The Willow Pattern Bridge: A novel and a critical study of three contemporary British historical novelists.

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PhD Creative Writing
Declaration of Authorship

I Adam O’Riordan hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

Signed:

Date: 26 May 2017
Abstract

The thesis consists of a novel (The Willow Pattern Bridge) and a critical study of historical novels by three contemporary British novelists; Alan Hollinghurst (b.1954), William Boyd (b. 1952) and Adam Foulds (b.1974).

The novel, The Willow Pattern Bridge, is work of historical fiction set in Manchester in 1890s and tells the story of a young family who travel together to America to begin a new life. It is concerned with the transmission of identity and the experience of industrialised space.

The critical part of the thesis explores the writing of historical fiction by three contemporary British novelists. It consists of three chapters. The first chapter looks at the uses of objects in the work of the three writers as a way of negotiating the pastness of the past. The use of objects in these historical novels is explored by reference to focalisation, defamiliarisation and improvisation across the work of the three. The focus of the chapter is different uses of objects in constructing the past in contemporary fiction.

The second chapter examines the use of space in the work of the same three novelists. The focus of the chapter is how the idea of the garden and the larger landscape figures and recurs in the work of each and plays a role in constructing the identity of their characters. The third chapter examines some of the issues around the use of speech in recreating the past in historical fiction. These issues are explored across the work of the same three novelists. The conclusion looks at the way these three novelists have influenced the construction of the past in my own novel, with particular focus on the aspects examined in the preceeding three chapters.
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I.

Manchester, England 1890
It starts with the girl on fire on the staircase. Before the flames take hold in the folds of her gown she walks out from the small room where she has been dressing. Perched on the sleigh-shaped bed she rolled her stockings over the fine, pale hairs of her calves, impatient for the long-awaited hour to arrive. The gown flows over the polished landing like the river Mersey twisting between its muddy banks a mile away on this moonless night. A string of pearls glows below the lacework at her neck, white as berries on the Chinese rowan she has often admired when out walking in the ornamental gardens. There is an open door at the end of the landing, a breeze comes through a casement which is propped open by a paperweight. An oil lamp on its brass pillar burns on the writing desk, a low flame dying in its etched-glass funnel.

Perhaps, she thinks, he was in there earlier, bent over some Latin fragments from his father’s library, before he was called away by his mother to attend to his duties at the party. She sees the rain lashing down outside, the tiny droplets exploding against the glass, bubbling over the lip of the windowsill to the floor where they darken the red clay colours of the Persian carpet. Nothing tonight is immune from the force of the wind; blowing in off the Cheshire plain, across the city over smoke stacks and canals. Raw against the faces of the Irish huddled in the cellars of their quarter by the river Medlock, where the nearby churchyard holds forty thousand paupers: the dead who fled the famine for the city, whose bones the earth pushes to the surface. Deep into Manchester, the wind finds the watchmen by their glowing braziers, skims the froth off millponds stagnant at the flanks of factories. Even here, in this hushed suburb of brick villas a few miles to the south of the city - grown fashionable since the arrival of the railway—the wind has in its power the twisted limb of an oak. It
waves from the blue darkness outside, as if signaling her to stop. At the head of the stairs the girl pauses. Her hand rests for a moment on the newel post. She touches the turned globe softly, as if it were the head of a newborn child. She thinks of the night of her brother’s birth. Her mother’s flushed face, feet wide apart, squatting on the stone floor. Then her brother, wrapped in flannel and placed in the cradle in a corner of the cottage so the light might not damage his eyes. Now as she stands at the head of the staircase, she breathes in deeply the rain-cooled air. It cuts through the heat and noise, the fag of tobacco smoke rising from the party below. It seems to dull her heart, and calm the fluttering that grew as she dressed, the blood beating in her ears. She feels queasy, as if her insides have been knitted together. She remembers her father out in the yard in his leather apron sticking a sow hung by its hind legs on a scaffold. Bound trotters jerking as the blade pierced the pink skin at its throat. The first spurts of blood blackening as it pooled with thick lumps on the cobbles. The brown bristles on her father’s forearms. The sickening feeling as he called her to stir the blood in the copper cauldron to stop it from fixing solid.

Steadying herself before the descent, she enjoys for a second the smell of her clean skin, the fragrance from the scented fan she holds. She hears the murmur of the assembled guests, that strange sound, that animal chorus, the unfamiliar noise of the human herd. The daughters of local merchants and the few favoured clerks, shifting uncomfortably in their finery, suits worn on Whitsun or at wakes, borrowed for the occasion from cousins. Some have dark silks tied in knots at their throats, bulging uncomfortably below their collars. Others wear drab tan and grey wool plaid. They look up, away from their conversations, and see her there on the staircase. The girl who arrived four months ago, a helpmeet to instruct the daughters of the house in music and needlework until a new governess could be appointed. Little is known
about this new girl, the one who is now to marry the only son and heir to the family’s seven storey mill with its eighty thousand mule spindles and three hundred carding machines - the thousands of tons of finished goods exported annually from the city, rolled out across the Empire on rails and covered wagons, that has grown the family’s wealth for two generations now. The guests invited here this evening to celebrate the betrothal of the young couple. Rumour has it Charles has been advised to delay his return to Cambridge; that he can be glimpsed behind the stained glass of the drawing room, a willowy, long-limbed boy toying with objects from his father’s collections; contemplating the skeleton of a songbird or some azure-winged butterfly unpinned from its case and held up to the grey light outside. Others say that he has grown degenerate and can be found most nights in the chop houses and the taverns on the north side of the city. But these are only rumours.

The ladies below fix their stares at her waist, the stitching at her overskirts, scanning for a sign that other rumours also are true. They pick her apart with their gazes. She senses they would unclothe her if they could, strip her down to her bones, weigh the residue for what remains, search out the impurities in her soul. So now it is time to offer them her smile. The smile she has rehearsed each morning for a week, since she learned there would be a celebration; practised from the head of the stair down onto an empty household or coyly over the gazes of maids as they carried the silver salvers steaming with kippers and dun-coloured kidneys to the table for breakfast. Before she experimented with the smile in the open she worked on it for hours in her oval looking-glass. Sitting on a small stool, running the brush through her hair, its faded tortoiseshell handle warming at her touch. Alone in front of the looking glass, silver flaking from its mildewed back, she would tighten, then loosen her lips and as if attempting to calibrate some infinitely subtle piece of machinery.
The ripples and the puckering, the split at their centre, from a freezing winter walking the hides by mule and lantern light over Chapel Ridge with her father, never fully healed. Singled out from her sister for the work of the son the good Lord blessed them with, but which he was too sickly ever to perform. She likes her full mouth, her lips, pink at their outer edges, reddening and swelling towards her teeth. She has good teeth, all there, and strong. *They had hair as the hair of women, and their teeth were as the teeth of lions*, her father would say looking down at his girls on the rag rug by the fireside, amber and topaz light flickering across his face and the tops of their heads. She smiles down to the crowd now, turning her face to her favoured side. The huge shadow of her profile is thrown onto the damask flock that papers the wall.

The quartet of German émigrés in a corner of the hallway play a piece by Dvorak sent over by friends in Bremen last winter. In the warm room among the music and the chatter of the guests, the men overheating in their dark suits, stand the recent arrivals, still wet from the rain, fine steam rising from their garments. The rain is falling harder now: blowing sideways, crossways, in swirls and loops that turn on themselves, falling hard against the windows of the house. The rain is louder than the music and the guests raise their voices. Because of this she does not hear the pucker of the flames as they take in the trailing layers of her dress. As she turns from the landing to the stairs her gown has swept across a taper for lighting the gas lamps on the upper floors, left and forgotten by Dolly as she hurried to help her with her dress. As she pauses at the head of the stairs, in one of the gown’s cavernous folds the taper, floating in a pool of wax, has found enough space and air to burn on in the darkness. As she begins her descent the flames rise at her back in thickening tongues, the fire thirsty for growth.
For a moment she thinks she sees the orange light falling on the moor’s edge at sundown, the light she would see walking the three miles home with her sister from the village school, tired after a day scratching the alphabet on slates in the school room that was once a piggery before the reforming folk from the city came and declared it a free school for the poor. Her father claimed they would have had a better chance educating the swine that once rooted and defecated in that stone room. The orange light on the edge of the moor comes back to her now. Still she is elegant, composed and unaware of the fire trailing in her wake. She searches for Charles, down there among the guests; the familiar elements that distinguish his face: his wide mouth, those large, hazel, slightly hooded eyes, his fine nose, somewhere among the gazes of the doctors and men of industry invited this evening. There is a thin crackle of applause from those who have not seen the flames but simply registered the shape on the stairs as the one remaining guest still to the join the party. She watches but does not comprehend the change in the faces below. Mr Whenlock, fleshy jowls sunken below his jaw-line, who she first encountered at supper when the Ship Canal Committee met to discuss the issue of subscriptions, the house hushed and serious as the members arrived, depositing their hats and coats with Dolly who bobbed a small reluctant curtsey to each in turn. Mr Vasserstein, the bleach trader, who purchased the neighbouring villa at auction the week she arrived, bent like a question mark, clutching his ear trumpet. He squints up towards her as if he is trying to make out a figure in the distance.

Now she is the focus of the entire room. She had desired to make an impression but would never have dared dream of this. In her hours before the looking glass in her wilder imaginings she had heard faint whistles, cries of ‘bellissima’ and
‘meravigliosa’ as she has heard they call out at the opera in Florence. She had imagined being showered in a soft confetti of praise as she moved among the guests, rewarding each with her perfected smile, a blush, a turn of the head. She would be taken instantly to their hearts. Gossiped about in coaches, in parlours and bed-chambers as the ladies removed their ropes of pearls and lengths of pinchbeck chain; talk loud enough to be overheard by the servants. The newly minted gossip glowing in their possession, passed quickly, like a currency whose value wavers, to friends before it cooled into mere fact. Her reputation rippling back from all the great addresses of the city to her home village, where right now the last of the lights would be extinguished and the occupants taking to their beds. How on hearing the news her father might be driven to blaspheme as he gripped his fleshing knife, its dead-weight, concave blade shaving hairs from a hide that lay stretched across the beam set between his knees, lifting deposits of salt, fat and dirt from the animal skin. And how her mother would be moved to secret tears at her daughter’s elevation in the world, thinking of her as she walked to the wood store or to toss scraps to the dog, the line of its ribs visible through its fur, tethered by a rope to the roots of the tree that had fallen when she was a girl and had never been cleared. How the guests who had met her before tonight would talk of her metamorphosis. Her flowering. Like Esther who became Queen of Persia. Esther who the bible says obtained favour in the eyes of all who saw her. But something is not right.

The fans of the ladies in the room rise like the wings of roosting birds whose coop has been disturbed. As if the wind that now thrashes outside were a predator that came for them. They cover their mouths with their open fans, gloved hands reaching for their husband’s arms. The violinists, Herr Tannenbaum and Herr Vetter,
exchange glances mid-arpeggio, and determining their duty is to the crowd, nod firmly to young Mr Liberskind who recently joined them on third fiddle and Frau Smithem at her cello, who continue to play. She feels warm at first as if submerged in a freshly drawn bath. Still luxuriating in that well-attended hour before the guests had begun to arrive, Dolly sluicing jugs of water from the geyser into the copper tub as she soaped her skin. Only an hour’s journey by coach to the village where her mother and father live, but a lifetime from the pail of water, hand-pumped from the well in the yard, that she would share with her sister on mornings through winter and summer, its surface reflecting the few stars that lingered in that first hour of daylight. Looking down at her limbs magnified and distorted through the water’s lens, the veins in her white thighs, the growing curve where her belly gave to her crotch. From the bathtub she had gazed across the room at her dress hanging by the window, watching the light catch its hundreds of tiny beads as she tried, idly, to calculate the hours of work it had demanded in the department store workroom of the calloused fingers of seamstresses in London, their eyes dimming in the service of her gown. The gown ordered from London. London, the luxurious word dropping from her tongue like a warm coin into a penny slot. The finished garment placed carefully in a box on layers of crisp tissue and tied with ribbon. Surely a sign she had been accepted as a member of the family.

Four steps down the flight of stairs she stops. The heat that was a vague sensation before is less tolerable now. She pats at her back, as if reassuring herself, as if ostentatiously commending some act of kindness or pure thought. She will use her smile again she thinks. But the guests have become quiet and are staring, like the great crowd in the Book of Revelation her father was often moved to speak on. She
begins to worry. She tries to remember each stage of her toilet and dressing. She is
gripped by the nauseating fear that what she is wearing may be deemed ill-fitting or
inappropriate. That some new rule of fashion recently arrived in the city from
London has been flouted or, worse, she suspects a trick has been played by Dolly as
she helped her dress. She remembers standing within the webbing of the bustle, the
dress as it was hoisted and lowered down onto her. The lattice-work with its curved
steels, its boned and laced cage made her feel part woman, part delicate machine,
like a walking loom. She had imagined as she stood there that this was the skeleton
of some fantastical animal, the bones of the great whale she had seen hanging in the
university museum. That she would meld and fuse with it. She would be born again
to meet the world, whose habitat would be society, that blessed word that meant
people together celebrating things beyond the size of their flock or the summer’s
yield from their fields. People gathered for things other than prayer. Praising others
than their saviour. Could she not dream? First Manchester, then London, or Paris or
Rome, one day, should luck be on her side. The acrid smell reaches her. She cannot
place it at first. Is it the latrine behind her father’s cottage, or the tannery where she
would be sent with his lunch wrapped in oilcloth and a slop of milk from the
Shorthorn? ‘Pray with me, child,’ her father would ask when she was sent, dropping
to his knees on the tannery floor. It’s tar and smoke and soot and spittle, a grotesque
incense wholly out of place at such a gathering. No, it comes clear now, it is the
unmistakable stench of burning hair. Now she remembers certain images from
childhood, how her sister once bid her snip a lock of hair and burn it in a tin dish to
keep the devil from their door. How her mother caught her and scolded Lottie but not
her sister. How her mother pronounced her bedevilled, her story a confected affront
to their God and to her poor sister and how such deceit needed to be beaten from her.
Her father, his face in shadow, looming with his belt beneath the wooden crucifix that hung at the doorway, slowly wrapping the punctured leather around his fist, and her sister saying nothing. Not a word, not even when she heard the crack of the leather against her skin, her weeping from the other room, father quoting the Book of Revelation as he brought the belt down across her bare buttocks.

The fire is suddenly everywhere. She looks down at the crowd, the light of the flames glowing on their faces. The music has come to a halt. The musicians stare up at her, their lacquered instruments muted at their shoulders. Frau Smithem is hugging her cello, as if it were a lost child who has been returned after hours away. The guests look to each other for some indication of whose place it is to act. The Great Crowd. The Great Fish. The Whale. A Walking Loom. The words come to her. They muddle in her mind and make no sense.

She feels faint. From the stairs the guests seem a tableau-vivant, an entertainment commissioned by the rich who, she has read, pay to have reconstructed for them great works of art. Before she feels the fire burn at her back, its weightless, dangerous, quick-moving presence, her scrubbed skin bubble and blister, before she falls down the final flight of the staircase, she sees outside herself, a vision. Not like the visions in the Bible or those of the cousins who were sent a sign of the impending rapture and burned down their building and threshing boards and shot their livestock in preparation, only for it not to come to pass. In her vision she sees herself. There she has flames for hair. She is Venus emerging from her shell, the Venus she saw in the reproduction Charles brought up from Cambridge and showed to her the afternoon they kissed. His dry lips, the slight, insistent pressure of his mouth against hers for the first time. But the recent past is slipping from her now. Now all is fire. In
her vision she stands resplendent, naked on the staircase. It pleases her to be Venus.

She sees herself, sees the flames. Then she begins to scream.
A slanted pillar of light was striking the long-case clock in the hallway. Dust motes, amber and ash-white, revolving slowly through the wide beam. Charles Wright looked up from the breakfast table as the minute hand fell a quarter-inch on the clock face. He should have seen her by now, he thought. She must be up and about somewhere about the house. He had already idled over breakfast longer than was necessary, the tails of his brace of kippers hardening on his plate, the thin bones fine as human hair. Twice he had sent the girl from the kitchen away when she came to clear. He looked down at the newspaper: Rhodes had reached Lundi and raised the Union Jack. The news was accompanied by a long report of his attack on Motloutsi at Matabeleland. Charles imagined the piles of fly-blown black bodies festering in the sun. Folding the newspaper he glanced at an article on how England’s cricketers might fare in the second test at the Oval in ten days time. Grace still smarting from the golden duck, the big druidic Englishman caught and bowled by the Australian Turner. Pushing the paper away Charles began to drum his nails on the tabletop. He ran the tip of his tongue over the smooth backs of the teeth of his lower jaw until he found the familiar rough patch, making tiny circles against sharp sides of the cavity. Yes, he should have seen her by now. Where was she? He stopped abruptly and rose to his feet, smoothing his trousers with the flat of his hands. He dabbed the corners of his mouth with his napkin then tossed it over his plate, over the metallic sheen on the tent of crumpled fish skin, over the baked, opaque eyes.

In the hallway Charles paused by the long-case clock as it released a brief flutter of chimes to mark the quarter hour. He checked his watch, a gift from his father on
going up to Cambridge two years ago. It had been losing time and he gave the stem a
sharp twist then snapped the case closed and slid it back into his pocket. If she was
not going to present herself then he would make it his business to find her. There was
no need to rush or to betray his intentions, he might simply be going to take up his
work in his father’s study as he had done each day this past week. This fortuitous
week, the two of them alone in the house, save for Cook who never travelled and the
girl she had called in from the village to help her, with the scar of a badly healed
hare-lip, the surface glossy and livid, whose name Charles had yet to learn. The
family gone to the house by the lake in Westmorland, his mother deciding Lottie was
too ill to travel, fearing his sisters, Tabitha and Eloise, might catch her cold if they
were confined together sharing the same stale air of the cab or the train for too long.
Insisting Lottie rest and she would send for her when needed. Charles recalled the
commotion as they left, his sisters each sent to their rooms to unpack all the
unnecessary items they had felt sure would be necessary for their six weeks in the
country. He made his way up the staircase, past the pink damask flock with which
his mother recently ordered the wall repapered; the painted family of quail in the
frame with the egg and dart border, feathers and blown glass beads for eyes and
beaks; the pair of murky mountain landscapes, turbid puddle-muddy colours in thick
gilt frames, blurred figures in bright dresses by a lake in the foreground. He stood for
a moment on the landing at the first turn in the stair. He could hear the girl from the
kitchen clearing his plates from the table, stacking them noisily, a fork scratching the
china as she scraped fish bones into the wooden pail she had carried through,
thinking herself out of earshot. He heard her call to Cook in her breathy, fleshy way,
something perhaps to do with how her lip had healed:
‘Do all these want clearing?’
Then a muffled reply from the kitchen, too dull to make out, and more clattering of plates.

