I have heard that Lord Byron used to swim in the canal and can only assume his submersion was a form of baptism, an homage, an act of devotion. If I were to allow my head beneath the waters of Venice, I would not breathe again, so happy would I be to welcome such sweet suffocation.

I have walked the narrow lanes at dawn and seen buildings emerge, new born into the light, buildings built of cobweb, steam and precious jewels. I have floated alone down the grand canal at midnight, convinced that such palazzos are, despite their bricks and mortar, edifices built from dreams. I have seen the pigeons explode at sunset above St Marks, the cacophony of their wings like applause at such magnificence. It must be one of the most gorgeous temples conceivable. No material has been spared. The range of the most costly and various marbles and mosaics is astonishing. The altars are the richest I have ever seen, adorned to excess and with the lights burning in various degrees of intensity, the incantations of the most sombre and otherworldly priests imaginable officiating and children, old men and women, young, veiled beautiful women, in fact all manner of people kneeling and unified throughout this fantastic interior an extraordinary sight for the eye.

Venice is a city built of pictures that have floated into my head like a lobster into a pot. I will die with them in my heart, and be joyful at the heat they generate, at the impossibility of them ever escaping my mind.

But the gondoliers and the street sellers! They must be God's joke on a people who have allowed themselves to become indifferent to the beauty that surrounds them. They are the greatest villains on earth, or, to be entirely accurate, water. Sir Toby and I were conveyed by two who swore and shouted at each other and, after a few minutes of this violent argument actually struck one another with their broad oars, yet still, on delivering us not a little nervous, asked for a gratuity! Everyone here who has something to sell seems to take for granted their right to plunder travellers. They expect to be paid for the slightest services, for example, telling one the time, or pointing the way to the market, or even smiling. I am surprised it

hasn't caught on, and half expect Sir Toby to demand a few coins when I pass him the salt at supper. When we leave our hotel they swarm about us with cruel, greedy faces and clutching fingers, anxious, like their own detestable fleas and mosquitoes, to get the last drop out of you. Never have I been made so aware of the difference between men. They look upon us as if we were wildly and extravagantly rich. I am the first to acknowledge, we perhaps are by their standards. But I violently object to their assumptions. I object to anybody assuming anything about me. There have been moments when I have exploded with a rage that has surprised even me.

Sir Toby, ever the experienced traveller, patronises me with sniggers, murmuring beneath his breath, Ah! Isaac, you will learn, you will learn.

At times I could have gladly exchanged him for the worst of them.

But their architecture and their paintings are enough to assuage the wrath of even a misjudged and ignorant artist.

Italian Painting

I almost could not look, because looking drained everything from me, and replaced it with a void I had never before recognised in myself.

Jealousy.

Where did they get it from, this blazing perfection. And how did so many receive the gift?

I have attempted to convey this idea in letters home, to friends, to my family. My words, however, are such thin things. They could not move or inspire the reader as much as a toenail painted by Tintoretto. I have had to depend on words that reflect nothing of the experience of looking, and so feeling.

However, if I am to be bled dry I will be grateful for my lack of every drop.

Tintoretto. The Miracle of St Mark. The fury of the painter only matched by the consummate fury of the subject. The trembling, raging goodness of such paint. It is terrible and fascinating that a man could summon such images. Or Veronese, full of daylight. The artist manipulating the material until the material itself disappears. The soft, rabid paint of Titian. The Italian mouth of the Bellini Madonna, in a few strokes annihilating all of our preconceptions about the spiritual laziness of these people.

I walk with my arm around the shoulders of Giorgione's ghost, which is restless with the impotence of unfinished pictures and premature death. I would like to protect his spirit as it walks the alleyways of Venice, haunted by Titian, who is trying to kill him. I have felt Tiziano's wild breath upon my cheek, his rage undimmed by extinction. Giorgione trembles, his head full of tree women and the hidden places beneath the earth, and secret coded stories, filled with the terrible knowledge that lightning would strike him many times.

Giorgione did not know how to protect himself.

He was not mad, and he was pursued. He knew this much and was not believed.