On the top floor of the house the narrow corridor was covered by a threadbare runner the colour of a pinkish cut of cooked meat. Lottie’s room was at the far end past the servants’ quarters with sloping ceilings and space for a single bed and a washstand. As Charles drew closer he noticed her door was open. On the dressing table was closed box covered in seashells: cockles and three broad bay scallops across the lid. A hairbrush, upturned, a nest of dull, combed-out hair wound around its outer bristles. He could feel the thump of his heart, a fist clenching and unclenching behind his ribs. He gave the corners of his waistcoat a tug. His gaze moved from the dresser to the mirror above it in which her bed was reflected. The pillows perfectly straight, the sheet folded back on itself. There was a faint indentation running the length of the bed. Charles closed his eyes and breathed in the scent he recognized as hers. Nothing heavy or complex, nothing like the fragrances his mother wore with their base notes of opoponax and vanilla, grandiflorum and sambac at their heavy hearts. This was lighter, simple, hardly a scent at all and less than anything his mother might recognize or wear. It was something proximate - Charles had thought about this a great deal - to the odour that clings to a posy of cut lavender you might find lining a draw, the slightest sour edge, fouling it faintly but endowing it with something human: the smell of clean skin mingled with the warm interior of these high rooms. Leaning in, but careful not to cross the threshold, Charles decided the room was empty. Perhaps he would find her downstairs in the drawing room, at the piano. Of course, the piano. He turned smartly on his heels and was met by a gladiator standing astride a lion. His mother bought the bronze last year but quickly wearied of it and exiled to the top of the house. The gladiator’s arm was
raised, Charles supposed to signal victory. He traced his finger inside the smooth curved arm then patted the gladiator on his head and made his way down stairs.

The drawing room was empty, if so over-furnished a room could ever be described as such. From the windows at the front three long, loosely-wavering oblongs of light poured over a pair of Persian carpets, each the size of a mill worker’s yard. Intricately woven, rusts and reds cut through with cobalt blues and flashes of jade. On the mantelpiece the preserved bodies of four blowfish, leather skinned, dark eyes ringed in white, sat on top of their fine steel spikes. Beside them a series of crumbling caramel and truffle coloured ammonites on wooden stands, a miniature mineral chest, a tiny brass armillary sphere. Behind them, out of sight to the uninformed eye, running the length of the mantelpiece the sun-bleached salt-white whale bacalum his father would bring out for the amusement of male guests after supper, making them guess the objects function. Competing for attention with these objects were Charles’ mother’s touches: the rugs, the jasper spheres, then boldest of all, so that it came to dominate the room the Bremond music box with its rosewood veneer and fat cylinder which when turned against the machine-made metal comb emitted a blurred and watery rendition of The Blue Danube. In this room, when he arrived back from Cambridge a month ago, Charles first began to notice Lottie. Bending to his sisters’ questions; her hands over theirs when she asked them to repeat a phrase at the piano with its ornately carved case until the clear notes sang through the house. He might have recorded her species and genus in his notebook, like the good naturalist he thought himself to be, so dispassionate was the story he gave their first encounters. And what would he have noted on the pages of his calf-skin pocket book with its brass clip, convinced as he was that his interest was simply rational, simply aesthetic? Freckles, first, a single spray reaching from cheek
to cheek via the fine boned bridge of her nose, colours of honey or weak tea. Eyes, a
fraction larger than most, shillings, say, to his mothers and his sister’s farthings. The
deep green of a fern in a glass mossery but with prominent flecks of amber,
disorderly, thrown around the drop of black ink that formed her pupil. Lashes,
copiously thick and dark across the upper lid, thinner, sparse almost on the lower.
Her bosom, or rather her blouse fastened tightly against it. Large, full buttocks, waist
nipped in, here as one since boyhood inclined more to the sciences, his language
might have let him down. Charles stood for a moment in the patch of light by the
piano feeling the warmth of the sun through his trouser leg. There was a small,
perfectly square book, *Jungennamen’s Preparatory Exercises for the Piano Forte*, on
the rosewood stand. Behind it rectangular sheets of music, speckled with a little
foxing, the sheets annotated faintly at their edge in pencil. Charles turned the pages,
trying to decipher a bar or two, humming the notes but he could not fathom them and
gave up. With his front teeth he tore a thin layer of dried skin from his bottom lip,
leaving the exposed section red and raw for a moment. He would try the garden, by
way of the kitchen in case Lottie had gone to talk with Cook.

In the corridor that connected the kitchen to the house he was met by the soft
presence of the warmer air, the sour smell of burned fat and baking bread. The
kitchen felt perpetually subterranean, dark even in the brightest daylight, the big
range squatting at the far wall, heavy as a penned bull in a stockyard. The shining
coals at its centre glowing like tangerine peel in the places they touched. A row of
polished brass pans along the shelf above the range, others on hooks. In the middle
of the kitchen, on the stone floor, a wide scrubbed-pine table, stained and pitted in
places in preparation of years of breakfasts and lunches and dinners. Pulled out at
one end of the table a ladder-backed chair, the rush weave sprung loose. As Charles
entered Cook emerged from the cold store. Her hay coloured hair plastered under a white cap, her weak jaw giving into itself like a badly set blancmange. She was carrying a glass rolling pin and nodded at Charles, then ignoring him she set to work at the table in the middle of the kitchen, tossing out a cloud of flour from the gauze of a conical sieve. Charles watched as she pulled a damp cloth from a mixing bowl, reached in and removed a pallid lump of dough. She slammed it on the table and began to knead; first with her fists and then with the undersides of her liver-spotted forearms. Charles saw the kitchen’s cat rubbing itself around her calves, dragging its smooth black fur between her legs as she worked. She pushed the cat away with her shin. It staggered sideways on the stone floor, looking up at her with yellow eyes until it turned, tail raised, and made towards the door to the garden. Charles followed. It looked up at him and let out a dry, constricted meow, a retch of air, from somewhere in the back of its mouth.

‘Want to go outside do you? Very well then…’ Charles said twisting the doorknob as the black cat poured itself through the gap.

The garden was bright after the gloom of the kitchen and Charles stood blinking, waiting for the world to take shape, to translate itself back from the light into some recognisable form. First he saw the row of evenly spaced poplars swaying at the far end of the garden, then the bright beds of snapdragons and night scented stock planted in magenta and salmon pink, finally the wide lawn drained of colour for a second, then brightly present. When the vision came clear Charles saw Lottie sitting at a folding wooden butler’s table in the centre of the lawn. He had seen her use the table with his sisters for lessons earlier in the summer. She was wearing a white lace dress, with a high neck and fine fluted ruffles at the shoulders. She was hatless, her hair held in place by pins. She was supporting her head on one arm, bent towards her
book, the other arm hanging at her side. Her straw hat lay upturned on its crown by her feet. Charles turned and inspected himself in the glass of the kitchen window. Presentable he thought, perhaps the check of his trousers was a little too loud and clearly bought at Pauldens on Cavendish Street and not in the capital. Still his shirt, which was from London, was neatly pressed and his waistcoat cut in a line he knew to be fashionable. He was hot in his jacket and so hung it over the door handle. Yes, he was presentable. Swallowing hard he crossed the lawn towards Lottie, steps measured and purposeful, hands clasped behind his back. When Charles reached her at the table he felt words come too quickly, spilling beyond his control:

‘Shall we, I mean to say, would you care to take a stroll?’

There was silence and he hoped she did not notice the slight crack, that reedy wavering in his voice, hoped he had managed to curve it into a mellifluence by the end of his invitation. He cleared his throat. Lottie looked up, shielding her eyes from the sun, her fingers and back of her hand bowed:

‘Charles?’

They strolled the first yards across the lawn, their footfall slightly exaggerated, as if pushing through a snow, not idling across a summer lawn. Past the great spreading ageratum with its crop of fuzzy powder-blue flowers, the neatly tended nasturtiums, blood-red, yolk-yellow, their heads jostling among cool green glossy leaves. On a flat rock a song thrush was smashing open a snail. The shell was broken, the slick, glittering insides being pecked at by the bird.

‘Turdus philomelos’ Charles said.

‘We called them throstles,’ Lottie replied the word thick and earthy in the back of her throat, then turning from the broken shell to Charles,

‘I suppose you know the name for everything don’t you?’
He felt a burning rising in his cheeks.

‘Mama bought me a book when I was a boy and Father offered me a not quite princely sum if I could learn a few. The song thrush stuck. Animalia, Chordata, Aves, Passeriformes, Turdidae, Turdus, Philomelos I suppose we have Linnaeus to...’

Charles saw he was losing her.

‘But thrrostles, I think, is a much better name. Have the girls shown you the wild garden yet?’

Lottie shook her head, a slow sweep of her chin from side to side. Charles felt his scrotum tighten.

Charles strode ahead now, the grass speckled and badged with yellow moss. At the far end of the lawn he paused beside a decrepit glasshouse. The paint on the ornate ironwork had begun to flake, the rusted insides showing through, several of the panes were smashed, the jagged trapezoids and trapeziums of old glass remained in place, discoloured, like broken ice on the surface on a pond. Grass, six inches high, flourished in the guttering.

‘Seem familiar?’ Charles asked resting against the hip-wall where the glass panels began. Lottie shook her head.

‘It was built to mirror the house. Well part of the house. That’s the story anyhow. Fallen into disuse somewhat’ he said, peering in at the grimy window at the piles of flowerpots stacked in bending columns, others smashed into jagged fragments on the floor. By the door to the glasshouse was a water butt made from an old barrel, wooden staves speckled with a slimy green moss, oak leaves floating on the surface. Charles slid himself between the back of the glasshouse and a broken section of wall.
‘Come through, come on’ he gestured scooping the air towards himself with a cupped hand ‘Oh come on!’ he said again laughing this time.

Lottie lifted the hem of her dress off the ground and followed. It was difficult to squeeze past the thickly knotted tangles of brambles. Some of the blackberries had begun to rot and harden on the branches but others still shone wet and bright black. Lottie worried about staining the lace trimmings on her underskirts. She imagined the fuss the cook, Mrs Simpkins, would make if she were to ask her later for a cloth or an extra flint of soap to get them clean. The gap in the wall by the glasshouse gave onto a clearing: some scrubby grass, a black circle from a recent bonfire, then running in a curve around it a dense thickets in front of which was the wide trunk of a felled tree. Charles stood on the stump as if spot-lit on a stage. His arms spread wide feigning glory in the wild garden. Behind him a clump of dry, waist-high weeds. His eyes were like his sister Eloise’s though his face shared the even neat proportions of Tabitha. He seemed easier and happier here in this strange nowhere place at the edge of the garden, not the serious young man Lottie had seen in the house. Charles picked up a bamboo cane and was hacking away at the tall weeds behind him, tiny seed heads exploding.

‘Anyway you can say you’ve seen it now.’ Charles said when he had finished massacring the weeds. ‘Only don’t tell my sisters I showed you’

They walked back to the wooden butlers table on the lawn. A tea-set from the nursery was laid out, the set Charles remembered his own nanny using. Resting his weight on his forearms, he looked across at Lottie as they talked.

‘And your family’ he asked ‘what was life before you came here?’

‘I had a talent for music’ Lottie said confidently though perhaps with too much force, ‘my schoolmaster recognised, he arranged for me to come to the city. I worked
in service for a pianist at the Halle in return for tuition. An hour’s lesson each Saturday.’ She paused and turned the cup on the table on front of her.

‘I was terribly lonely at first.’ she said, ‘He wasn’t given to conversation. But I would practice every day. I was at it so much,’ she said warming to her story ‘he put a blanket across the strings, there were complaints, you see, from the neighbours’ Charles pictured her alone in the man’s house, the movement of her fingers against the silenced keys, the airy click as the worn ivory rose and fell. He did not break from her stare. He raised his cup to his mouth, his finger too large to thread the child-size handle, a pink rose blooming on the porcelain, an oily sheen on the dark surface of the cold tea. Lottie looked away. She took a tiny sip from her own cup then placed it carefully on the saucer.

‘So why aren’t you with your family?’

‘I’m supposed to be travelling. To Engadine and the baths at St Moritz. But alas, I have been delayed’ he exhaled theatrically. Charles talked about his growing frustration at the delay, his travelling companion and school friend William Bird. As Charles talked, his hand moved towards Lottie, thrown out at first, conveying amusement at the story he was telling, until the tips of two fingers rested on the flesh below her thumb. Charles was aware of the outline of the girl from the kitchen carrying an armful of linen past the window at the back of the house. For a few seconds nothing was said, then a bee lurched out from behind a spear of tall blue larkspur at the edge of the lawn. Its fur duckling yellow, its shining boot-black legs drawn up tight to its body. The pair watched the bee as it zig-zagged toward them, first circling the table, then the tea-cups. Lottie narrowed her eyes, then tried to shoo it, awkwardly, unnaturally, using only her free hand, the hand Charles was not touching.
In this light the scar looked even more livid, purplish almost at its edges and puckered like the anus of a cat. Charles rebuked himself for the comparison. But he was certain now, as he looked at her lip, that it was connected to, indeed the cause of, her slurred speech. Those wet, open vowels, those plosives all air. He had read a treatise on oral deformities and tried to recall the details. The girl from the kitchen stood in front of him with an unopened envelope on a silver tray. Another improvisation, another disruption to the order of the house. She might simply have told him there was mail or handed him the letter, had she not after all walked past him to answer the front door? But after greeting the postman standing by his tricycle, she had returned letter in hand, past Charles to the kitchen where she had remained for some time. Now here she stood with a breakfast tray. Heaven knows where she had found it or why Cook had instructed her to deliver it like this, like some liveried footman at the court of a continental king.

Charles’ mind was on the Proceedings of the Academy of Natural Sciences. He had spent the morning gleaning its pages, amassing facts he might casually litter conversation with next term at the Natural Science Club where last year A.R. Wallace, ragged white beard and eyes tiny behind his spectacles, had inscribed his copy of his famous Malay book. Charles remembered how proud his father had been when he had presented him with the copy. But even as he worked Lottie had remained on his mind. He had seen her earlier as he sat in the armchair in the drawing room beside the piano where he reasoned she might gravitate as the day wore on. When she passed the doorway she held a bundle of folded clothes. She must be packing, Charles thought, which meant she would be leaving soon for
Westmorland. She must have received a communication from his mother summoning her. He had not wanted to enquire directly, feeling it might betray something, might leave him seeming needy or foolish, but sensed it would be tomorrow before she left. They hadn’t spoken a word since the afternoon in the garden two days ago now.

‘Thank you’ Charles said to the girl from the kitchen rising from the chair to take the letter. Ellen, he thought, he must remember to use her name next time.

‘Thank you Ellen,’ he said with a clumsy emphasis that made her pause, unsure if he were about to admonish her or ask her to perform some additional task. After a moment’s hesitation Ellen nodded to Charles, the glossy knot of her lip twitching. At Cambridge he had observed an electrical current passed through the leg of a frog on a dissection table and this spasm of the leg came back to him now.

Charles eased his little finger under the corner of the envelope and with a casual, fluid backhand tore open the flap. He felt the paper nick his skin and when he examined his hand a mite of blood welled up from the cut. When the repeated pressure and wetness of his tongue had numbed the tingling he raised the wound to the light. There was no more blood but the tiny tear in the skin seemed to glow. He still had the envelope pinched between his thumb and forefinger, and he paused to consider the pollen yellow stamp with Railway Postage in black lettering. He recognized the looping, inelegant hand in which his name and address were written. He took the letter and unfolding it certain words swam up at him. He quickly pieced together the puzzle of prominent words to approximate the letter’s message. He felt both a deflation and sense of justification at last having his suspicions confirmed.

There had been a silence for days now from Wim and they had already missed their planned date of departure for the continent. Charles learned that his friend William
Bird was returning early to Cambridge, an unforeseen condition of the exhibition he had been awarded. There would be no trip to the baths at St Moritz. No walking in Engadine among the alpine flowers and undulating grassland that they had sat in his cellar-cold rooms talking of earnestly all last term. However the letter assured Charles their trip was not cancelled, merely postponed. Wim had written to the owner of the guesthouse, a Madame Tornay, who promised them lodging, if they wished, for Easter. Wim would cover any expenses incurred in preparing for the trip. Charles knew this could not be true. How could it be as he had subsidised Wim all last term at the Kestral club after they were elected members.

‘We’ll be off now.’

Charles looked up. Cook and Ellen were standing a few feet away.

‘The band,’ Cook said.

Charles looked at them blankly.

‘The Temperance Band.’

‘Yes,’ Charles said without any real conviction.

‘Your mother said before she left it were fine for us to go.’

‘Of course, yes.’

‘We’ll be back for supper.’

Cook was wearing her own clothes, a heavy plaid skirt, a shirt creased on the arms and a stained blue silk bonnet tied under her chin. She looked younger. Charles had never seen her without her apron. Ellen stood beside, looking much the same as earlier save a tatty length of ribbon in her hair like something snagged in a hedgerow.

‘Well,’ Charles said trying to think of words to fill the widening silence, ‘I hope they acquit themselves creditably’ he gave a tight little smile then nodded to Ellen and then to Cook.
So this was to be his summer then. The society of Cook and Ellen, the bone dry proceedings of the Academy for stimulation. Or a train to Westmorland, engaged with his father in dull conversations about the new steam launch, pendulum rods and pitman arms, suppers with the dreadful neighbours, old Howells the gardener rackety and bent double calling to take the young master out to engage in a country pursuit, some ritualised mammalian killing, his sisters the unceasing Tabitha and Eloise who had recently elected him Authority on Everything, their own walking encyclopaedia to be consulted at all times, no matter too small to warrant their questioning. Or remain here in Manchester. Drinking at the Hare or the Turk’s Head with Caraway. Caraway pompous after two years in his father’s employment, perhaps a fitful correspondence with Bird. Charles looked up from the armchair to see Lottie collecting her music from the rosewood stand by the piano, the pages rolled and held in the crook of her arm. Standing by the piano, music in hand, light hitting the lower part of her skirts, hair parted in the middle, three inches of fringe falling curled at her forehead, a green brooch at the throat of the brown cotton day dress, the fern green of her eyes, she seemed to glow, as if the room had spawned her to perfect itself. He imagined the heaving warmth of her body under the dense soufflé of petticoats and felt desire for her sluice through him. Charles held out Wim’s letter blowing loudly through his lips.