Poor Giorgione, in danger of his life, painting pictures which dissolve into the deflected light of the canals. Painting pictures that dullwitted people find impossible to fathom because they are not full of the meanings most people crave. These men who stand perplexed before Giorgione must have dull safe marriages and reveal nothing to their wives, because there is nothing for them to reveal. The few women I have witnessed looking at his paintings appear somewhat more confused than the men. They glance, turn away, then turn back again and look with wide eyes. Perhaps women expect less and so see more. I do not know.

These paintings turn everything around that can be turned around.

Paintings to fall into.

Sir Toby reads aloud from Vasari in front of each painting until I crumble in embarrassment. He finds people to dine with us. I think he has begun to find my silences dull. I do not blame him. I am mute to him.

I cannot speak about painting to Sir Toby. After all, I could not speak German to Germans because I do not speak their language. Somehow, although our language anchors us to our geographical origins, in the space that truly counts, we bear no relation to each other, are not kinsmen. We come from different places on this planet. From cities so far, far away from each other, the possibility of communication between us is impossible.

I am nothing and so must begin again.

Ballad Mongers

When I was a child, Ballad mongers visited our town to sell their songs. They hung their pages up for inspection like lines of sheets on washing day. People peered into them and as they read, imagined the sound they might make when sung.

I recalled these itinerants when I received word from my father.

I held the pages of his letter before me, and could have sworn I heard music.

The weight and texture of the paper of my father's letter were as familiar to me as his face. The shape of his writing echoed the strong shape of his good hands.

To hold his words was at once immensely familiar and immensely strange. Like seeing someone you did not expect to see in a place you have never visited before.

He wrote to me of my brothers and sisters (well), and of his business bronzing and watergilding (steady). He described paintings he had recently seen (nothing interesting) and briefly discussed the weather (bad) and friends (friendly). In other words, he wrote me an entirely predictable letter, which I found immensely reassuring.

I carry it in my pocket like an anchor.

Letters Home

Sir Toby is buried too deeply inside that corpulent body of his and will not read the signs that surround him. But he writes all the time, despatching letters to that family of his, so many and such long letters he must include the number of ants we have seen, and weigh the amount of sunlight every day he is forced to carry on his sturdy shoulders. I am sure I caught him counting the crumbs I leave on the table after supper.

A cigar Isaac?

I accept one and look for his notebook. Surely this momentous event must be recorded. Isaac has smoked a cigar.

What does he not leave out though? He writes of everything but the hard, true things, the ones that permeate our conversation without a word spoken.

I have begun to read some of his letters. I am ashamed to admit it, but was too filled with curiosity about what it was he was recording. To resist.

The first time, he left his letter on the sideboard and went to fetch a book. I heard him conversing with our landlady. I picked up his letter and read it.

I did not realise we had done so much.

Oh, how he goes on! About what we have eaten, what we have seen. His letters are contracted like a housekeeper might order her weekly accounts in pages and pages of lists. I would not be surprised if he drafted his letters in columns.

He writes like a genial accountant, and includes the price of every sip of tea.

I am filled with frustration at the thought of the conversations we could have had, the letters he might write home. I know that this is unfair of me, but in truth, I cannot veil my thoughts. I dwell, almost obsessively I must admit, on the exchanges we might have had if he were someone else. I feel an overwhelming need to have my assumptions challenged.

Namely: a dissection, a clarification of what happens in the space that occurs between the mind and the image. We could have discussed why images are necessary. We might have argued deep into the night about the possible existence of a world more real than the one we now inhabit, or disagreed about the meandering degree of truth telling that exists at the heart of all truths. We might have agreed about the complicated urges that make a man want to own an image when he has seen the thing he wants to draw, which is in effect the thing that moves him most, either in passion, in curiosity or in the spirit of experimentation.

Sir Toby, I would like to ask you: in your opinion, which is bigger, mountains or grass? A drop of rain, a sliver of glass? The potential of a calf or a lamb? The power of the sun or moon? Mars or Venus? Woman or man? Sir Toby, tell me, what is the difference between a song and a picture in its recreation of a feeling? Sir Toby, why are some sculptures considered great and others indifferent? Would you really be able to see the difference, Sir Toby?

And Sir Toby, tell me, what is it that separates me from you.

I would dearly like to know.

He speaks to me about the origins of architecture, but not about the bricks and the slaves and the heat and the flies, or the desire of one man to own more bricks than his neighbour.

I have discovered I do not want to know about the bricks so much as to understand the impulse that said to someone, somewhere, I am tired of retreating inside myself and so must build a wall.

Yes. I would like to learn more about the origins of rooms.

Sir Toby, tell me how a flower speaks, in what language, and how I might better read the words that fill the sky. Sir Toby, can you translate a bird's song? Would you like to try? We could start with a common trill.

Sir Toby, tell me, now, about the space between you and I and what fills it. Tell me why a story should be transformed into an image. Tell me how the image might transmit both an atmosphere of the real and a semblance of imitation, which, in its constant ambiguity, ensures the life of the subject so depicted.

Every line is full of lies and every lie is full of truth.

The problem exists in the sorting, the sieving, the ruthless looking.

But you cannot teach a man such things. He has to find them out himself. That is my travelling sorrow. I am impatient. These are only some of the questions and some of the observations which never gain entrance into Sir Toby's missives home.

Sophia Writes

A slim letter and stained, from grubby fingers and perhaps tears. I wish, unfairly perhaps, that she would not tell me the things she tells me. Because once I have the words inside my head, words she has sent from such distance, they stick there and will not budge.

She tells me, in abrupt, painful sentences, of how she sews and yawns. She lets me know that she cannot sleep for dreaming too hard. She has written, quite simply, of her love of the colour blue, and how she will dress in no other. And of how she has decided not to speak for a week. Or eat more than four mouthfuls of food a day, and how she has abstained from kissing the cheeks of loved ones, in order to know their minds more closely, and refrained from smelling flowers, so she will learn to look more closely at their shapes.

She tells me father is too busy to notice anything and her brothers, apart from me, never speak to her.

She enquires about my travels with questions that are close enough to my own way of thinking to make me uneasy: Come home Isaac, and tell me about the different light. Have you held your face to the stars? Are they differently coloured there, Isaac?

She is mute about Sir Toby. She tells me she cannot imagine what we eat.

She tells me little about my family, although I can imagine what they are doing. But they cannot imagine the places I move through. That is the difference.

It is Difficult to Believe it Exists

We travel to Rome through dusted golden countryside.

We drink wine in our carriage to alleviate the discomfort. Sir Toby becomes voluble.

One field appears, full of poppies, then another overflowing with yellow flowers.

There are no birds in the sky.

It is absurd but the coachman breaks into a mournful song.

My senses cannot take much more.

Sir Toby sighs and sips.

I love this country Isaac. Do you feel that?

That you love it, Sir Toby, or that I love it?

Both. I am a different man here Isaac. Something in Italy casts England away from me.

I look at him. Apart from his cheeks, which are red from the sun, he looks exactly like the man I left England with.

I am curious.

What is it that has been cast from you, Sir Toby?

A reticence, perhaps, to speak one's mind honestly. A reserve in one's attitude to strangers. I feel more forthcoming. Do you know what it is I am speaking of?

I think for a moment.

I think of the women I have seen here I would like to embrace. The thought has occurred to me more often in Italy than in any other time of my life.

I have blushed more in a week in the streets of Venice than I have in a year in London.

I think of the unspeakable paintings.

These are thoughts I find impossible to communicate. And so I lie.

Yes, I think I do understand. It is in the air. The air and the light. It is more accommodating than at home.

Accommodating, Isaac? Of what?

Sometimes you speak the truth despite yourself.

I am caught out.

Accommodating of pleasure, Sir Toby. When the skin is touched by such air it creates a benevolence in one's attitude towards one's fellow man.

Silence. He thinks. Then turns to me.

Do you know, Isaac, I do think I agree with what you are saying.

He turns his head and gazes intently at something in the far distance.

Look at that Isaac. It is hard to believe it exists.

I look towards where he is pointing. A tower on a hill, its edges dissolving in the sunlight, its base hovering above the earth. Tall cypress trees flank it like ladies-in-waiting. A thin road curves up to it. The whole scene is absent of people.

Sir Isaac is right. It is difficult to believe that it exists.

A Dream in Rome

I dreamt there was too much lethargy in Rome.