‘You have a letter’

Charles looked up pretending not to have heard her.

‘I’m sorry?’

‘A letter. You have one I see.’

‘Ah, yes,’ he said gravely.

‘From your friend William Bird?’
‘Alas.’

‘And the news is not good?’

‘No, it is not,’ Charles paused

‘But a letter from Wim’ Charles said rallying, displaying for Lottie his indefatigable spirit ‘is never without its consolations, no matter how dire the news’

Charles had risen and was leaning on the mantelpiece where he lit a cigarette. He felt the rich smoke settle him. He exhaled onto the flame that consumed the match, ringing it with his wrist before tossing it, withered and glossy, into the hearth.

‘In my room there are more recent letters from Wim you are sure to find amusing. When Bird sets his mind to it,’ Charles said holding one of his father’s caramel-coloured ammonites to the light,

‘He can move his reader from tears to laughter as quickly as any stage comic with their stories of policemen or railway accidents.’

Charles studied her expression through the delicate skein of blue smoke from his cigarette.

‘You may see, also,’ he paused to send a stream of smoke through the narrowed aperture of his lips ‘how his signature had changed over the course of our correspondence, so that it now takes up a quarter of any letter’s final page, a remarkable extravagance when his frugality in all other matters is considered’

Charles smiled. He had built the trap and now he baited it.

‘ Perhaps I might show you some letters of his later?’

*

The lug worms had been found dead on the beach a few yards from the colony, ten miles to the north east of Cape May on the New Jersey Coast, ‘having perchance left their burrow in the endeavour to reach the water’. The essay built on work Charles
had seen by Stimpson. These were the cigar-shaped polychaete Charles had been charged with bettering his understanding of by his tutor Piggot-Roche. Slurry brown with a delicate green sheen, the colour of something a newly-born baby might expel. The afternoon had so far been spent working in his father’s study on his essay on Arenicola cristata and their allies: salinity, embryology, age, size and span of life. When he began to tire of the work Charles had sketched a lugworm in black ink in the margin of his notebook, and next to it the cigar the creature was said to resemble. He had looked down on the two doodlings, placing a cross beside the lugworm and tick by the cigar. ‘Piggot-Roche be damned’ he said as if it were a formal leave taking required of him. His sketching had put him in the mood to smoke, and he closed his notebook and retreated to his bedroom abandoning his work for the day.

It was five p.m. when Lottie came to Charles’ room. All clocks in the house were striking their final chimes as she appeared. She hesitated at the doorway. Charles was lying on his bed, sending rings of smoke toward the moulding of the ceiling. He found the cigar too rich but was persisting as a matter of principle, the proceedings of the Academy propping open the window of his room. Lottie cast her eye around the room; on the mantelpiece a tall glazed vase of dying white roses, heads bowed, petals beginning to brown. The flowers flanked by a pair of portraits: two boys Charles’ age, pressed paper in black rococo frames, a few steps from the bed a compact Turkish chair upholstered in a velvet, over which Charles had tossed his jacket. The walls of the room were crowded with pictures, pale watercolours mainly, and some freehand charcoal sketches in frames that seemed too expensive for the work they held.

‘So these letters then,’

Lottie did not enter but stood by the door her gaze moving from picture to picture.
‘The letters, yes, of course,’ Charles said trying not to betray any hesitation as he got up.

‘You have a great number of pictures’

Charles turned from the travelling trunk at the foot of the bed where he had knelt to retrieve Wim’s correspondence.

‘The water-colours? Yes, painted by a friend at Cambridge. This one,’

Charles said pointing up to a large picture and raising himself on his tiptoes

‘Is based on a work by the painter Sargent. Fumée d'Ambris Gris. How about that?’

He felt worldly standing in his room holding forth on his collection. He wished for a moment the other members of the Kestral Club could see him. He set down his cigar, glad to be done with it, and wiped his hands on his handkerchief. He leant against the doorframe, so that it was all that separated him from Lottie.

‘And beside them, there, that’s an etching of the Ponte Vecchio. Bird and I visited last summer. ‘

Charles removed the etching from the brass hook on the picture rail and sat with it balanced on his lap on the edge of this bed. He made no mention of the anxiety of the trip, Wim’s sickness, the panic they felt as strangers in the foreign city for the first time. Charles gestured for Lottie to come and sit with him on the edge of his bed. She paused for what seemed to Charles a very long time then approached, the door swinging shut behind her, the finer detail fading from the framed pictures that hung around the room. The smell of cigar smoke dense in the late afternoon air. She sat down, adjusting her skirts. Moments later they heard Cook and Ellen returning, laughter from downstairs. Cook humming a tune they heard the band playing that afternoon, imitating the trumpet through pursed lips. Charles looked at Lottie then
raised his finger to his own lips to dampen her laughter. He was aware of the heat of her body as their shoulders touched, the etching of the Ponte Vecchio balanced on his lap, their faces reflected in the glass. Charles rested his finger on the first of the windows of the buildings that ran along the bridge:

‘Allow me to introduce you’ Charles said tapping his finger on the glass.

‘Here lives Signor…Contandio’ his tongue tripped exaggeratedly over the consonants, ‘a sad and solemn man if ever I have met one, and here the widowed sisters Donata and Trisola, great beauties in their day would you believe?’

Charles went on listing invented names until his finger came to rest on the final window on the bridge. Now he turned toward Lottie, shifting his weight onto one buttock so she had to grip the etching to stop it slipping from his lap. Her profile was lit by the late sun, sharply angled through the window. It made prominent the vellus hair, the soft blonde down, on the edges of her cheek. He leant in and kissed her on the mouth. This was unlike the other women. The girl in Florence who tasted of stale tobacco beneath the sharp sweetness of the candied fruit she had been eating. Who took him back to her room above a macelleria in the old town, a few fly-blown lean cuts of meat left in the shop window, the noise of the frantic city below them. Her front teeth chipped and discoloured, striated pattern of browns and greys like the smashed shell of an oyster. He bedded her with an urgency that surprised him, she laughed when he withdrew after a few strokes, standing there in his shirt tails, his look of shock, his inability to control the fine spurt of semen. Or the other woman, the one he visited last winter with Caraway, hurrying down the shining, rain-slicked cobbles in Ancoats on Caraway’s insistence after an evening at the Turk. The tatty vermilion paper peeling from the walls of her room at the edge of the slums, pressing the coins into her hand in the manner Caraway instructed. She looked him
over, inspecting the boy who stood before her, as if she were employing his services. Judging him a sufficient prospect she flopped back onto the bed, hitching up her skirt until it revealed the lower half of her wide white body, the circlet of puckered marks along her belly. He fell drunkenly forwards onto her. She unbuttoned his trousers and toyed with his member unable to arouse him then sent him home. The twin images flickered then vanished. Charles kissed Lottie again. He felt her tongue dart back in response to his. He began to undress her, hurriedly, his fingers at the smooth curve of her shoulders, her bare arms, the tense rigged sinew in her neck. Lottie’s face flushed, crimson across the bridge of her nose and the tops of her cheeks. Charles placed a kiss in the hollow at her collarbone. His kisses moved to her breasts, her small, conical, nipples the colour of carnations. Hand drawn through layers of cotton underclothes towards warmth, that lush musk. His own clothes were off now. As she pulled him in towards her the walls of his room shrank and enclosed him. The leisurely contralto of a blackbird on its exposed perch on a branch of the oak in the garden grew louder until it seemed to fill the whole room.
The crane-fly drifted upwards, weightlessly trailing its wire-fine, stiffly jointed legs. When it gained the maximum height possible, up near the pelmet, it proceeded to cast itself, over and over, against the rain-smeared glass, butting the casement: determined to pass through the thick glass and off into the hammered silver of the low grey sky evident yet unreachable beyond. It seemed a strange remnant of the summer: the insect hatching too late, now rushing to devour whatever was left for it of the world. Charles glanced up, observing its efforts from where he sat hunched in the button-backed bergère in his father’s study, a drab woollen shawl wrapped around his shoulders like a fishwife from the pages of Punch. He had made the room his own, slowly colonising the space in the weeks after Lottie left for Westmorland: an apple core lay browning on the leather desktop beside a saucer of raisins and a finely etched port glass half full of water. Charles’ books sat stacked in piles around the blotter and the dark sump of the inkwell with its thick glass and silver sides.

He was behind already this morning with his work and every time he felt he had arrived at something close to clarity the thought seemed to escape him. Charles blamed Caraway squarely for his predicament: the pulsing headache, the tingling waves of nausea, the abject lack of progress with his reading. He imagined the look of reproach on Piggot-Roche’s face, the rapid tut-tutting behind the pursed lips of that prim little mouth. Charles gathered the shawl at his throat as a shiver ran across his shoulder blades and down the length of his spine. It had grown colder this week. The days lurching from daylight to a shimmering, tar-black dark that lurked and glittered on all the streets around Manchester. Charles glanced across to the fire. A watery flame licked at the glossy ridges of a charred log then vanished. Charles made
to rise and fetch another log from the wicker basket by the hearthside but felt his body overrule him. He slumped back in the chair. Yes, Charles was suffering this morning and Hewlett Caraway was squarely to blame.

Yesterday afternoon Caraway had greeted Charles outside his father’s offices in the city. The grand rooms occupied the upper floor of the shining terracotta building opposite the Ottoman Bank on Cross Street. Charles was late, having stopped to buy a newspaper from a boy with a wet, rattling cough in Piccadilly. A man called Easton had shot himself twice with a revolver during the morning service in St Paul’s. When Charles arrived Caraway was leaning against the massive oak doors, studded their entire length with dark knuckles of iron. He was smoking a cheroot. His frame had run to fat since school and a recently cultivated moustache, waxed at the corners of his mouth, lent him an air of calculated melancholy. Charles wondered how long it had taken Caraway to contrive the posture.

Caraway stepped into the street and seized Charles’ hand, gripping it to the point of pain. He ushered him inside and led him up the narrow stairs, the wrought iron banister worn smooth and Charles let his hand skim along as they ascended, their heels ringing on the tiled steps. ‘Shan’t be long’ Caraway promised, before talking with gravity of the new responsibilities his father had recently given to him. On the top floor they entered a high ceilinged room with what looked like an altar table at the north end where a dozen or so men were gathered, shifting uneasily like petitioners outside the assizes. Charles assumed these must be the commercial travellers over who Caraway now had responsibility. Above the table was a leaded glass dome that cast a harsh light, the men’s faces raw and blotched, else yellow and wan like the smoke stained ceiling of a cheap dining club.

‘Here to collect their new samples.’ Caraway explained.
Nearby a huge parcel, size of a tightly packed hay bale, had been sliced open: a long ragged gash running down its centre and from inside batches of napkins and table cloths had been laid along the altar table: various sizes and lengths some intricately patterned others plain.

‘My office is over there,’ Caraway said ‘in the south transept, and father’s is up there in the High Place. All alone in his apse and sacristy.’ Charles laughed. For all his pomposity Caraway could amuse when he chose to. As Caraway approached, the men’s chatter diminished. Charles watched Caraway move among them shaking hands, exchanging pleasantries and jokes, the punch line he’d reinforce tapping the man with the back of his knuckles on the buttonhole of his jacket or gripping a shoulder for emphasis.

‘Gentlemen,’ Caraway said after shaking each by the hand and giving a short speech on the quality of the new products and possessed now of a deep and solemn formality, ‘I will leave you with Mrs Gudrum who will introduce the latest lines.’

A thin woman in her sixties, dressed in jet black, a mass of hair like combed wool pinned above her head, stood nearby, knotting and unknottting her hands as if they were pieces of a puzzle that would not mesh. Caraway gestured for her to take the floor. Charles watched Caraway’s smile dissolve as he walked back towards him.

‘Apes to a man,’ Caraway whispered as they left the room. Charles suppressed his laughter. In the stairway Caraway paused leaning his large frame against the coolness of the green and white mosaic tiles: ‘Now, apes, trained apes, selling father’s goods. There’s an idea I must raise with him.’

The pair retreated to The Turks Head, a short walk from Caraway’s office. The cramped rooms above the hostelry sold fishing tackle, dusty reams and reels, a dense forest of fishing poles crammed at the windows. The bar was crowded and smelled
of stale sweat and sharp, vinegary smoke, the lemony tang of spilled ale. At the far end was a scarlet macaw in a brass cage. The glossy worms of its droppings covered the base of its cage. The bird’s feathers had faded. Its eyes and nostrils were dry. It moved crabwise on the long sharp hooks of its scaly claws along its perch, rocking and dipping its head. Caraway pushed his way to the front of the bar, pulling Charles behind him. The girl serving wore a low cut waistcoat with a grubby white blouse onto which fell twisting coils of nutmeg hair.

‘Two pints of Empress’ Caraway said. As the girl set down the glasses of porter, liquid the colour of wet earth, Caraway lit another cheroot, scrutinising the tip between puffs. When it was smoking to his satisfaction, he reached into his trouser pocket and retrieved a folded sheet of paper, which he carefully spread across the bar to reveal an illustrated playbill. With the air of a man studying a betting form, Caraway ran the little finger of the hand that held his cheroot down the list of troupes performing in the city that season.

‘They’ll be the end of me Charlie,’ Caraway said glancing up from the playbill.

‘But I just adore those jolie-petites and their fancy dancing.’

Charles laughed half-heartedly, pushing two little puffs of air through his nostrils.

‘Laugh Charlie,’ Caraway continued ‘but I have it on good authority these girls are told to seek out Hewlett Caraway on arrival. He alone can be counted on to show you the city.’

A smirk spread across Caraway’s lips. Setting one hand on the bar top, he inclined his head and with the flat of his other hand banged the bar hard. The brass pumps caught and warped Caraway’s reflection offering his elongated form, golden and in triplicate. When the serving girl looked over Caraway straightened and gave a wide grin.
‘Plate of mutton-chops and a dozen oysters,’ Caraway said emphatically as if it were the answer to a riddle he had been set. ‘For an off,’ he added to Charles with a nudge as he licked the reddened edge of his lips, ‘for an off’.

The Empress evened the mood of the two friends but by his fifth glass Caraway had grown maudlin.

‘So easily spoiled Charlie, gifts and trinkets, each time I visit their lodgings,’

The head on Caraway’s Empress, dense with wide and shining bubbles, made Charles think of the scum that builds against an inlet or a harbour wall. He watched as Caraway sucked it away then took a long pull, wiping the froth from his lip when he was done then giving the greasy tip of his nose a pinch.

‘How about you Charlie? Some girly hidden away in Cambridge?’

Charles hesitated. And as soon as he did he knew it to be fatal.

‘So you do,’ Caraway said taking pleasure in his friend’s discomfort.

Charles looked down the bar at the caged macaw, the mechanical movement of the bird’s scarred and slate blue beak.

‘I’m sure you have her set up discreetly’ Caraway said taking another pull of his porter.

‘For God’s sake, Caraway,’ Charles snapped.

Feigning not to have heard, Caraway sucked at a flake of meat trapped in his front teeth.

‘Best part of a pound just for a touch these days.’ Caraway continued

‘Expensive business what with all the bon-bons and trinketry. What father would call a loss-making enterprise.’
Caraway’s face was flushed now, the colour of water beets have been boiled in, broken veins on the tops of his ruddy cheeks, his expression beginning to slacken. He went to signal for more porter but Charles caught his arm and held it.

‘Really, Hewlett, I must be on my way’

Caraway swivelled his wide body around on his stool to face Charles. He looked at him hard, suddenly perfectly sober, his eyes moving over Charles’ face, as if he sensed something withheld in Charles’ earlier response, something that should the mood take him Hewlett Caraway could tease out or simply take by force from his friend. Caraway pushed his tongue against his under-lip and narrowed his eyes as if trying very hard to recall a name that escaped him. Then just as quickly his attention waned.

‘As you wish,’ Caraway said patting Charles’ shoulder gently, turning to the man on his right, ‘Now, do you know this one…’

Caraway launched into a song Charles had heard him clumsily hammer out at the piano the last time they had been drinking together. It was raining outside, cold wintery rain, pooling in the middle of the road, filling the cart tracks. There were small lights in bare windows. Charles stumbled out into the rain. From the closed door came the sound of the bar in full voice now: ‘Oh what a happy land is England,’ they were singing, Caraway leading the choir, as Charles set off into the night.

Yes, Hewlett Caraway was square to blame for Charles’ state this morning. Hewlett Caraway and the long walk home in the rain after he left his friend at the Turks Head. As Charles sat wrapped in the shawl at his father’s desk he hoped he wasn’t coming down with some sickness that might delay his return to Cambridge. It would be a tragedy after all his work this past month. Last night he had stripped off shivering in his room, the clothes still wet when he woke this morning, spread across
his bedroom floor where he shed them in a damp approximation of the shape of a man. He had worked too hard so far this summer not to return triumphantly, better read than any of his peers, the apple of Piggot-Roche’s eye. Charles would steel himself, not sick, just a little worse for all that porter Caraway insisted they throw back. Charles pulled himself up in the bergère, rod straight now, looking up at the books on the highest shelf, breathing slowly. It was then he heard the carriage approach and come to a halt outside. The high sharp yapping of his mother’s dogs as they spilled from the cab, scratching with their claws at the small, expensive stones, the chits of gravel flying up from under their paws as they raced toward the front door where Cook stood waiting to greet them. Charles could also hear his sisters Eloise and Tabitha, voices raised in shrill dispute:

‘That is not the case,’ Tabitha was saying ‘That is simply not the case’

Charles heard his mother hushing them ineffectually. Could they really be back already? Had six weeks passed so quickly? What on earth did he have to show for his time? He scanned the pile of papers, his notebook open, the books borrowed from the college library arranged in piles. He felt a pitiful sense of having failed to extract all that he needed. And now with only a week left before his return he was sure to be subsumed again by the family, by the demands of his mother and sisters. Charles draped the shawl over the bergère and hurried downstairs to greet them. On the driveway his sisters ran towards him, arms outstretched so all three collided with such force that Charles almost fell backwards. Eloise tugged at the corner of his coat, eager to be the first to tell him everything that had happened in the intervening weeks. Charles looked beyond them to Lottie who was gathering her things from inside the second hansom she had travelled with his sisters in from the train station. She wore a grey and white three-cornered shawl that emphasised her paleness. She
was carrying her music case, the linen embroidered with olive and gold thread. Lottie walked past him and into the house. Holding his sisters against him, palms on the backs of their heads, Charles turned and watched Lottie disappear inside the house.