I dreamt that this lethargy was endemic and that the only way it could be eradicated would be to frighten people here into understanding that their own energy, their own possibility for transformation, like the sky in a Tintoretto or the discovery of the edge in a Titian, was by the spilling of blood. That sometimes transformation demands, nay deserves, blood. Their religion is wrong. It is wrong because it satiates their need for the body which it gives them at every ceremony and makes them self-satisfied. Their capacity for painting has disappeared from them. There are reasons for this. The church and the painting are inextricably connected, and cannot, should not be separated here, but the laziness of these people has forced a weakness to occur in the connection. They have a greater need for moral strictness than anywhere else I have been. But they have diffused their religion with sensuality. I am overwhelmed by the people I see in the street. They rub their crucifixes and spit. The men and boys walk into churches looking at the girls. I have seen them feign prayer and slip a hand beneath the skirts of kneeling supplicants. Seeing such believers is like seeing a river stripped of light, a woman without breasts, the sky without a sun. A Bellini without a Madonna. It should be unimaginable for never was a country so blessed with the possibility of beatitude. But no-one has woken them up. In my dream I slit the throat of their lazy Pope and replace him with a blazing Angel. When I woke from this dream, I knew that it was not wrong, but that this country, emotionally and spiritually, is wrongly located. Sir Toby calls it a charming place and is worn out from winking. It is as charming as a deconsecrated church operating as a brothel and filled with the most beautiful whores imaginable. This dream has made me sad and nervy. I do not feel myself.

The Coliseum

After a month in Rome, I am glutted on ruins and see things in their cracks and crevices I never noticed before.

We visit the Coliseum, again. It is a different place every time.

Cats mewl and curl around our legs as we attempt to wander through the crumbs of this once terrible place. The crickets scream incessantly and the sun is white. The wind lifts the dust into our eyes. Beggars cry out at the gates, and tiny Gypsy children attempt to slip their fingers into our pockets. Sir Toby stamps on the bare feet of a little girl, who runs away howling. Her cries bounce off the heartless stone.

I try to intervene, to protest.

Sir Toby, she is only a child.

He rises before me, stout and indignant.

She is grown enough to know right and wrong. She was intent on robbing me, Isaac.

And then, where would we be?

My protest is lame, my words impotent.

But Sir Toby, she is probably no better than a slave. A child slave.

He does not dignify my observation with a response and walks away from me with an angry back.

This place fills me with sadness and dread. This is a place where Christians were killed, but our outrage at such crimes is, I feel, a little misplaced. I cannot wander through this ancient tomb and not think of our own terrible Tyburn, where men swing for crimes that more often than not should, in my view, warrant little more than a rebuke.

I read that the Emperor Hadrian gave the populace spices to honour his mother-in-law, and ordered essence of balsam and saffron to be poured over the seats in the coliseum. He considered them sweet smells to watch death by. The image plagues me.

But, perhaps, it was not so simple and I should not dwell on a history that may have no basis in reality. Truths shift and alter with each telling. I could imagine how I might write

another's story, or even, and this is the strangest thought, my own, and how, if held up against the life it was meant to replicate, this story would seem to appear riddled with holes and artifice. Nothing could reproduce my breath here or now. Who can tell the thoughts that crowded Hadrian's head as he sat by his loathed wife's mother and watched screaming men and women and even children have their limbs torn away. Who can tell?

History is more and more unclear to me. I do not know who to believe or which story to heed. It is easier to draw, to look at the curve of rock or stone or brick and to try and fathom how it interacts with the sky and the earth than it is to contemplate the mechanics of the mind of the man who ordered that this architecture be placed so perfectly.

Greece

Patras Argos Mycanae Corinth Athens...

The sounds of these words! As dusty as the schoolroom, as difficult as memories I have dreamt but never experienced. It is hard to reconcile myself to the fact that these words are, quite simply, the names of towns, practical naming devices like Chatham or London or Hastings. But I cannot grasp it. They sound like words waiting to be translated, tainted with the blood of animal battles or romances that have straddled time. Words that clang like a faint bell on the edge of my mind, calling together a congregation of nursery stories, of Ulysses, of Troy, of Helen, of giant fictitious horses and women who turn into fish, of songs that could kill a man, of gods and demigods and heroes.

The sounds of these words in no way prepare the weary traveller for the very real filth spilling out from every doorway. How different the reality to the actuality! History has crumbled these towns as effectively as if it had taken a sledgehammer to their bricks and statues and books. But the more they crumble, the more mythical, the more buried, their origins become. These are the elements of Greece about which our teachers remained mute, but perhaps their silence was born of ignorance.

The stained marble, the crumbling fingertips of masterpieces, the filthy huts that coexist with tear stained splendour. The ruins of the ancients have become as integral to the living habits of the locals as bread. But with less sustenance, less meaning. The people here live in such a strange way, they hardly feel like fellow humans, but yet their curiosity in me is mirrored by my own in them. Their eyes are almost uniformly beautiful, thick lashed, heavy and profoundly and deeply dark, but they hug their filth and dirty habits to them like friends. Perhaps though, in such a country where the air tastes like a wonderful drink, they do not crave the same order as I do. Their lives are as dreamt as they are lived.

The air is full of lemons and wild thyme and the gentle percussion of goat bells. It tastes like syrup tinged with something harsh and insubstantial, perhaps the whispering of ghosts who stand on every corner and behind every bush. The sun cannot be the same sun we have in England. It might be perhaps a distant cousin, but nothing closer.

Greece is populated with characters from fairy tales, the diluted descendants of Gods.

I have seen a pirate with a knife in his boots speak in a language I cannot recognise, to a woman who leant up to kiss his cheek as tenderly as a child.

I have seen an old woman walk through a village with a sheep leaping at her side linked to her hand by a piece of string. I have seen a child in a doorway, a goat asleep at her feet as she spun the narrow wool from its back.

I have tried to distract my restless mind by eating fresh tomatoes. I eat them like apples and they taste as delicious as the sun and the air.

I have watched a gypsy family sing a vicious beautiful song. I have no access to those

words, but I understood their sentiment with a fluency that surprised me.

I have heard incantations to ward off profanity and sinfulness. I have heard shepherds recite poetry beneath cypress trees. I have tasted oil squeezed from the small hard berries of the olive tree.

Everything Exists Only Once

In a market Sir Toby calls to me Will you look at this, Isaac.
Busy as I am examining pots, I am obedient to his summons.
He is examining a fossil at a stall. A long-dead insect curled into stone, permanently asleep.

It is worn out, plain and beautiful.
Do you like it, Isaac?
I do, Sir Toby. Very much. Do you?
It is terribly overpriced. But I have not seen one like it before.
Will you buy it, then?
He thinks, strokes it with a large finger, mops his brow.
No, Isaac, I do not think I will. There will be others to buy, similar to this one, but less expensive, I am sure of it.

The fossil is the price of modest ale in London.
The seller begins to yell, no no no. You are wrong. None cheaper, none cheaper.
Sir Toby hands him back his relic and we walk on, attempting to ignore the man's irate cries.

Sir Toby puts on his moral face.
Perhaps I should have bought it, Isaac. But I do not like to support these thieves.
Thieves, Sir Toby?
Yes, Isaac, thieves. He was a thief. It was obvious. His eyes.
I think about the fossil but do not tell Sir Toby that he should have bought it.
Everything exists only once. He will never find another one like it.

Looking Becomes Lines

This is a seductive country. It facilitates desires to drowse in the afternoon and wake and eat and then wander the streets until the early morning. Its climate encourages nocturnal activities.

I have become drunk on retsina, and sucked the harsh smoke of their cigarettes deeply and gratefully into my lungs.

I have felt the heat from kitchens cooking food I cannot name. I do not recognise their smells. They are mostly delicious and make me lightheaded with hunger, even when I have recently eaten.

(Sir Toby speaks with wistful longing of Roast Dinners.)

I have tried to read the signs around me but cannot. This Greek script dances and leaps about the page. It blocks my passage to comprehension. It insists that this place and these people will continue to remain enigmatic to me. I am dependent on translation, which makes me feel somewhat detached, as if I were hearing and looking at the world through a thin muslin cloth.

I have seen Sir Toby' face swell with the effort of bargaining for a carpet.
I have tried to make my watercolours echo with the sounds of the port.
I have painted endless windows, and the faces that look and in and out of them.

I have attempted to draw connections between the air and the earth.