‘Charles, have you been smoking tobacco?’ Tabitha asked, clinging to him still but straining her neck as she leant back from where she had taken a deep lungful of his jacket.

‘Do you admire her shawl? Eloise asked pointing towards Lottie

‘We’ve been working on our own,’

‘Yes,’ Tabitha interjected, ‘with Berlin wool Mama sent for from Kendal.’

It began to rain lightly, spitting down onto the ground, leaving pockmarks where it fell. The siblings, reunited, hurried into the house.
Charles sat in an armchair in the drawing room aware of himself as the only male in a house full of women. He listened as his mother moved from room to room, prowling like a zoo-kept lioness who did not like the smell of her new quarters, calling for Cook or Dolly to come and explain ‘why is this here?’ Charles watched his mother move a vase then an occasional table, her tone suggesting Dolly had made away with the family silver, not simply placed a Royal Worcester Pigeon Posy vase at the incorrect station. As his mother scolded Dolly, it occurred to Charles to return to the study and clear away any evidence of having being there. Charles’s father had gone directly from the station to his offices in town; delivery of a condensing engine from Pollit and Wigzell in Sowerby Bridge had been delayed when the hauliers commissioned to transport the machinery across the Pennines were declared bankrupt. Charles’s mother relayed the news curtly as if Charles himself had been responsible for the defaulting hauliers.

By elevenses the earlier rain had abated and Charles’ mother instructed Cook and Dolly to lay the tea set out on the lawn, where she gathered Charles and his sisters. It was cold and blowy out there, gusts of wind cutting across the garden though his mother persisted as if it were still high summer. Occasionally brief bolts of sunlight fell on the party, his sisters’ faces lit and glowing, at which his mother would give a quick, closed-lipped, smile at Charles before the cloud rolled in again and cast them back in cold shadow. His mother was telling a rambling story about an afternoon on the steam yacht but Charles wasn’t paying attention, instead he was playing a game of tick under the table with his sisters who sat either side of him, snapping at each other’s hands or knees to their occasional squeals of delight.
'Here comes teacher,' Tabitha said.

Charles looked up to see Lottie making her way across the lawn towards them as his mother continued with her increasingly otiose tale of life on the lake.

‘Now you see, I have never known that to be the case. Never’.

When Lottie was a foot or so behind his mother’s chair she rocked slightly, body swaying as if blown off balance, she looked for a moment as if she were about to topple down onto the grass. Charles’ mother turned around looking up from the story she was telling.

‘My dear’ she said ‘are you quite alright?’

His mother looked at the pale girl in front of her.

‘I think you should go and rest. Eloise and Tabitha are fine here thank you’

Charles’ mother gave a little tut under her breath as Lottie went inside, another bead slid along the abacus of petty frustrations fought against each day.

That afternoon Lottie was late down for lessons with the girls and had to return to her bed afterwards. Although he did not yet feel panic, did not allow himself even to articulate his suspicion to himself, nonetheless Charles found himself standing in the hall later that afternoon saying,

‘Really Mama, must you call for Dr Calthorpe? Give the poor man some peace. Remember when you had him over for Father last.’

Calthorpe had been summoned to the house a few months earlier, Charles’ father suffering stomach cramps which the good doctor diagnosed as being nothing more sinister than indigestion.

‘I’m sure the girl’s condition will pass,’ Charles continued trying to affect a disinterested air ‘calling the doctor does seem a little extravagant given the circumstances.’
His mother looked at her son; two dark lines etched fleetingly in the gap between her eyebrows. She pursed her lips as if on the verge of asking something then shook her head saying to herself very softly ‘no, no’ and then stifling a brief, thin laugh dismissing whatever she had been about to ask as ludicrous.

‘Now come along Charles, do let me pass, I must speak with Cook.’

* 

At his mother’s instruction Cook laid on a large lunch that afternoon: a plate of cold chicken, boiled eggs in a silver bowl, a salad of crinkly leafed watercress, two freshly baked loaves. Sandwiches cut into triangles for Eloise and squares for Tabitha. Butter in a silver dish. Fish soup, from a French recipe, served in a big tureen and flavoured with cayenne and anchovy sauce. A delicate sponge cake made with essence of lemon, filled with cream and one without, white-washed with a dusting of chalk-thick icing sugar. Eloise and Tabitha we taking turns telling their gossipy, innocent tales of neighbours in Westmorland: of the steam yacht; of the plain, peculiar or painfully shy daughters of neighbours; and of the good matches one of them might one day make for Charles.

‘There is one young lady, Charles,’ Tabitha said sounding exactly like her mother, ‘Her engagement to the son of a local engineer…’

‘No, no, that’s not true he was…’ her sister tried to stymie the tale,

‘Oh do hush Eloise’ Tabitha snapped

‘…has been called off, now she is twenty four years old,’ Tabitha continued, delicately peeling the shell from a boiled egg, the shattered fragments clinging to the membrane which she tore with her nails and dropped onto her plate, the sulphur from the ivory-white egg hung in the air.
‘Yes, an old bat with her nose always in a book we thought just perfect for you.’

Eloise said sabotaging Tabitha’s story with insouciance as she reached across the table for another piece of cake. Charles’ mother now joined them, casting a disapproving glance over the food that remained on her daughters’ plates as she set down a vase of hydrangeas cut from the garden, rearranging the stems and cupping the heads in her hands until she was satisfied with the way they fell. Shortly afterwards Dolly came to the table to tell them Lottie was being sick again.

‘Oh.’ Charles’ mother said as if she had just received terrible news then turning to Dolly softly, more softly than Charles had ever heard his mother talk to any of the servants, ‘send Ellen for Dr Calthorpe at once.’

*

Charles’ father had returned from the city by the time Calthorpe arrived. Charles watched him talking with his mother who had walked out along the drive to meet him. His father nodding, running his hand through his beard as his mother talked. They had both been present to greet Dr Calthorpe. The shoulders of Calthorpe’s coat were dusted with dry skin that fell from his scalp each time he ran his hand through his hair. Charles met the doctor several times before but if he ever had occasion to pass him on the street or meet him at some engagement he attended with his parents, Calthorpe gave him the same vague watery-eyed smile from his heavy head and Charles was always given to believe Calthorpe was on the verge of to addressing him by the wrong name in his fluted, slipper-soft, Edinburgh accent.

When Dr Calthorpe arrived, as Dolly helped Lottie down the stairs and into the drawing room, Calthorpe asked Dolly to place three chairs alongside each other in the bay window. The doctor placed the cushions with their needlepoint bouquets on
the seat of each chair before escorting Lottie and instructing her to lie across the makeshift assemblage in the light, so that he might better examine her. Charles stood with his mother, feeling panic rising in him as the doctor placed his hand across Lottie’s abdomen, applying pressure in various positions as he looked toward the window, the doctor’s heavy, nasal, bull-like breathing the only sound in the room. A bird flew towards the window stopping itself just short of the glass and hovered, beating its wings rapidly before abruptly changing direction as Calthorpe examined the girl lying across the chairs.

The proceedings had the air of a parlour game in which both participants had lost interest but continued to gratify their watching hosts. After the initial examination, Calthorpe asked Charles and his father to leave the room and Dolly to bring him a bowl of freshly boiled water. She squeezed past the two men as they stood waiting in the hallway and returned several minutes later with a mixing bowl, borrowed from the kitchen, filled almost to spilling, the glassy surface of the water swaying as she made her way back into the room, the reflection of her white cap and apron distorted in the rippling water. Charles went to open the door for Dolly but was blocked by his father. They waited behind the door, the house hushed around them. A bead of sweat rolled down his father’s neck to his collar. He wiped it away with his fingers. From behind the door Charles could hear passages of whispered speech followed by long pauses.

Eventually Calthorpe emerged, wiping his hands on a white handkerchief. He suggested Charles and his parents join him at the table in the dining room. The table was half set for supper, the polished cutlery laid out, the butter knives engraved with an intricate leaf pattern and the linen napkins folded to stand alone, but no plates or
glasses yet in place. Calthorpe positioned himself at the head. As he spoke he moved hands like a card player, as if the small party were seated for a game of Canasta.

‘As I suspected,’ Calthorpe said ‘the girl is with child, although at the very early stages.’ Calthorpe glanced across the table to Charles. ‘Much might still go wrong,’

Charles felt his bowels loosen. His fingers pressed to the point of pain against the edge of the dining table. The doctor continued, the music of his voice replaced with a monotone drawl, saying that he had spoken with Lottie and that it was her contention that Charles was the father. Calthorpe lowered his head, carefully tracing the outline of his face in the polished surface of the table with his thumb.

Time seemed to warp. Waves of nausea came over Charles with a prickling along the shins and his inner arms. The palms of his hands began to tingle. He wanted to rise from the table. He saw himself standing, without excusing himself, suddenly bolting out through the front door and into the street. He felt he had it within his power to run for hours: past the rain-smeared red brick villas, down the busy high street, past the nannies with their perambulators, the shopkeepers sweeping beneath the awnings of their tidy stores. Run until he reached the fields he played in as a boy and the river that ran alongside. He imagined sprinting down the muddy banks. He could run for miles, until the river met the estuary at Runcorn, where his father had taken him when the plans for the Ship Canal were taking shape. The pewter expanse of the estuary glittering the colour of hammered silver in the afternoon sun. Wind coming whipping up the surface of the water into waves that snagged and glistered. Glimpsing sailors at the gunwales of the long-hulled trade ships navigating their way to the port of Liverpool as he swam out, then pulling himself through each wave and swell headed towards the shore. Until England itself was reduced to a wavering line on the horizon. White, wide-winged gulls reeling and cawing at the strange object in
the water below. There in the middle of the sea, he would sink to the ocean floor, his flesh picked apart by soft-mouthed creatures in the silken silt at the bottom of the Irish Sea, his bones covered as the tides move above him.

‘Much might still go wrong,’ Calthorpe repeated, looking directly at Charles this time.

His father was talking now to the doctor but to Charles it seemed as if the words were being spoken underwater. His mother had grown pale, the colour of the wax on the tapered candles that lit the tree in their hall at Christmas time. His father stood up, offering his hand to Calthorpe. Calthorpe, leather bag in hand, the brass buckle glinting sickeningly bright made for the door. The three of them were alone at the table. Charles’s father placed himself at the head. He removed his pocket watch and set it softly on the table. His elbows planted on the smooth mahogany, hands clasped, the index fingers forming a steeple. Charles saw his mother working her thumbs inside a lace-edged handkerchief of fine cotton lawn. His mother toyed with the handkerchief until she began to weep, then she pressed it hard to her mouth to mute her sobbing.

The twitching of his mother’s pale mouth, as his father had reached across, patting her hand. In that moment Charles wanted to comfort his mother in a way his father was unable. He imagined Lottie’s confession to the doctor, the story and insinuation. The doctor’s bloodshot eyes, their sagging pouches of skin, moving over Lottie’s face as she lay across the chairs, and he received her confession. How she must have phrased for Calthorpe everything that passed between them that early evening in his bedroom behind the sound of the blackbird. Vaguely at first, then steered to precision by Dr Calthorpe’s questions, until the act was recounted in each and every one of its details.
For a moment Charles was filled with a vicious and unbidden anger, as if Lottie alone had been the author of his current state. As if she plotted to bring him down, to curtail his future, to shame him in front of his parents. He saw clearly now he had been trapped. Despite the game he believed he had controlled it was, in fact, he who had been seduced. He wanted to stand up at the table before his parents and accuse Lottie. Or turn to his mother and blame her for allowing such a woman into their home. Or to his father for indulging another whim of his mother, when she had returned home from a neighbour’s house boasting of the girl she had heard playing the piano, who, she learned, was making tentative enquiries for employment in one of the houses hereabouts. Charles wanted to compel his parents to send Lottie away, back to the edge of whichever blighted moor she had come from. But the anger ebbed as quickly as it had risen. Charles was left feeling an amorphous, nauseating pity. At first for himself, for his own state and then for Lottie, still lying in the room next door, too sick and overcome with shock to rise from the expensive and delicate wooden chairs that Calthorpe had lain her across, supported by figured-silk cushions, Dolly’s hand passing lightly over her brow.
'Is she sick again? Tabitha asked

‘Is she going to die?’ Eloise added gleefully.

Charles’ sisters looked up at him with open, expectant faces. They were standing by the piano in matching mushroom-hued day dresses, the wide hems trimmed with raspberry lace. A stye was beginning to form on the lid of Eloise’s right eye, the pouch of skin tight and shining, pushing the lid down a fraction over her pupil, lending her a drowsy, slightly dazed look. Her dry hair combed out so it was almost to her waist. Tabitha taller, older by two years, neat, exact features, framed by black hair, parted scrupulously at the centre of her head and cut below the ears at her own insistence. Charles hushed the girls, rapidly batting the air with the back of his hands. When the signal commanding them to leave was ignored, he steered them, elbows in the sockets of his palms, out of the drawing room and into the hall where he hoped Dolly might find them and return them to the nursery. It was early evening now, all around the drawing room light was dying on polished mahogany and veneer.

After Dr Calthorpe left Charles’s mother and father had retreated: Mother to her bedroom, Father to his study. When Charles stood outside the study door he heard him repeatedly clearing his throat, a dry rasp, as if there were a fish bone or fragment of biscuit, he was unable shift. Charles had returned downstairs to the drawing room where a few moments later his sisters joined him, Charles knew this domestic interregnum would not last.

‘Away with you now,’ Charles repeated weakly to his sisters taking a seat in the armchair by the fireplace, composing his limbs as he might on any average afternoon. If he did not know how to act he would act as if nothing at all had
changed and yet his legs felt overly long, like pair of wooden spoons, crossed one over the other. There was a book on the occasional table that stood beside the armchair. Charles picked it up and set it open in the hollow of his lap. He was grateful for the prop, grateful to have a place to direct his attention beyond his sisters or the enormity of the afternoon’s events. He hoped he might corral his thoughts here on the pages of Sir Walter Scott. Charles tried to focus on the book, his mother’s copy of Waverley. It had fallen open at the banquet scene. ‘The Baron ate like a famished soldier’ Charles heard the sound of the words in his head but they made no sense. In the periphery he was aware of Tabitha and Eloise conspiring by the doorway. ‘The Baron ate like a famished soldier,’ No good, he tried again: ‘The Baron ate like a famished soldier’, it was as if his facility for comprehending words had temporarily vanished: he read them, he heard their sounds but then a gap appeared, a sort of numbness, and no sense came to him, no images were summoned, no meaning arose.

Glancing up he saw Tabitha whispering theatrically to her younger sister, palm raised, the edge of her hand pressed flush against Eloise’s cheek. Eloise looked straight at Charles eyes widening as Tabitha whispered. Charles shook his head and glanced back down at the book. A few seconds later Charles felt a tap on his shoulder. Eloise was standing there, the beginnings of a smile in the set of her lips. Charles looked directly at her, he saw his pale reflection, the pictures on the wall behind him, the table and lamp all curving in the bright film on her wide, brown eyes:

‘Now,’ Eloise said ‘It is only fair, Charles, that you tell us,’ she paused for a second and glanced back to her sister who stood in the doorway, hands clasped, pushed in
above her knees, shoulders stooped a little as she fought to contain her excitement and laughter.

‘Tabitha wants to know: is it you that has killed our new governess?’

Eloise slapped her hand against her small red mouth, covering her laughter, steadying herself with her other on the side of the armchair. This was a good joke indeed.

Suddenly Charles was on his feet, towering over his sister, he slammed the book onto the floor, striking over the occasional table with his flailing arm. On the table was a porcelain vase of pot-pourri, painted jade and covered in bright pink scales like hundreds of tiny lapping pink tongues. It toppled and shattered as it struck the floor beside the spine of Waverley which had broken clean away from its leather binding, the dark backing of the book’s soft spine like the flesh of a turtle cut from its shell. Eloise ran towards Tabitha and protection. Charles saw his sisters clutching each other in the doorway the look of bewilderment on their faces. He wanted to reach out to them, to comfort them, to undo the harm his anger caused, but the words eluded him. Leaving the book where it had fallen on the floor, the shattered bowl that held the dried rose leaves, cedar shavings, mugwort, the petals and barks slowly releasing their fragrances.

Charles walked from the drawing room and up the stairs slow and stately as an undertaker leading a black plumed horse. He saw his sister wince, recoiling as he passed them. Eloise was sobbing. Tabitha was holding her, an arm wrapped around her back, a hand on her neck, glowering up at Charles her eyes narrowed with all the spite she could muster. On reaching his bedroom he closed the door behind him and locked it, the bolt biting deep into the casing, slotting the key into his pocket. He stood at his full height, eyes shut, patterns of twisted red and white light forming and
reforming, his fists balled at his side, his shallow breath quickening, every muscle and sinew pulled tense. He rocked back against the door, his spine against the panels, then he slammed the crown of his skull hard against the frame three times, white light exploding behind his eyes. He slid down, pulling his knees into his chest, burying his face into the grey flannel of his trousers.

It was after dark when Charles finally left his room, moving through the house as if the subject of a stage mesmerist or a somnambulist moving inside a dream. He saw the moon through the fanlight in the doorway. Charles watched Cook plucking feathers from a hen, bringing the heavy cleaver down across its neck on the scored wooden block, then tossing the head into the mass of feathers in the basket below the large scrubbed pine table at which she worked.

‘You’re welcome to take over if you wish, I could do with a rest’ Cook said without looking up from her work.

Charles said nothing but watched as she continued gutting and boning the bird, removing giblets and the crop, white feathers floating in the bucket below the table where she had rinsed her hands while she worked, the table top now stained with the bright blood.

The next morning when he woke, Charles made his way downstairs. He saw Dolly bearing a tray up to his mother’s bedroom. He smiled weakly at her but she kept her head bowed. There was no sign of Lottie and he wondered if she had been confined to her room. Through choice, perhaps, or by his parents decree as if she were a wayward child. Over the days that followed each member of the family seemed to retreat into their own territory: Charles to the garden or to his room, his mother to the goose feather pillows of her bed, his father as soon as he arrived home each evening to his study from where, he instructed, he was not to be disturbed. The
girls to the nursery or the drawing room, watched over by Dolly, growing by turns raucous and solemn, unable to gauge the new mood of the household and the role they should play in it, Tabitha refusing point blank to talk to her brother for the beastly, ungallant way he had shouted and scared half to death her sister. When the weekend arrived Charles’s father took breakfast in his study, leaving Charles at the dining table with his sisters. At the end of the day Mrs Wright summoned Charles and his father to her room. Charles’ father held open the door for his son. Charles noticed the remains of his mother’s breakfast not yet cleared, the shattered top of a hen’s egg, the crusts of triangular half-rounds of toast still in the silver rack.  

His mother was lent a new authority by her infirmity, perhaps this had been her plan. She had an idea, she told Charles, that she will need to discuss with his father. She then sent Charles away. At luncheon his father rejoined the family, his mother still took her meals alone. Charles watched him holding a dipped piece of bread roll and bring it to his lips, the soup caught and held in thick globules in the tip of his beard and moustache. After a few minutes he tossed his napkin over the barely touched soup and left the table. Kissing his daughters tenderly on their foreheads, ignoring Charles. Another day passed like this until Charles was finally called to his father’s study. Entering the room he found his father with his head in his hands. On the desk in front of him was a book on anatomy, torn from the paper wrapper that lay next to it.  

On the open page there was fine line-drawing of a womb and a foetus in utero; the soft limbs curled in on itself and, despite the swollen, elongated dome of the head, clearly visible as a human form. His father did not invite Charles to sit, and as he stood there before him, he related to Charles the story of his own father. A clumsy oil painting of the old man hung in a heavy frame above the fireplace, a sickly figure
against a dim background, his hair parted severely, the lower half of the right side of
his face sagging onto his stiff white collar, as if affected by some palsy or stroke.

‘We have never preached monasticism Charles, nor even the strict avoidance of
life’s spontaneous pleasures...’ His father’s voice trailed off then and he lost his train
of thought or any appetite for the sermon. His pale eyes prickled with tears. Standing
in the silence of the study, Charles heard chestnuts falling from the branches of the
trees outside. He pictured the green shells breaking open on the pavement, their
softer, creamy insides beginning instantly to discolour. The glossy horse-chestnuts he
remembered collecting as a boy, shattered, spent and useless, broken pieces
glimmering in the leaf swirl that filled the street.

‘We have come to a decision,’ his father looked down at a silver dip pen,
revolving it slowly towards him so the weak light glinted from the body.

‘You accept that you are old enough now to be accountable for your actions in this
world.’

‘Yes Father,’

It was the gruff voice of authority Charles heard him use to the factory foremen,
the voice he was always spared as a boy. Mr Wright went on to outline for him what
he had decided should happen.

‘You will marry her. Then you will go away’ his father paused.

‘There is a Colonel Mayhew, a cousin of your mother who moved to America
when he resigned his commission. With orange groves in Florida.’

Charles tried not to betray any sign that the news affected him but buckled
visibly.

Seeing his son’s discomfort his father sought to soften the blow
‘If we act with haste, the match might still be made public. A deed of release will be drawn up.’

His father shook his head at the terrible pity of the situation.

‘I will make funds available for your travel and a year’s living allowance.’

‘For God’s sake Father I’m not a tradesman, you can’t pay me off.’

Charles regretted his words.

‘No,’ his father slammed his hand and the pen it held on the table. He rose up now, his arms braced against the desk, leaning towards his son.

‘No, you are not, they at least have done something…’

His father stopped and looked up at Charles. There were tears running down his face, long shining trails as a snail would leave on a stone path in the morning after rain.

* 

Although it was early October there was still a softness to the air, as if that day had been shaken loose from summer and found itself out of sequence here at the foot of Autumn.

‘We are spoiling the boy,’ Charles heard his father tell his mother early that evening in the garden, as he bent to pull dead heads from a patch of marigolds after taking a turn around the lawn. The orange and yellow flowers, decaying at their edges, piled on the dull grass behind him. His father’s words carried across the garden to Charles who sat with a rug across his knees, like an invalid, staring blankly at the pages of the book open in front of him. His mother glanced back towards Charles who watched her place the span of her hand on his father’s back, as he bent deeper into the flowerbed. How changed his father seemed since the news of Lottie. Older, thinner, careworn, a papery marionette of the man he was, even his voice
lacked the assurance, that measured, compelling tone Charles so often heard him use in the past, addressing assembled workers or as he rose from the table after supper to deliver a speech to the Ship Canal Committee. Charles had risen from his chair now and was standing in the centre of the lawn looking up at the poplars which had begun to shed their shining yellow leaves. His mother walked out to him. She was wearing a jade and rust paisley tea gown, with wide black cuffs and collar. She took him by the arm pulling it close to her and patting it as she said softly,

‘Now you must do as your father says Charles. I’m sure any arrangement need not be permanent. Think of it as,’ she struggled for a moment to locate the word, ‘think of it as a great adventure.’

She placed a hand on Charles’ arm to emphasise the point.

‘But…’

She let go of his arm as if it were suddenly scalding hot.

‘For Heaven’s sake Charles,’ she said through tightly gritted teeth, ‘think of the girls, think of your poor sisters.’

His mother turned and walked back towards the house, the hem of her gown darkening where it dragged across the damp grass.
'The Folly,’ said a woman’s voice, dark with catarrh around the slack vowels.

‘Or the Grand. I bet he’ll take you to the Grand.’

Without breaking from their conversation the nurses made a tent of Lottie’s sheets with their outstretched arms. She felt the cold edge of the bedpan flush against her buttocks. It was almost pleasurable. ‘Up you get, come on now,’ the older nurse said. Lottie braced her hands against the iron bed frame, back arched, shoulders pushed forward. She was used to the routine but still felt clumsy and vulgar hunched like that, like some great featherless bird soiling its nest. There was a tingling as she relaxed her bladder, a shiver then gooseflesh along her shoulders and the tops of her arms, steam from the bedpan dampening the inside of her parted thighs.

The older nurse pulled the bedpan from under Lottie, glancing at the contents as she carried it from the room. The younger nurse rolled her onto her side and began peeling away the dressings. ‘The Grand’ the younger nurse said to herself dreamily. Lottie looked at the tray on the floor where the soiled bandages lay coiled, covered in faint gravy-brown extrusions, the patterns printed lightly on them like the shed skin of an anaconda. The nurse buttered a gauze pad with ointment then pressed it against her skin, the pink marbling of the burns running down her flank. Against her skin the gauze felt like a slab of ice. ‘There you go now,’ the nurse said ‘all done’.

After the nurses finished their morning rounds the charwoman, Mrs Galloway, would come, fussing at the mantelpiece in the tiny private room, running the tip of her goose wing over the chipped character jugs with their tricorn hats. Galloway whistling faintly through closed lips as she worked, wide rump bound in a faded calico apron. Yesterday Galloway told Lottie about the son who drowned when his
herring boat went down in a gale. As she dozed that afternoon Lottie dreamed of herring in their thousands washed up on a rocky beach, and the body of a drowned boy among them. It was two weeks since her first night in the Infirmary. Lottie was used to her bed now, to her windowless room, and if the door were left open her view of the corridor where nurses passed with shallow pans of blood and sputum, where occasionally the nurses stood and gossiped between shifts, leaning against the wall, their stout calves wrapped like hams in lisle stockings. Lottie only ever hearing fragments of their conversations, their talk of courting, of evenings at the music halls and theatres in the city before their voices dropped to a whisper as a doctor passed and they moved along to attend their duties.

As the days passed Lottie learned a series of restricted movements. She could feel the skin crack and break if she turned too quickly in her sheets, her flank numb or aching from where she had been lying, the dressings growing wet where the scabs had broken. Watching light from the ward flood then ebb in the windowless room, bells tolling somewhere in the city. When Lottie was first moved to the room she had lain awake as fragments of the evening floated up: the faces of the guests at the party, their features distorted. The events came back in sharp focus; the pale wick of the one unlit candle in the shimmering candelabra in the hallway, the glare of the flames at her shoulders, the baluster below the handrail splintering as she clutched at the banister rails, polished by Dolly to a shine that allowed her no purchase to try and halt her fall. She lay in the starched sheets of the infirmary bed, the sounds and groans of the sick reaching her from along the hallway. She closed her eyes onto blurred and shifting blocks of colour from behind which floated voices: their words incomprehensible as bird song. She tried to remember the chain of events and piece together what happened. The confusion below her, that alarming, implausible heat.
After she had fussed at and troubled the objects on mantelpiece with her duster Mrs Galloway left, noisy as always, bustling and clanking and banging her bucket and mop on her way out. Now all that was left for Lottie was to wait for Dr Calthorpe. He had been in yesterday talking about how ‘We must do all we can to ensure a living and viable foetus’ and how ‘Thermal trauma has been known to cause spontaneous uterine activity, overwhelming systemic infection,’ Dr Calthorpe explained she was recovering well but that it was their duty to keep her here where she could be properly observed. ‘Quite remarkable how the fire spared you’, he said as if he still could not believe her luck ‘you may not feel so now but you are fortunate. Your fall prevented the worst. And you are healing nicely’ He gave her shoulder a little squeeze. She wondered if Dr Calthorpe would be talkative today or if he would smell of brandy as he sometimes did, gruffly studying her.

As Lottie waited for Dr Calthorpe the hours staring up at the ceiling began; plasterwork and flaking cornices, watching a spider, bulbs of its pedipals swollen, spinning filaments into a web beyond the reach of Galloway the charwoman, the warm fug of sickness seeping in from the corridor into the stuffy room. Lottie bit the tip of her tongue tightly in her front teeth when the itching became unbearable. She tried everything, nursery rhymes, skipping songs, tried recalling the sounds of all the scales she learned; the half-remembered waltzes, cadenzas, the whining serenades, all the unmastered music of her youth. As she lay there, one broken phrase flowing into the next, she felt as if the spider that worked away at the ceiling has burrowed down into her skin and secreted eggs which would soon hatch and burrow down into her body, naked beneath the bandages.
Charles and his mother stood at the pavement’s edge. In front of them the rain-slicked cobblestones were busy in both directions with hansom cabs, drivers sat high behind the cabs, rigid whips like the antennae of insects. Beyond the road, behind the iron railings, stood the Infirmary: the narrow columns of its portico, the two great porthole windows in the dome above lending the impression the building was staring out amazed across the underwater city. Charles was wearing a black wool frock coat borrowed from his father; his third best, fraying slightly at the cuff, the coarse wool stretched tight across his shoulder blades, his starched collar uncomfortably high at his throat. There was a tiny grease mark on the black silk tie he wore in a four-in-hand knot. In his right hand he gripped the brim of his Derby. And in his palm, which was perspiring, a wilted bunch of anemones his mother instructed him to buy from a woman at a barrow as they arrived. His boots were smattered with fine webs of mud thrown from the wheel of the hansom that carried them into the city as it departed.

Charles ran the tip of his little finger between his starched collar and his neck. Hooking the collar away from the skin he felt his body unburden itself of its stored up heat. It began to spot with rain. His mother handed him her umbrella. There was a sleeping putto painted on the porcelain handle. He opened its black silk sections carefully, like a blown tulip, a Blackjack, a Negrita, a Queen of the Night. They stood for a moment in silence under the curved ribs of the umbrella’s canopy, rain pittering and hissing down. His mother was wearing her fox-fur stole, tiny beads of moisture trapped between its russet hairs.
As he stepped closer the smell of the fur made Charles think of the badger sett he saw flushed by terriers as a boy. Sent out at his father’s insistence with Howells, the taciturn, raw-faced man who worked in the garden of the house in Westmorland. The dogs’ muzzles wet with blood, rags of sinew and scraps of stomach hanging from their teeth. The badger was the first animal Charles had watched die. He had seen braces of pheasant, the sheen of their emerald feathers, hung by their broken necks above the range in the kitchen, and he had stood behind his mother as she wept at the burial of one her lapdogs, a black-eyed Schipperke, that had taken itself to a shady corner of the garden in Manchester to expire. But the badger was the first creature he had watched as it died. During his first term at Cambridge in conversation with a fellow students in Piggot-Roche’s rooms Charles credited the event with attracting him to the study of the Natural Sciences. In truth, he only remembered his fear for the terriers as they shot down into the dark warren, then his disgust as the twitching, wheezing half-killed body of the badger was hauled above ground.

The sky above Manchester was full of cinereous, slow-moving cloud. The greys and silver-blues of the ash-pan Dolly lifted from the grate on winter mornings. Occasionally the clouds parted letting light down into the city. This light refracted by the recent rain gave an unexpected lambency to the brickwork of the storefronts and offices that lined Piccadilly. Wellington: stooping, chin thrust out, ready to step clear of his pedestal, Mars and Minerva helmeted at his heels was reflected in their windows while the wet bricks shimmered and glinted like newly minted coins. Charles observed the effect as he took his mother by the arm, sliding his hand into the fold at the crook of her elbow, as he would when a boy as they walked each Sunday to service at the Church his grandfather endowed in a final act of philanthropy as he lay dying.
As they stepped down onto the cobbles a wagon appeared, Walker & Homfray stencilled in squat letters along its side. The empty barrels in the bed of the wagon, wooden staves hooped with steel rings, collided loudly. The driver snapped his reins, sending streams of spray from his horse’s piebald back. Charles pulled his mother back onto the pavement. When the wagon had passed they crossed to the narrow island with its single, tall, black lamp post at the centre of the busy road. Charles had slept little last night. He had been woken by a knocking at his bedroom door which then disappeared, and later he was sure he heard the sound of a gong being struck somewhere inside the house. He lay in the dark room listening for it again until sleep took him and he began to dream he was walking with friends from the examination schools in Cambridge.

Looking down on the scene from above, the figures on the cobbles seemed in their black gowns and carrying their stiff mortarboards, a flock of crows pecking at seed on a newly sown field. The two visions shimmered and bled into each other. Charles could not keep pace with the other students. He called out, but no one slowed and he fell further behind, until he was a tiny figure, a speck in the distance, between the lead roofs of the university buildings. He felt himself begin to weep until his weeping woke him and he lay motionless in his bed, eyes fixed on the wavering bars of light coming through the curtains, slowing making vivid their pattern of lilies with interlocking leaves set on the scarlet backdrop, slowly brightening the glow of the ceramic washbowl on its stand by the bed, then the faded lettering of his name on the trunk propped up against the wall since his arrival home. He lay in silence, watching the room come to life, the damson Turkish emerge from the darkness, the pictures grow vivid in their frames, until he heard the stirring of the maids, their hurried footfall on the uncovered floorboards of the rooms above him.
As he stood with his mother under the unlit iron lamppost, hansoms clattering by on either side of the busy cobblestones, the Infirmary before them, Charles tried not to think of Lottie recuperating somewhere inside its maze of wards and corridors, taken there on Dr Calthorpe’s instructions from their house so that he could more closely observe her progress. He tried not to think of the sterile dressings set on her burns or the red raised skin, the suppurating patches with their charred edges, brown and brittle as burned paper, he had seen when he had reached the foot of the stairs. The chorus of voices calling for Dr Calthorpe.

When the accident occurred Calthorpe was talking with Charles’ father. He had set down his brandy glass by a drooping abutilon and pushed through the crowd towards where Lottie lay crumpled at the foot of the stairs, more at ease in the midst of this catastrophe than he had been all evening. Earlier Charles had watched him recounting for his father the conditions he would come across daily at the Infirmary, listing them like a schoolboy naming all the kings of England in the hope of receiving half a crown.

By the steps of the infirmary there were porters leaning on a large handcart, a grubby tarpaulin fastened loosely over it, and a pair of nurses in puffed sleeves, talking, heads dipped towards one another. The Infirmary’s pitted stonework was coarsened with soot. Charles and his mother peered up at it from under the black umbrella. Through the umbrella’s fringe of raindrops they saw the four ornate columns that formed the entrance, the brick wings on either side, the thick grouting a funereal grey, that looked as if it might more properly belong to a jail or to the lunatic asylum a mile down the road. A dray passed, its wheels throwing rainwater in high arcs through the air. Charles and his mother mounted the pavement behind a row of hansom cabs. The drivers were gathered in a circle, the burr of their accents
identifying them as from the north of the city. ‘It never, it never is’ one said, growing agitated, breath stretched in front of him on the cold air like a webs of raw silk. They were discussing a patch of mange on the horse of the front most cab. One of the men, hatless, red hair thinning on the pale crown of his head, broke from the group then standing by the horse worked his thumb into its the hindquarter as if the mange were a fleck of paint that could be rubbed away. In the distance beyond the cabmen Charles saw Dr Calthorpe. He was fastening an unfashionably long cape at his neck. The cape fell in folds down to his feet. Charles raised his derby and the anemones towards the outline of the man in the distance.

‘Mama,’ he said, softly in the voice of his younger self, the voice he felt shamed back into using. Seeing the doctor in the distance, his mother called out ‘Calthorpe’ as if summoning one of her dogs from the far side of the lawn a greasy scrap pinched between her ringed fingers. But her words were lost in the clamour of the afternoon, in the sound of the hansoms and the chatter of the cabmen, the hawkers, the flower sellers, the vendors hauling their handcarts along the cobbled street - and the figure in the distance continued walking. His mother called again, louder this time, her voice shrill and almost operatic. Charles felt himself blushing, the prickling heat spreading across the tops of his cheeks. The cabmen stopped their conversation and turned towards Charles and his mother.

The figure in the distance halted. Dr Calthorpe adjusted his cape at the shoulder and turned sharply on his heels, raising a hand like an umpire signalling a bye. He walked back towards them through the gathered cabmen. ‘We shall have his report now, I think,’ Charles’s mother said, so softly now only her son could hear her words.
The man who approached was badly shaven, patches of hair missed below his ears and at the bottom of his neck. There were grey marks under his eyes, as if wet ash has been smeared there. His heavy head sat on this thick neck and broad shoulders, the proportions of a caricature by Spy in the back pages of Vanity Fair. Calthorpe had called at the house every evening last week to report on Lottie’s progress. Charles stood attentively with the seltzer bottle ready to refresh Dr Calthorpe’s brandy glass. Dr Calthorpe weighing the globe in his palm, like a woman’s breast. The Bidault Dubois sinking from above the Queen’s tiara, to her pearls, the crest on her sash until by the week’s end only an inch or so was left above the words Made in France.

‘I had not expected you until later this afternoon.’ Dr Calthorpe said. He paused and pursed his lip as if on the verge of making a decision of infinite consequence.

‘No matter, I shall escort you to her directly.’

Dr Calthorpe gripped the corner of his cape and with a flapping gesture ushered Charles and his mother through the iron gates of the Infirmary. They walked together across the stone courtyard, the elephant greys and lioness yellows made vivid by the rain, past the pair of porters leaning on their cart, past the nurses, the younger listening rapt to her colleague, her fingers flitted on the chatelaine hanging from her belt: turning first scissors, pill box, smelling salts and finally twisting the lead pencil. As they entered the Infirmary Dr Calthorpe nodded to a colleague, who peered back unresponsive, over the lenses of his half-moon spectacles.