The blue doorways are wonderfully cheerful, and the villages look like polished white rocks that have been miraculously stained by the colour of the sky.

Greece is a luminous bone, an infinitely fascinating graveyard. The longer I spend here, trying to fathom its complexities, the more it laughs at me for my seriousness, and chides me for my lack of application. But I have only had twenty-five years on this planet, I say in my defence. You have had more than two thousand.

Greece has made me feel as if I know nothing. As if I were born in a new place. As if my family are frauds and the ghosts whose language I cannot speak or understand are my real kin. I feel my lies so deeply embedded inside me, I do not know where or how to begin to extract them. These are the lies we are given at birth. About God. About knowing the truth despite evidence to the contrary. About feeling a connection to an idea that is truthful, namely the idea of cleansing.

I do not know what I mean by this. But I have an urge to clean something, someone, I do not know. I dream of the Magdalene washing Christ's feet. I think of the filth that stained Lucifer's hooves.

I look down and think of how far these boots of mine have travelled since my departure from England.

Cleansing. The word bounces inside me like a child's toy. Like a spinning top. Like the refrain in a song.

Bathing

Shall we bathe, Sir Toby? The water looks inviting.

We have been following dusty paths across rocky fields, looking at ruins.

The sea is even older than the most ancient crumbling temple but so shiny it looks new born.

Sir Toby's face is very red and hot, despite the fresh breeze. He looks about. There is no one in sight.

I would like to be naked here, beneath such a sky.

Why not, Isaac. There is no one here.

We walk to the beach and take our clothes off, careful not to look at one another.

Then we are in the water.

It is cool and clear like glass.

The water wakes us up.

We both draw our breath in and then breathe out noisily.

The sky is curved and blue and does not move.

Everything is silent.

We walk into the water until it covers our chests.

I put my head beneath it and am baptised.

I have been immersed in ancient waters.

Gods swam here once.

We are clean now, if only momentarily.

Sir Toby sighs with pleasure and holds his face up to the heavens and closes his eyes.

Mine have been opened so wide the light burns into them.

The Sea that Surrounds Greece

The sea is absurdly blue, a transparent, seductive place that is unlike any place I have ever seen. It is possible to watch an octopus converse with a mullet 20 feet below and to see the irritation in their eyes at the interruption of a boat.

Octopi are a delicacy here. The fishermen stand in a row and bash the poor creatures repeatedly until they have broken every muscle in their bodies. This violence apparently makes their meat very tender. The men chat together and smoke, while their arms flail up and down with indifferent, murderous intent.

But then I have also seen a fisherman cradle a dying fish, and observed children dive deep into the blue and emerge with silver shells.

I have walked in the dim corridors of monasteries built from cliffs, risen from the sea.

I have seen islands appear from the faint, misted horizon, where the day before nothing existed but water. Even Sir Toby has commented on this phenomenon. Land would seem to exist at whim in this singular country.

Such miracles make me reflect on the solid earth that gave birth to me, the predictable hills and sodden skies of Chatham. I have wondered if Chatham wasn't as equally magical as Greece, only more secretive in the manifestation of its magic. It never, after all, was ruled by such a confident god as Zeus. I have wondered if landscapes can know one another, if they ever meet, and possibly converse in a common language, in another realm. I have tried to convey this thought to Sir Toby, who, in his infinite simplicity, called me a fanciful artist to ask such questions. This, I tried to tell him, has no bearing on art whatsoever, but he would not listen. He would prefer not to have his experience of reality, which is what is really at stake, even slightly stirred.

The Parthenon

I have never seen marble breathe so violently in its death throes as I have in Athens. The Parthenon was sad enough to weep at, so empty of Gods it echoed with their absence as we walked up its steps. (Where do the Gods go when they die? Who buries the last dead God?) The steps are lined with thin grooves.

An old woman approached me as I was examining them.

She was so stooped that to look at the ground was her natural posture. Without further ado, and without asking me if I wished to know, she told me that these thin lines were carved into the stone to ease the passage of animals up to the heights of the temple for sacrifice. The grooves were there so their little hooves would not slip.

This made me feel very sad. Sir Toby noticed my sadness and chided me.

Isaac you are too sentimental. Why, in England we slaughter beasts every day. You are happy to eat their flesh.