Dr Calthorpe escorted Charles and his mother along the Men’s Amputation Ward. There were heavy drapes open at the windows, windows that ran from the wooden floors, polished to a dark plum, up to the corniced ceiling crumbling like a ripe heel of Cheshire cheese. On the ward there was a low moaning broken by fits of bronchial
coughing. Charles scanned the faces in the beds. In the closest was a man in his twenties, standing at full height he must be six foot four or five, tall as Howells the gardener, Charles estimated. His cheeks were sunken, two shadowy depressions like marks in modelling clay, hair prematurely white in patches. He scratched at space where his right arm should be and Calthorpe raised a finger in admonishment. The man stopped and slumped back against the iron St Andrew’s cross of his bed head.

‘Osteomyelitis,’ Calthorpe said, ‘a fairly simple procedure, but a shame that we could not save more of the limb.’

In the next bed was an older man, his slack face the colour of whey and wrinkled like the skin on a pan of warmed milk. He was unshaven, the waterlines of his eyelids ringed pink. Calthorpe turned to Charles.

‘Both femurs removed,’ he said casually as if pointing out a common plant in the rocky bed of a hot–house.

‘Fell into a machine he was oiling, friends nearby managed to pull him out before it swallowed him whole. As you may have observed at your father’s factories Charles,’ Calthorpe said, ‘the mills are kept humid to preserve the cotton. Our friend is near deaf from the clatter of the machines after years in the mill and he also, it saddens me to say, suffers from fairly advanced byssinosis. And now this,’

Dr Calthorpe pointed to the space where his legs should be and shook his head.

‘Such catastrophic accidents are rarer than they once were’.

Dr Calthorpe gestured for Charles and his mother to move closer to the man. The stumps of his legs were bound tightly in bandages and housed beneath a small linen tent. The man lay motionless, looking across at the empty bed next to him, its sheets bunched. Dr Calthorpe did not acknowledge the patient who lay there staring glassy eyed at the space that until recently held his neighbour.
Dr Calthorpe lifted the flap on the tent above the stumps and Charles watched them twitching as they peered down, as if the limbs that were no longer there still tried desperately to work. Dr Calthorpe lowered the flap. As they left the ward Charles saw the ward sister, in her white apron, making her way from window to window, drawing the curtains with a wooden pole, the type a gondolier might use to propel himself along a the Grand Canal. There was a brass hook at the tip. She used it to catch a metal eye sewn into the top of each the curtains before drawing them briskly shut.

‘They must sleep each afternoon,’ Dr Calthorpe said, then, a little too sweetly, ‘else they will never mend.’

When they reached the exit, Charles turned and glanced back. In a bed at the far end he saw the tall man with the missing arm lighting a cigarette, then another man, then another, until a dozen glowing orange points of light filled the artificial dark of the Men’s Amputation Ward.

‘If I may,’ Calthorpe said raising his fist to his lips and clearing his throat as they stood outside the ward ‘it would give me great pleasure to briefly show you the operating theatre and anaesthesia room.’

It was a short walk to the anaesthesia room where they peered through the glass porthole cut into the door. A blonde boy, naked from the waist up, lay on the raised operating table, his breathing shallow. The skin on his chest was so pale it looked as if it had been moulded in plaster of Paris. The boy looked angelic, his blonde curls falling around his face. Charles watched as the surgeons closed in around him, a scalpel glittering from the centre of the circle around the unconscious child.

‘Among other initiatives I encouraged when I arrived here was the wearing of white among the nurses and the surgeons, replacing the frock coated predecessors
who populated the hospital prior to my arrival. You would see them, Charles,’ Dr Calthorpe said ushering them away from the portal now surgery has commenced and warming to his subject, ‘black coats daubed with blood and plasma, each unwittingly a seething bed of infection. The grave danger,’ he added turning to Charles’s mother ‘is wounds suppurating. Impurities in the air the cause, you will have observed how the beds along the ward are evenly spaced, allowing sufficient room for the air to circulate and the healing process to occur unhindered. Anyhow,’ he said sensing he has lost the attention of his audience, ‘we are almost there’.

The wooden door was chamfered with an intricate inlay, Charles set his fingers against it for a moment. ‘Now you must expect some changes, Charles,’ Dr Calthorpe cautioned before opening the door. It took their eyes a moment to adjust. The room was windowless. More stock cupboard or storeroom than the private quarters Dr Calthorpe had assured them would be most efficacious to Lottie’s recovery. There was a wardrobe, a large mottled mirror above the bed and a faded four-panel painted Chinese screen folded in the corner of the room. The scene showed five pale-faced geishas in repose in a garden and under a pagoda. It looked like a hastily dressed stage-set of a scene from an oriental domestic life.

There was an enamelled vase of wilted roses on the small table by her bed. Lottie lay with a sheet pulled up, to cover her shoulders and part of her neck. She was sleeping with her head turned to one side. Her mouth part open. Her hair boyishly cropped with medical scissors. As he looks down at her Charles saw a single burn, the length of a feather, reaching up from her neck to her face where it lay itself the colour of a Virginia creeper at autumn against the stucco of her skin.

‘My own rooms,’ Dr Calthorpe said, guessing Charles’s thoughts at the quality of the conditions ‘are very close by.’ Dr Calthorpe looked down at Lottie,
‘Yes, we shall wake her now I think.’
Even with her eyes shut she sensed him: the smell of carbolic soap she had come to associate with his visits and beneath it, always, disguised but not erased, the cardamom seed musk of his sweat. She had felt it before as he lingered watching her, felt him standing at her bedside looking on as she feigned sleep and waited for him to leave. Now she felt his breath hot against her face. ‘Lottie,’ the voice said again, ‘there is someone here to see you’. Her vision swam as she opened her eyes. A pair of dim figures at the foot of her bed, blurred, watery imprints like reflections in a puddle. Dr Calthorpe withdrew from the room, his heavy head bowed. Charles’s mother lingered for a moment inspecting herself in the mirror above the bed, adjusting her fox fur stole by the tail, with the air of a woman who has called in at a department store to idle away an hour before an engagement in the city. Charles turned and she excused herself calling after Dr Calthorpe who was talking with the nurses outside. Charles dragged a wicker chair towards the edge of Lottie’s bed, the rattan stalks plaited in the wide arms, the type that might be found in a summerhouse. There was a thick, crocheted blanket across the foot of the bed. Charles surveyed the room from his chair; the grey pipework along the far wall coated in years of discoloured paint, the pipes groaning faintly.

‘Dr Calthorpe is looking after you I trust?’

Lottie smiled weakly then closed her eyes and nodded, pushing herself up and back against the pillows behind her. She began to cough, a tight, dry cough, scratching high in her throat. Charles reached for the jug of water. His hand trembled as he filled the glass to the brim then sipped away its excess before offering it to Lottie.
‘Here, drink some.’

Lottie lifted her head to meet the rim of the glass. The pipes on the far wall creaked then hissed briefly. There was muffled laughter from a nurse outside.

‘Dr Calthorpe was kind enough to give my mother and me a tour of the wards before we came to visit you today.’

Lottie nodded. It was enough to intimate Charles should continue.

‘They are doing some remarkable things with anaesthesia. And the girls ask after you. The house hasn’t been the same. They continue to practise. The house filled with chords and scales and such music as they might as this stage bring themselves to make.’

Charles laughed at his joke then regretted doing so. His mirth seemed misplaced. He made a second joke to mask his embarrassment.

‘Really, Lottie, if you had not wished to marry and travel to America I’m sure we could have arranged some alternative.’

Lottie began to cry. She moved her hand to her belly. Charles’s cheeks pinked at his second blunder. His face hot and clogged again. He placed his hand on top of Lottie’s. Her fingers were cold.

‘Perhaps you would like me to tell you of our plans once you have recovered?’

Lottie did not respond. He continued anyway.

‘These past few weeks I have been in contact with Colonel Mayhew. You will remember mother spoke of him. I have in my possession a letter recently arrived. May I read from it?’

Lottie said nothing.

‘I am sure it will cheer you. He paints such a picture of his estates in Florida,’
Charles took the pages from his pocket, the address on the envelope written in a large, florid, slanting hand. Charles cleared his throat but was embarrassed back into silence for a moment by the rattle of mucus in his gullet. He took a sip of Lottie’s water then began to read:

My dear Charles,

How well I remember your mother. As she will no doubt have recounted as children we were the fondest of cousins. Even now I recall the hours spent at play in the garden of her mother’s house at Comberbach, the golden chain of their great laburnum in full flower. I often wonder if that tree still stands. You asked in your letter for some description of the estates here. Oranges are my stock in trade; tangelos mainly, ‘honey bells’ we call them, and the Dancy tangerine. We are some six thousand acres ranging from New Farm at the north to the old Indian ground at our southern tip. Each summer great groves glow with fruit. There is no sight so warming to the heart. You will forgive my poeticism for the reality of my life is, and has been for long years now, one of unremitting work and laboured commitment to the land. I would not wish to present a false portrait of the country I have made home or the conditions in which I continue my modest labours. In Florida in winter there is a clement, constant warmth. In high summer the air itself seems heated beyond what is humanly tolerable. You will find a series of adjustments needed to make life pleasant. An old negro looks after the running of my estates. Thomas is a most companionable presence. His employment in such a position, and the terms I offer, are somewhat disquieting to the drawing rooms of Jacksonville. Thankfully I am afforded some latitude in my position, my ill-disguised sympathies seen as eccentrically English and tolerated. Thos., I tell him,
someday you will accompany me to supper and I shall have you sing and they shall not fail to be moved. Thos. at his spirituals is a living compendium of the grave ills done to his people. Having, and here forgive my boastfulness, come to dominate the market in the certain varieties of orange in our county, I have it in mind to turn to apples. I recently entered into an agreement to purchase lands in Oregon. I have this queer notion of an English apple bred so close to the breath of the mighty Pacific as to be almost Oriental. Would not such a feat be admirable in the extreme?

Charles paused. He ran his finger over the proceeding lines of text,

‘Here Mayhew lists, in some detail, the technicalities of his business and his domestic arrangements. He is unmarried which he says is regrettable.’

Charles reached for the glass of water again. He noticed a small mark where Lottie’s mouth touched it, imprinting the edge of the glass with the contours of her lower lip. He took a sip and continued to read aloud from the letter, angling it towards the doorway more clearly to discern the words:

And to the accident, details of which you briefly outlined, I wish your betrothed a swift recovery. I understand she has begun to mend and the worst of her travails are perhaps behind her? We shall raise a glass to the triumph of the corpus humanum and the spirit’s continuing endeavours under the gaze of our Good Lord, some evening not far hence. In my mind’s eye I see a soft Florida dusk coming to a close, the nighthawk and oystercatcher starting up, and the three of us at happy at conversation on the veranda on the rockers I purchased this past summer. It is indeed a pleasant thought.

Until then, I remain your affectionate cousin,

Col. H. J Mayhew
Charles looked up from the letter to Lottie, searching her face for some reaction. It had begun to rain. Charles heard it falling softly at the windows of the ward outside. It had grown quiet save for the squeak of the wheels of a trolley being pushed from bed to bed. Beyond the rain, Charles heard the sound of voices, his mother’s among them.

‘All this is miles away. Let’s not dwell on it shall we?’

Charles put the letter back in his breast pocket and arranged himself stiffly on the chair, crossing his legs in front of him, one hand over the other on his lap.

‘I have brought something for you Lottie, to brighten the room.’

Charles unwrapped a small package he carried with him this afternoon. He placed the sheet of brown paper taken from the kitchen where he stood wrapping it at first light before the maids and Cook had made their way down from the upper floors of the house, his mother’s dogs scratching at the stone floor around his feet in the hope of feeding. He set the brown paper on the floor and moved with the plate towards the mantelpiece. He cleared the trinkets to the far side.

‘There you are. Brings a little cheer to the place.’

On the willow pattern plate was a picture of three figures on a bridge. He had found it in the attic one afternoon where he had gone to shelter from his mother’s questioning, retreated on the pretext of picking out certain items he wished to travel with. He asked his mother if he might display it in his room, knowing that he had no intention to place it there. He wanted to bring something from the house for Lottie, an object that would remind her there was life beyond her room in the infirmary.

‘Now,’ he said, ‘Chinese, I think, in origin. The design at least. One of my father’s earliest purchased pieces. He claims it is original and imported and he
bought at auction when he was a young man but I suspect Staffordshire is probably its true provenance.’

Lottie moved in her sheets.

‘It sat for years in the garden room until my mother decided she could no longer abide it.’

Lottie attempted to sit up but Charles patted the air with the palm of his hand

‘No, no, let me describe it for you.’

He stepped closer to the plate and rested one hand on the mantelpiece.

‘There is a bridge with three people on it, the people are in the process of crossing towards a small island where there is a house.’

He paused.

‘Their arms are made of little half moons. And their faces when you look closely, well you cannot make them out too clearly. Each carries an object’

Charles leaned in until his nose is only inches from the plate, tiny fine cracks running across the glaze.

‘In the hand of one perhaps is a rush mat, the other holds a staff or a rod of some sort. The third has perhaps a hook I’d say to hang a lantern from. They are travelling towards a tiny blue house. I’ve said that already of course. You might think of them as magi if the scene were not so clearly oriental.’

He paused again before speaking the words he had rehearsed softly under his breath in the hansom on the way to the infirmary. His breath clouding the window as the streets outside moved past. He walked back to the bed.

‘We shall have bridges of our own to cross soon, so perhaps let this remind us, ‘

The click of the cartilage in his throat as he swallowed seemed to fill the small room.

‘The three of us… That we shall cross them together.’
Charles noticed he was trembling, he placed one hand his trouser pocket, and stepped toward to the bed. Lottie reached out for Charles’s free hand. The strength in her fingers surprised him. She gripped it, unfolding the fingers above her belly then softly pressed his palm down. Charles felt a pulse in her stomach. He remained with his hand flat against her stomach saying nothing until eventually Calthorpe came back into the room.

‘Charles, I think some rest will serve Lottie now. You might return in a few days’ time?’
The porter Dr Calthorpe had arranged to show them out moved with an awkward, sloping gate as if he had damaged some part of his pelvis. He glanced back over his shoulder and smiled weakly at Charles and his mother. His face was pale, like a circus performer, Charles thought, a Pierrot preparing for the ring, his fine hair the colour of wet thistledown thinning at the pate. Charles wondered if the man was once a patient at the Infirmary, the venereal section or the fever ward or perhaps an unknown wing reserved for some special infirmity bred here in the city.

The gas lamps hissed along the narrow corridor, the shadows of their filigreed fixtures thrown onto the sticky-looking flaxseed-colour cellulose. As they walked, a girl in a wicker-backed wheelchair was pushed past. Her hair was cut around a broad oval face, flat nose, small chin, little bubbles of spittle drying white at the corners of her mouth. She wore a purple dress with grubby, once-white lace cuffs. The nurse pushing the chair smiled at the porter then at Charles’ mother who ignored her. They had been in the infirmary too long. Charles and his mother needed air, fresh air, even the smoke-laced, mizzle drenched Manchester air, even that would feel cleansing.

They passed an open door. A woman was standing by a chalkboard. In front of her on low wooden chairs were three young women in black. The woman at the chalkboard was pointing at words with a stick. As she tapped the board the seated women would return the words guttural and blunted, shapeless grunting globs of noise, the sounds solicited in illness or in ejaculation or the clearing of the bowels. ‘Again’ the woman at the chalkboard said sharply tapping her stick against the words, she glanced at Charles who looked away and continued walking.
Eventually the corridor gave onto a high-ceilinged vestibule, the ornate ceiling-rose badged with flower heads, bunches of grapes, two smooth skinned cherubs with distended stomachs. The porter turned and pointed towards an arch of camel coloured brick holding double doors with brass handles and panes of smoked glass. The glass was stencilled with a Latin motto, the rain smear darkening the letters. As he gestured at the doors Charles noticed the porter’s fingers were webbed.

Charles thought of the glass plates he was shown in his first term at Cambridge. The images burned onto them of jagged, misshapen and hydrocephalic human skulls. He and William Bird, pince-nez balanced on the bridge of his nose, at the back of the room crowded with undergraduates. The smell of beeswax rising from wood panelling, long tables polished to a bruised plum with their nicks and scars and dark indentations. The smell of potato water and chicken fat drifting from the college kitchens. Bird and Charles straining to see as the tutor held up the tintypes, commenting briefly on the condition, each documented before placing them carefully back inside their paper sleeves. And later that term the cabinet cards they passed among each other with their pictures of babies whose concave heads looked as if they had been moulded from clay with massive craters and dips, the names of the photographers: Ballarat, Strunk, Demalion, proclaimed in gaudy cursive. One contemporary kept an ape foetus in a jar on his desk, the vaguely humanoid head and thin rat-like limbs and long tail. He had been summoned before the Proctor to explain its presence when his scout discovered it uncovered, the chenille cloth he usually kept draped across it misplaced. The grey skinned foetus suspended in a jar of grease yellow formaldehyde, thumb raised to its soft mouth, one small, barely formed arm, the other across its eyes as if shielding itself from the horrors of the world.
‘Sir,\

The porter bowed hesitantly to Charles then lingered for a moment as if in hope of receiving some reward for guiding them through the Infirmary. Charles walked past him across the tiles whose tessellating entwined crosses were in milky blues and truffle colours. He held the door open for his mother. The rain-laced air was cool on his nose and lips, the clamour of the city, metal-rimmed cart wheels the clattering report of hoof fall on the shining seal-skin cobbles, the horse tram, the yelling and screeching of the hawkers and match girls,

‘Mama,’ Charles said ‘This way.’

* 

Charles’s mother insisted on leaving open the window of the hansom. Charles watched the rain-spray falling on the soft bracken of her gathered skirts. She unscrewed the cap of a dagger-shaped perfume bottle and tipped the lip to her wrist then pressed the shining square to the lower part her neck. Charles looked away, embarrassed to be witnessing this aspect of her toilette here in the hansom. The scent filled the interior like colourless smoke. His mother raised the window an inch though not far enough to stop the rain coming through. She seemed not to notice it falling on her skirts as she stared into the passing city. Shoeless children playing with a steel hoop by a stone trough at the edge of the pavement and behind them a tall women in a shot- silk bonnet with a drooping ostrich feather standing motionless. Charles listened to the tiny stones thrown by the horse’s hooves striking the underside of the cab. His mother was silent.

They passed a row of vast warehouses, bricks ochre and mole and dark heather, blurring in a mottled mass at the window of the hansom. The cab came to a halt outside the largest in the row. Vaster than a cathedral, vaster than an ocean liner, the
yellow stone of its ornate façade more suited to a grand hotel in an imperial capital than this enormous storeroom for textiles, this warehouse that aspired at once to Palazzo, Château and Elizabethan Palace. To escape the smallness of the silent cab, the air hung with a pungency Charles felt as a pressure behind his eyes, he thought of the city around him, imagining the labour in its wards: its five hundred mills, the name of each his father claimed to have committed to memory, a trick he used to impresses guests after supper as candles burned down and the decanter with the broad base filled with port the colour of pigs blood was passed man to man.

Charles closed his eyes and the city’s working men processed through his mind in a ragged pageant: the card and paste board makers, the calico manufacturers, the coopers and cotton spinners, the coal owners and coke merchants, the Turkey Red Dyers, the importers of Ebonite and Earthenware, the men who sold Gauge Glass and German Silver, the makers of hinges and screws and hoses, those men who passed their days in the manufacture of dynamos and driving rope, the organ builders, the patent agents, the manufacturers of magnesia and importers of margarine. The men who sold nitrates and those who sold numbering machines. Pump makers, putty power manufactures, the leather cutters on Conway street, the warehousemen, coach builders and brewers, the shopfitters, the fruiterers, boot makers, compositors and the dealers whose stock in trade was fish. The brick setters, the dresser, the innumerable host of grey-faced clerks and cashiers, the china dealers on Market street of whom his mother disapproved, the drapers and dress makers on Victoria Terrace she tolerated, the grocers of Alexandra Street, Old Mather on Pigeon Street from whom his father bought his good cigars, the wire workers, wood carvers, the spinners of worsted yarn, the city’s single zincographer and its numerous merchants of zinc, the joiners, the dairymen, the engine setters and the fustian
cutters. All living now in the rain-soaked, smoke racked city, their lives indivisible from their labour, their scraping and cutting, scratching, hammering their tearing away at their meagre or immodest livings, for the city seemed only to allow the two extremes. Charles opened his eyes and the pageant vanished. His mother was looking out of the window with an expression so blank as to be almost vatic. Workers were passing through the high iron hoop of the gates of the lamp-wick factory, spilling onto the pavement, women wrapped in shrew-brown shawls, those children fortunate enough to have coats with their collars turned against the cold.

The cab slowed as a handcart piled with sticks of firewood tied in loose bundles was hauled out of a side street. It inched slowly ahead of them. The men pulling the cart ignored the cabman’s shouts for them to move aside. Tired of idling behind the handcart the cabman turned down Aytoun Street where a line of well-fed boys dressed like medieval friars were being led along by their master from the music school. Charles watched as the city gradually faded, the architecture dwindling in scale and ambition until the buildings receded to tightly packed rows of mandarin and chestnut brick, gable ends painted with advertisements in wide white letters for Ales, Hardware, Properties for Hire. Still his mother remained silent. As they passed the park it began to hail, a short shower, rattling on the roof of the hansom. He watched the walkers with their black umbrellas taking shelter in the bandstand, their footsteps marking the fallen hail.

When the cab arrived at the house he offered his hand to his mother. Clutching the umbrella he attempted to manoeuvre it to protect her from the soft drizzle into which the hail had declined. His movements were awkward but his mother’s hand accepted his and they engineered her descent from the folding steps. He paid the
driver. As the cabman pocketed the coins, he unlatched the gates at the front the house, and his mother without looking at him said,

‘I spoke with Dr Calthorpe about the child.’

She paused turning to look straight at Charles,

‘No damage he could detect has been done.’

She raised her eyebrows, forehead creasing heavily, veined lids half closed, signaling to Charles this was regrettable. When no response was forthcoming she sniffed then turned sharply, calling out to her dogs who came haring down the path towards her.
There were lilies on the Purbeck marble altar. The pale cones of their open throats flecked and freckled with pollen, jade stems vibrant against the dark church interior. The shallow soapstone font lay empty. Beside the flowers a host of altar candles burned, black tapers honeying above the bleached wax of their stout and rounded bodies. The church smelled of musk, wet dust, damp books, the bitter mineral smell of stone after rainfall, behind it somewhere the priest’s hair oil. The church was small, the roughly finished stone of the exterior forming a squat cruciform bound by two stunted transepts; a tower just tall enough to house the ringing chamber and belfry. Late afternoon light, colour of weak gin, washed from the windows at the west, falling through uneven leading, leaving dim the boxy nave. The priest wore a faded cassock, as if it had been tailored to a man twice his size then left hanging on the line in the seminary garden a whole summer. The priest’s silver hair was thinning, his pale pink scalp showed through in places. He held a heavy black book open in his palms as he read aloud:

‘The union of husband and wife in heart, body… for the help and comfort given one another in prosperity and adversity… God’s will, for the procreation of children and their nurture’

From the back of the church there came a muted ringing, the tiny broken bell of water dripping into a bucket. The church door whined at its hinges. A bright gap ran down the centre. Whoever was at the threshold changed their mind about entering. The crack of light thinned then disappeared entirely. The priest glanced from his reading to Charles. Then sniffing loudly, continued:
‘In the knowledge and love of the Lord. Therefore marriage is not to be entered into unadvisedly or lightly, but reverently, deliberately, and in accordance with the purposes for which it was instituted by’ he paused ‘God’

Before the altar Lottie and Charles stood awaiting their time to speak as instructed. Lottie held a posy of winter flowers; honeysuckle and yellow forsythia plaited at the stems. Her dress grey and beaded, twelve buttons along the bodice, sleeves puffed at the shoulder and a rough velvet collar that came in high at the neck. The burn where it had healed was visible: a strip of glossy mahogany pigment against her white skin. The cuffs of the dress dark velvet with a pattern of pampas grass embroidered on the skirts. The dress Charles’ mother picked for her the week she returned from the hospital. The seamstress sent over, Charles’ mother saying to Lottie before she was shown through: ‘the aim is not to disguise the,’ she struggled for the word then made do by gesturing to Lottie’s swollen stomach ‘but to diminish its appearance.’ His mother left the room and the seamstress’s girl, buck-toothed, mousy, lank hair scraped back into a bun, entered unsure whether to demur or dictate to Lottie.

Behind them in the empty church light fell faintly on the rows of polished pews; on the kneeling pads woven with flowers and passages from the Bible that hung behind them; on the spines of prayer books and the brass hooks in the aisles. Above the priest there was a stained glass window. It carried an image of Christ on the Cross and below an eagle in buff and the Lamb of God. The palette was limited, the Son of God rendered in marigolds and peppery reds at his bleeding side. Light through the glass Christ hit the priest’s sparse hair in a dappled pattern, lighting him as if he were a painted tin figure on fairground amusement. Lottie carefully shifted her weight from foot to foot. Her arches ached. She could feel the cold moving up
through her; up from the stone flags, through the soles of her feet, into her shins and the small bones of her feet. She felt as if she has been standing now for hours. The shoes were too thin. She knew they were too thin when she first tried them but she did not mention the fact to Charles’s mother. Charles stared ahead and up at the priest. His jaw clenched, the wedge of bone at his mandible pulsing in a box of shifting shadow. His mother and father sat on the front row, a Bible’s width between them, like strangers in a station waiting room. Charles’ father, hands capping his knees, head drooping forward, his trimmed beard streaked with ragged platinum. He stared ahead as if listening to a sentencing. Charles’ mother toyed with her handkerchief. She was wearing a wool and satin walking suit in laurel. Charles heard the leak again, the drip-drip-dripping at the back of the church beyond the shining rows of empty pews, behind the absent congregation. Water pooling in the rust-rimmed milking bucket the priest nudged aside as they made their way down the aisle. The priest read Paul’s Epistle to the Ephesians. Charles watched the flicker of his quick pink tongue as it darted across his lips, felt his hot, gamey breath against their faces.

‘For this reason I bow my knees before the Father,’ the priest glanced beyond the couple to Charles’ father, ‘that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.’
There was a flapping of wings, a crisp snapping of feather against air, a bird broke across the highest part of the nave through the gap in the lead flashing at the apex out into the pearl grey winter sky.

When the service was finished the priest led Charles’ father outside. Charles followed a few paces behind. Hoar-frost glittered along the pavement circling the church, on the redbrick sills of the church windows, on its common brick slopes, tiny crystals gathered in the names cut into the tombstones of the graveyard: Chadwick, Atherton, Sullivan, Bennet, all silvered by the frozen water. Below the buttress on the west side of the church the priest pointed to a gargoyle, sharp beak covered in lichen, the bottom of its jaw fallen away.

‘Work of vandals or some imperfection in the stone. Alas I suspect now we shall never know,’ the priest nudged the fragments of fallen gargoyle with his boot. Charles’ father gazed up at the broken face.

‘Any help to see our friend returned to its rightful place would be a source of gratitude’

Charles’ father said nothing. His gaze was fixed on the gargoyle with the broken mouth as if it might any moment address him. He looked at Charles, back to the gargoyle, then finally the priest. Charles’ father touched his breast pocket.

‘I shall send a contribution in the morning’

The priest bowed, a terse little wet-lipped bow then made off along the frost-covered pavement, his baggy cassock bellowing as he strode away.

‘You should go to your wife.’ Charles’ father said, still staring up at the broken gargoyle.

Across the churchyard the two Mrs Wrights were walking among the tombstones.
Charles’ mother was pointing out the numerous places the cemetery plots had fallen into disrepair.

‘Delacroix, that’s an odd name to find in an English church yard’ Charles’ mother said as she and Lottie paused by a black marble tombstone

‘I wonder how a De-la-croix ended up here?’

She removed her glove and ran her bare finger over the lettering. There was gold leaf beneath the frost.

‘I suppose none of us knows where our bones will be buried.’ she said, touching the gold leaf of the dead man’s name.

‘Or how far from home we might find ourselves when the Good Lord calls us his bosom.’ She left the words hanging in the air for a moment,

‘Ah, look, there’s your husband, we might walk over and join him now.’

As his father walked towards the women, Charles watched the choir being led into the church. The choirmaster held the door open touching each child lightly on the head as they entered. From inside came the sound of a low voice for a few moments then a pregnant silence before their singing began. The bell in the squat tower struck five, reverberating across the churchyard. Charles noticed Lottie had left her posy resting on top of a stone. ‘Come along now,’ his father said opening the gate latch, then the door of the waiting cab. The late sun was striking a stone crucifix, the shadow long across the lightly frosted ground. In the leaded windows candles were being lit. A scrawny robin, winter-thin, landed on the lych-gate, ruffled its dull grey feathers and terracotta bib into a puffed ball, an inch of earthworm writhing in its tiny, seed-shaped beak.
The trunk was almost full. Four shirts, a winter hat, a pair of dress shoes he had never worn but that had somehow become scuffed around the toe. Charles gently lowered the lid to test the remaining capacity. One of the ribs had splintered. He ran his fingers along it until they snagged on the broken spar. Had it been like that since Florence? He saw an image of himself and Bird on the old stones of some heat-bleached piazza, skin prickling as he recalled the warmth. He probably should have sent it to be mended. In the corner of his eye Charles saw a shadow out on the landing. He watched it for a moment, lengthening by an inch or two, then receding again.

‘Hallo Tabitha,’

‘Hallo Frater,’ Tabitha said stepping into the space her shadow occupied, hands behind her back. She must have been outside as there was snow in her hair, a few flakes held and slowly melting on the upper lashes of her right eye.

‘Mama tells me you are going away,’

‘Yes, for a little while.’

‘She said it wouldn’t do to mention it to anyone.’

As Tabitha breathed there was a soft whistling around her nostrils.

‘It’s not our fault is it?’

‘Why not at all.’

‘Oh good,’

Tabitha gave the wide, closed-lipped smile of the habitually praised. Tilting her head a little as if to cushion the inferred compliment as she received it.

‘Well I thought you might want something to read while you’re away,’
She handed him the Waverley, the pages thickly and inexpertly glued back to cover the spine. When Tabitha spoke next there was a brittleness to her voice Charles had never heard before

‘We shall see you again shan’t we?’

‘Of course you will, in no time at all’

Tabitha’s face brightened, a blaze of bright pink gums and recent teeth.

‘Thought so. Silly Eloise was awfully worried we should not. I shall tell her right away.’
'And I’m told by my husband that work is the purpose of your journey?’

‘Yes, I intend to take up a position in the employ of a cousin’

‘And what, may I enquire, is his trade?’

‘He is in fruit.’

‘Why, that makes it sound rather like the man himself is flowering.’

The dining room rose sharply, hung suspended for a moment then righted itself to the sound of crockery colliding and the muttering of blue suited stewards. Mr Davenport halted a salt-cellar with the flat of his hand. Mrs Davenport, Charles’ interlocutor, lightly touched the corner of her mouth with her napkin. Grateful for the brief adjournment in the questioning, Charles broke a fragment of bread roll into his soup. He watched it soften and bloat among the thin strips of carrot and turnip then fished it out with his spoon. Through the portholes of the drably grand saloon it was dark out at sea, a few wisps of puce-coloured cloud around the horizon and a spray of stars hanging in a loose arc above the ocean. As the next big wave broke at the bow there was a flash in the far distance, just off to the ship’s starboard, a great tinkling and rattling of tableware and chandeliers. Those seated on Charles’ side waited a moment, a concentrated hush as they listened for thunder out at sea.

The white tablecloth, pristine at the start of the supper, was covered with spots and splashes of soup and drops of the Chateau Latour Mr Davenport had worked his way through almost single-handedly. They had dined with the same company last night and the night before, little said beside an exchange of names and a few pleasantries over a thin, watery potage and some overcooked meat Charles thought might be veal.
To Charles’s right sat a very fat and largely silent man called Hunnicutt who introduced himself as from Kentucky as if it were a country of its own. To his left the Davenports. Mrs Davenport, small and feline with quick mouse-killing eyes. Mr Davenport, self-appointed authority on the grapes of Paulliac and the Haut-Médoc. Age seemed to have claimed his craggy face but left his thick mop of yellow hair entirely unaltered since boyhood. His skin was the colour of the marbling on a good sirloin steak. The Davenports were from Concord, New York and, Charles had discovered last night, lived off income derived from a pair of flourmills in Ohio, among several other inherited interests. Now it was Mr Davenport’s turn to take the initiative with conversation.

‘Now, Young Mr Wright, I am sure you will have seen Swain Gifford’s illustrations in Picturesque America. If you have not I would advise you seek out a copy. Swain Gifford is a friend of mine, longstanding, I was one of the subscribers to the Appleton and Company Edition. Richmond, my boyhood home, is captured in every detail imaginable, right down to what they term ‘the perpetual requiem of the James River’. Is that not a lovely phrase Mrs Wright?

Lottie nodded and smiled at Mr Davenport.

‘The work evokes Richmond in its sublime entirety, from foundries to flour mills. It truly is a thing of beauty.

Mr Davenport grinned contentedly recalling the book and the small part he played in bringing it to existence. Another huge wave broke across the ship, a moment of uneasy silence followed then gradually the sound of spoons against the china bowls and muted conversation returned to the saloon.

‘And Mr Hunnicutt, what was your reason for travelling to England?’ Charles asked looking to their quieter neighbour, avoiding the Davenports. Hunnicutt, who
was either deaf or feigning deafness, ignored Charles and supped noisily at his soup, napkin tucked at this throat and spread in a wide white fan across his shirtfront.

‘Six months?’ Mrs Davenport asked drily.

‘You have been married six months at the very least I should imagine?’

She gave a wide smile revealing small, very white teeth, the skin puckering in fine creases at the corners of her hazel eyes.

‘Which would make it a spring wedding. I adore spring weddings. Mrs Wright you must tell me everything. I hear lilies are the fashion in England. I have never been able to abide them.’

Mrs Davenport’s eyes, fiercely bright now, darted from Lottie to Charles.

‘I must confess, I did wonder, did I not,’ Mrs Davenport asked, looking over to her husband, ‘why it was you chose to travel now and not once baby is born. It was my understanding most Englishmen wanted their heirs born on native soil. Yours, it seems, will be a Yankee.’

On hearing the word Yankee, Hunnicutt, the linings of his loosely pouched eyes the colour of cut watermelon, looked up from his soup, the brimming spoon poised at his lips.

‘Why did you choose to travel now Mr Wright?’ Mrs Davenport asked again, acid this time, any veneer of charm stripped away, her eyes fixed firmly on Charles. Charles stood up and set his napkin across the back of his chair where it hung like a flag of surrender.

‘I hope you will excuse us Mr Hunnicutt,’

Hunnicutt nodded at his soup and gave a little grunt like a rooting sow.

‘Come,’ Charles said to Lottie.

‘Why, I hope I have not given offence…’ Mrs Davenport asked
‘None whatsoever.’ Charles said cutting her off midsentence.

‘This ship is the offender here I believe,’ Mr Davenport pronounced from beneath his blonde mop of boy’s hair, adding a further twist of pepper to his soup.

‘Mr Wright is a little green about the gills’ he pointed at Charles with the pepper pot. ‘Nothing to be ashamed of there, happened to me many times as a younger man.’

‘You’re husband is correct.’

‘He is a very wise man’ Mrs Davenport replied with the tart finality of one deprived of a game she had enjoyed playing.

*

It was still squally four days later as they passed the Sandy Hook Lightship, but by the time the steamer had navigated the Ambrose Channel and reached the port of New York, the water had calmed to a single sheet of hammered zinc. In the sky above the cloud that had trailed them since daybreak had solidified into a dense, pearlescent fog that now squatted across the harbour mouth. It made ghostly the immense commotion of the ship unloading at the East River pier; softening the sound of gangways slamming down, horses whinnying, the clatter of drays and handcarts, the incessant cawing of gulls and the distant, grief-laden moaning of ships’ horns. Officials, porters, employees of the line yelling and rushing between the ship and the low stone buildings at the top of the pier, their lamps slicing pale wedges through the fog as they moved. Horse dung and hot tar, fresh creosote and the rank metallic whiff of seaweed rotting on the pier supports were all mingled with and sharpened by the fog. On the pier the herds of third class passengers, roused from the burlap mattresses of their metal berths in steerage, were being corralled towards the waiting ferries to Ellis Island where they would shortly be inspected for pregnancy, senility,
lung complaints, have eyelids turned inside out by button hooks and hairpins to search for traces of disease. The steamship’s massive iron flank loomed like a cliff face at the pier-side and, tiny among the commotion, Charles and Lottie stood beside their luggage. Three ribbed, chestnut coloured trunks, Charles checking the itinerary; there were duties to perform he reminded himself, the prospect had caused an amorphous sense of anxiety increasing each day as landfall approached and he was forced to contemplate leaving the regulated, floating world of the steamer, its knowable dangers. Mrs Davenport had cut Charles dead when they passed her yesterday. Now there were suitable lodgings for the evening to be secured, train timetables to be surveyed, an immense journeying ahead of them, more than a thousand miles to traverse, and at the end of it all Mayhew, who Charles knew next to nothing about.