He is right. It is astonishing that I have never thought about the thoughts of the animals I eat. I could weep at my lack of compassion, which is only indicative of an even greater, widespread lack. We are a cruel culture, perhaps even crueller than the ancients, because we do not call our cruelty its real name. We disguise the slaughter of our animals under the rubric of normalcy and need, and delight in accusing less hypocritical countries than our own of barbarism.

Rhodes

The steamer will not arrive and so we are stranded here, but it is less of an imprisonment than a stroke of luck. Sir Toby leaves me alone to sketch and as a result I have achieved more

in a few days here than I have in weeks on the road.

Being reunited with my pencil has returned normalcy to my hands.

I did not realise how restless they had become.

The sun penetrates everything here, even when it is not hot.

The Gulf of Corinth

There are lost things in the water I cannot find. Jewels perhaps or lives even. Glances flung from the decks of anonymous boats, or handkerchiefs, or grapes. I believe I saw a small mirror drifting quietly beneath the surface of the sea, but it sank before I could be sure of what I had seen.

It is all I can do to lean as far as I can over the rail to peer even further. In every wave a picture hides from me, but none I can mention or describe to my companion. The reasons for my reticence are manifold. Some of the objects I witness are indescribable, on account of their beauty. Others are too cruel for my imagination to accommodate. Some I would prefer not to believe are possible. Others, I must be honest, most, in fact, I do not have the vocabulary for.

How is it possible to communicate thoughts that have not been shaped into an appropriate language?

This secrecy in me is beginning to tire even myself, and I would not persist if it were not necessary. But we are on our way to Delphi, and there lies are sure to be revealed. So I must keep quiet until we arrive.

I am anxious only on one count. I do not remember if withholding information constitutes lying.

But we will soon drink the inspiring waters of the Castalian Fountain.

Delphi

Alas! Although I have never been here before, I know for a fact this place is so changed as to be almost unrecognisable. Where formerly priestesses ranted and raved about the oracle of the deity, spilling their wisdom about as casually as water, now angry washerwomen scream an intolerable level of abuse at each other. These sacred waters, once deemed full of inspiration, are now thick and full and uninspired, inhabited by frogs and watercress; indeed any goddess who decided to live here today, indeed might be forced to sell herself in order to survive.

We walk the ruins, and again and again our footsteps echo with absence. The vanishing of past meanings, the lack of any replacement. The absence of any feeling between Sir Toby and myself, and between Sir Toby and I and the local people, who see us only as types. I see them look at us convinced we are the same. It is enough to make me gag, to have myself associated with such a man. I attempt to distance myself from him, but cannot. His presence, even when he is not beside me, clings to me like a stain.

Delphi is the site of a vanquished army, a sad place of ruins. And not only the ruins of buildings, but the ruins of hope. Religion has floated to the surface of this place and become a thing, not a spirit. Nothing will flourish here again. This is a rancid place.

Fictions

We have left Europe behind, and, for me, it was a sweet, if harrowing, departure.

The strangeness of travel is something I wish to embrace. I do believe I have to dive as deeply into its dislocation with the exuberance of the children we witnessed in Greece diving for sponges. Europe is a word I knew once, but now, it must be left behind, if I am to

understand it accurately. I have often understood a painting more profoundly when I have not seen it for a while, as if leaving its colours behind allowed me to feel its content all the more keenly.

We are now in Africa, and, without a moment's rest, we have looked at stories carved into walls.

Sir Toby did not realise their lack of fiction. For him they are exotic things, devoid of a life outside the sphere of the guidebook, the sketch book, the adventurer's tale. He does not realise they are not stories.

Time, I have discovered, is not a series of discreet rooms.

It is built by an invisible architect, who often makes his walls from water.

I wonder at Sir Toby's growing distrust of me, which he would be the first to deny.

Have I become so transparent that he can sense my indifference to him? Has he become so visually literate that the layer of skin that enfolds me has begun to reveal how thin a covering it is?

In the dark, my hands fly about and fill the void that surrounds me with line and then my still hands tremble on the counterpane. I feel the dilation of my pupils, the absorption rate of my eyes, denied their illumination.

I am no longer in a place that I recognise.

[To be continued PORTAL Vol. 2, No. 1 January 2005]