It had begun to snow, the first few brittle flakes drifting gently through the fog. Charles needed to find help with the trunks before the snow set in, someone who would not vanish into the crowd with their belongings (little chance of their papers going amiss bound as they were tightly to the clammy skin of Charles’ chest). Several porters had approached offering their services: despite their long blue aprons they seemed dangerously casual. Charles felt unable to establish a clear authority over them. He stood looking into the shifting crowds, the fog-bound, roughly choreographed commotion of the pier-side. ‘Won’t be a moment’ he said with a small frown stepping forwards. After a few paces he stopped, turned and looked back: the drifting snowflakes, the dense black smoke from the ship’s four funnels, Lottie by the luggage, black umbrella open, the triangular sections slowly filling with snow. Even something as simple as finding a boy to help with their baggage now seemed an impossibly difficult task. Charles felt a headache forming behind his eyes,
steady waves of soft pain from his temples above the eye sockets up towards the top of his skull, then a little hot retch of acid spurt up into his mouth.

‘Mr Wright? Charles Wright?’

The voice - bluff, authoritative, its vowels coarsened by drink - cut across the others on the pier. It came from a man in a full-length beaver skin coat, glossy pelage patched in places with mismatching fur.

‘Mr Charles Wright?’ the man even more emphatically this time, as if impersonating an American with great enthusiasm but only a middling degree of success. ‘I’d recognise that profile anywhere, even in this fog.’

The man who stood before Charles was barrel-chested, like a circus strong man, rubicund, a high colour in his dry and roughly shaved pink cheeks. It was a round, kind face with very pale blue eyes and a heavy, well-groomed moustache above a sparse, tawny triangle of beard. He moved with a set of distinctive grasping gestures as if he sought to bring everything to close-quarters. He dragged the cuff of his beaver fur coat across his brow then plucked a matching misshapen fur hat from his head and ran the fingers of the same hand over the dome of his bald skull. There was faint, asymmetric rash at the edges his crown, tapering down between the thick ridges of muscle in the nape of his neck.

‘Hellishly hot in this thing,’ said Mayhew looking at Lottie under the umbrella, grimacing slightly, and jutting forward his jaw. ‘Glad that your steamer wasn’t delayed, lost a little more than I can afford to a cattle baron at Brandes last night, some five card vying game he claimed to have picked up in Mississippi,’

Mayhew gestured for a porter to come and help with the baggage.

‘I have a room reserved for you at the Plaza.’
Mayhew grabbed the handle of one of the trunks and directed the porter towards the others.

‘Thought a touch of luxury may be in order after your crossing.’

He softened his voice into a whisper

‘Your mother cabled to tell me you were travelling Second Class.’

Mayhew pressed ten cents into the palm of the porter, an elderly, stooping man with honey coloured skin and a broad, badly broken nose, then he nodded brusquely to indicate no further monies would be forthcoming.

‘But won’t that be a great expense?’ Lottie asked,

‘A great expense,’ said Mayhew

‘I’m told there’s a Tiffany ceiling and a two-story ballroom. Not that you will have chance to experience either I’m afraid, we’re on the first train Jacksonville in the morning. And please do not despair dear child, the room is courtesy of HJ Mayhew.’

Mayhew winked then took Lottie’s fingers in a tight bunch and pecked a little flurry of kisses on the back of her hand.

‘Thank you’ said Charles, the immense relief spreading through him.

* 

That evening Charles and Lottie sat down to a supper of calf’s head soup with madeira, leg of mutton and gooseberry soufflé. They took their meal alone and early in the corner of a vast and almost entirely deserted dining room, their table between two huge potted ferns, under great glass chandeliers, their reflection repeated infinitely in the ornately mirrored walls. After supper, as the dining room was beginning to fill, they retired to their room to rest. Mayhew, who had an engagement in the city, had promised to call on them later. Charles was bent over the basin of

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soap-clouded water, dragging the blade of a razor down his cheeks and the lower parts of his throat. The thick layer of the soap felt soft and nourishing against his skin. He had shaved before dinner but was repeating it for the sheer luxury, for the stillness of the thickly carpeted floor beneath his feet. Lottie was resting on the bed nearby, wondering what to say to Charles. They were still to talk about anything beyond the immediate or the superficial, her appetite, her health, changes in the weather. He behaved towards her, Lottie thought, like an overly attentive servant, one who quietly hoped that at any moment he might be relieved of his duties: unrelentingly courteous, well-mannered, distant. Unless, that was, a black mood took him and then he would sit feigning to read the book with the broken spine he had brought with him from England. Once in the night she had woken to find him crying. She had risen out of her wooden bed and walked over and stroked his brow until he fell back to sleep. Then was angry for having done so the next day. Surely he should be caring for her, all day? She met him with a formality more severe and distant than his own. There was a knock on the door. Charles set down his razor wiping his neck with a white towel.

Mayhew was wearing evening dress, the peaked lapels of his silk-faced jacket. His white lawn bowtie undone, the middle one of his three mother of pearl dress studs missing. He was holding a bottle of champagne, the dark green glass dimpled, thumb deep, at the heel. It was glistening fresh from the bucket, beads of water leaving slick black trails down its cold sides, the overlapping perfect circles of a pair champagne flutes hooked between the fingers of his other hand.

‘Well, here we all are then,’ Mayhew said expansively ‘Here we all are.’
He stepped into the room, leaned back a little like a man landing a fish, then fired the cork up into the cornicing, with a thrilling smack, a solid mass of white bubbles momentarily projected from the lip of the bottle.
Mayhew’s mansion, with its cantilevered gables and broad overhanging eaves, stood  
two and a half stories high in the Florida sunlight. The formerly dove-grey sidings  
recently repainted coral pink, its whimsical appearance was added to by three  
hexagonal turrets and a wide, rosewood veranda, curving in two bellowing skirts  
around the sides of the house. The veranda with its ornamental spindles and ornate  
hand-carvings gave those fortunate enough to sit in its shady cool unrestricted views  
down into Mayhew’s flower garden, its jessamine and figs, its roses and wide white  
magnolia. A shallow, trout-brown river glittered across the foot of the softly sloping  
lawn, tangled knots of mangroves on the far bank. The river had been diverted a few  
miles up stream to feed Mayhew’s vast and immaculately tended orange groves, their  
continued expansion and the subsequent growth in revenues had built the house and  
the recently enlarged servants quarters to the rear. Charles observed a sobering in  
Mayhew the moment they arrived at Jacksonville, stepping from the train, greeting  
the stationmaster, a languid, elegant man with a finely combed set of silver  
moustaches, the type of figure you might expect to see instructing a corps de ballet  
not standing with a white flag and a whistle to his lips.  

Thomas, the overseer Mayhew mentioned in his letter, sent his son Samuel to  
meet them at Jacksonville. Samuel was in his early twenties Charles guessed to look  
at him, in blue flannel trousers and an immaculately pressed linen shirt, heavily  
starched, dazzlingly blue-white, a pair of handmade English leather shoes Charles  
recognized as Hook Knowles, makers favoured by Piggot-Roche and members of the  
Kestrel Club since their Royal Warrant, and a small pair of gold-rimmed spectacles.  
Standing on the station platform Samuel conveyed an air of dignity that struck
Charles as almost feminine. Charles watched Mayhew embrace Samuel on the station platform, standing hip to hip, his arm looped for a long moment around Samuel’s narrow waist.

From Jacksonville the party rode a gipsyish open-sided carriage with wicker seats and tasselled sun canopy, hauled by a decrepit looking horse, the blades of its old bones visible as it moved at a surprisingly quick trot. At the mansion Mayhew introduced Lottie and Charles to his numerous staff who had assembled in the relative cool of the cavernous hallway. Mayhew showed them around the mansion, Lottie admiring the care with which the house had been assembled from the large and airy parlour with its bank of bright windows running floor to ceiling and its burr walnut bookcases to the brass hinges, patterned with complicated knots of flowers, that sat inside every door in the house, servants quarters included.

On the train to Jacksonville Mayhew had taken Charles into the dining car to explain the programme of work he expected him to undertake on arrival. Mayhew seemed at ease in the dining car, running the flats of his hands over the tablecloths, flicking the glass shade on the table lamps with his fingernail so the fine glass returned a high note, Mayhew described to Charles how he took the first service two years ago ‘Always been loyal to The Clyde if ever New York required me. Knew all the Captains; Platt on the Seminole, Jock Robison on the Yemasee but while I was in the city I received word that George Mortimer Pullman himself was going to be on board for the maiden voyage of the New York to Florida service, so I switched my allegiance to the heavyweight steam locomotive for the return leg,’ Mayhew said lighting a cigar ‘a thousand miles in under thirty hours. All night they were burning bonfires in the sidings and waving to us as we passed, that seventy-soul carnival of steam and iron journeying southward from New Jersey. When we arrived in
Jacksonville we took a ferry across the St John River for champagne in the Hotel Ponce de Leon. By the summer the whole of Jacksonville was ripe with yellow fever, thousands shivering to death in their beds, red tongued, sweat drenched, people being instructed by the Times Union to eat no cabbage or fire off small arms to clear the air of spores, burn back with powder that dreaded miasma. Hand-stitched yellow flags hanging from windows. Frightful. Some crank in the Dispatch claiming it was astrological. I gave a hundred dollars of my own money to the fever hospital. Yellow Jack never made it as far as us I’m happy to relay. And by the time the frost arrived in November it was all but over...’ Sitting in the dining car with Mayhew Charles began to feel a needling disdain for his contemporaries at Cambridge. He pitied them, hunched among the old stones in the damp fens, listening to Piggot-Roche’s maxims, boys still, untested, untempered by the world.

* It was three months now since Charles and Lottie had arrived in Florida and Charles was still sweating. He felt as if he hadn’t stopped sweating since the moment they arrived. His shirt was soaked through, his boots covered in red dust, he had busied himself all morning at Mayhew’s request supervising the teams constructing shelters and stitching canvas covers for the orange trees, preparing a series of slat shacks, like tiny sentry boxes, to sit over the trees in the most vulnerable groves of the estates. The freeze five years ago had threatened to put Mayhew out of business but in fact had damaged his competitors, crippling some, gifting him the largest share of the market in the process. Most afternoons after working on his ascribed task Charles would shadow Mayhew as he conducted his business across the estates, negotiating pay schedules for the packers later in the year, granting interviews with businessmen
who sought his investment in schemes across the state. Today after he finished his morning’s work, Charles had been instructed to meet Mayhew in the library.

‘And this is my protégé Mr Charles Wright.’ Mayhew said as Charles entered.

Gallup and Holowill, engineers from Tallahassee, were already installed around the table. The former was a portly, florid man with a soft face and stubby babyish hands like those of a china doll, nails striated with tiny white dots, the cuticles torn and ragged, his business partner was lanky and hollowed-eyed, his face a series of deep shadowy depressions, the thick mark of his hat band visible on his broad forehead. The men were offering Mayhew the opportunity to invest in an operation extracting high-grade phosphate from sites across Okaloosa, Gilchrist and Layfyette. As Charles entered the library Gallup and Holowill stood, the feet of their chairs scraping a thin layer of wax from the parquet. Holowill, Charles now saw, was a good foot and a half taller than his business partner. Charles felt a flush of embarrassment at his lateness, his state of dress, at the unsettling attention of the men who looked at him as if his presence might be the deciding factor in the success of their petition.

‘Holowill and Gallup are outlining the particulars of their phosphate operation,’ Mayhew said sipping his tea, then reclining in his chair at the head of the long table clearly enjoying the attention of his visitors.

‘Man called Vogel started it all off looking for dinosaur bones in Dunellon,’ said Gallup bringing Charles up to speed. Gallup was sweating heavily, thick beads prickling along his brow which he dabbed with a folded polkadot handkerchief.

‘Simmons in Gainsville tried a decade back. But this is the real thing. Land prices are set to shoot up.’ Beside him Holowill nodded slowly and solemnly as if only just able to control the weight and direction of his massive head.
‘That’s a fact.’ added Gallup, ‘what our technique offers is a patented method for mapping and classifying of the areas with the largest deposits. Land going for a dollar an acre today will be selling for two, three hundred by the New Year, mark my words’

‘Okaloosa homesteaders will be waking up millionaires,’ Holowill prophesied in his deep-chested basso voice.

Gullup squeezed the handkerchief into his saucer. It pooled with drops of clouded sweat. Taking this as his signal Holowill proceeded to detail the operation, his long arms moving like a marionette as he spoke. Holowill spoke for a very long time, with the unhurried air of a senator running down a filibuster. Much of the speech was lost on Charles but it seemed to revolve around their patented technique, the merits of which Holowill listed in exhaustive detail while the workings were barely touched upon. Mayhew listened intently throughout, occasionally massaging the thick and fleshy lobe of his right ear in tiny circles counter-clockwise. At one point, somewhat mischievously Charles thought, Mayhew trimmed and lit a cigar with a great puff-puffing and puckering of cheeks but even that could not disrupt Holowill’s sombre flow.

By the time Holowill finished the atmosphere the library was stiller and heavier than when Charles entered, as if all Holowill’s talk had added a slight lag onto each second in its aftermath. Unjaded Mayhew began a series of questions about other investors, schemes of work, patents pending, there was even a note of excitement in his voice. By the time Mayhew finished his interest in the success of the Gallup & Holowill Phosphate Company seemed almost to equal that of its founders. Charles was certain Mayhew would invest perhaps even seek a controlling share in the business. Holowill and Gallup, both now grinning widely, seemed of the same mind,
warm handshakes were exchanged as the pair left the library. After showing the men to the door, Charles retook his seat beside Mayhew. ‘Proof, Charles,’ Mayhew said as they sat alone among the empty tea cups, slices of waxy lemon sodden and shapeless against the bone china sides, a fine skein of blue smoke hanging between them ‘and they have little of it’. Mayhew took the blown stub of his cigar from his mouth, the dark leaves loosely wet and uncompressed, with the same hand, using the pincer of his thumb and third finger fished a slice of lemon from his cup, then tore the wet flesh away with his teeth, its sourness narrowing his eyes. He deposited the spent rind on the lip. ‘Good luck to them, I say. But they’ll not see a cent from me.’

*  

As she had each day since her arrival Lottie watched the women sitting in the shade, their naked children playing at their feet as they talked. A girl with a baby at her high, clay-coloured breast smiling shyly, covering the infant with her braided hair, when she saw she was being watched. Their men close by clearing acres Mayhew had given to them so they could grow sweet potatoes and yams thick as bowling skittles, year round; working bare-backed among the coontie plants with their grubbing hoes, burning piles of palmetto roots. Samuel had driven her down in the buggy and left her under the cool shade of magnolia tree. Mayhew had given her a sketchbook and some charcoals, put Samuel at her disposal as she used them as a license to travel around the estate. The ease of the girl with the infant as if it were an extension of her own person. How many days had she passed like this now? Mayhew had made everything at her disposal. The limp, wet heat. She had worked her way through Trollope and Twain and Jules Verne and some tedious hunting journals Mayhew loaned her from his private library. Mayhew had shown her the little room set aside for the nursery. They couldn’t stay here forever. Perhaps Mayhew would
promote Charles. Perhaps they would have their own house. Despite Mayhew’s generosity she longed to talk to someone, the kind of easy conversation the women she watched were having now. She felt a sudden shifting movement a sort of rupture inside of her. She leant forward knocking the sketchbook falling from her lap. It was time. She could feel it was coming and said so very softly so as not to alarm Samuel who stood nearby with the buggy.
'And you are certain it will reach him?'

‘Dolly says so’

‘How does Dolly know?’

‘Oh Tab. She just knows’

‘What if she gives it to Mama?’

‘I shouldn’t think so,’ Eloise said enjoying for once being the better-informed sister. ‘When the post arrived I asked if there was any news from our brother and Dolly said no and then I said we should like to write him a letter and asked if she knew where we could reach him and Dolly said of course we do, Cook and I are in regular contact, your brother writes near daily, give the letter to us and we shall get it to him in no time at all, shan’t we Cook? And Cook who was folding napkins at the table nodded. And then Dolly said mind it shall cost you I’m afraid, then she looked over at Cook and Cook gave a sort of smile and Dolly said a shilling and then Cook sort of pinched her lips and looked a little crossly as though Dolly were being unkind and said no, no, no, an ha’penny. And Dolly said Yes, I mean an ha’penny. Then before I could say anything Mama walked in carrying that horrid new dog, fur on its belly all wet, little pink feet scratching away and asked what on earth I was doing in the kitchen. And when I turned around Dolly had vanished and Cook was on her way to the cold store. That’s when I came up here to the nursery to find you.’

‘Well, if you’re sure…’ Tabitha said already wondering of what important news she need inform her distant brother.
The tiny features that a few months ago seemed little more than nubs and lumps were now taking on the makings of a face. A genuine face, Charles thought, an entire life belonging to these few pounds of flesh; the tiny chambers of its lungs, its cherry-size heart. Charles looked down at Wallace in the cradle. His infant son shifted under the claret and blue bear paw blanket. There were figures in relief along the cradle’s lace wood inlays; Mayhew, hunting crop in hand among his orange groves and on the other panel boxy representations of Charles and Lottie. Lottie had wept when Mayhew unveiled the cradle pulling clear a sheet to reveal a wide red ribbon looped about its body. Charles liked to visit Wallace at this hour, just after he had been settled and the house was moving towards evening. Charles allowed himself to wonder what dreams were passing through his son’s infant mind. He imagined Wallace through the stages of his childhood bruised of knee, bloody of nose, studious and inquisitive in adolescence, a grown man; urgent, vital, striving, in age a prosperous font of wisdom, family gathered around him and Charles just a distant figure, vanquished to the past, a memory pulsing somewhere in his son’s mind, surviving in few half-recalled details, a thinning sense of someone that vaguely coalesced around the word ‘father’. The prospect of his own erasure sent a chill flickering through Charles. What type of man would his son remember?

For weeks now Charles had felt a growing frustration at life under Mayhew, a restlessness forming within him that no amount of research into future fruit cultivars or any other reports Mayhew had him compile could satisfy. As the weeks passed whenever Charles offered to oversee some task he felt a tightening of Mayhew’s grip ‘No need, dear boy. Thomas more than capable’ Mayhew would declare. Charles
watched Wallace lift a soft pink hand and bat it against the fat cheek of his sleeping face. ‘Your father will make you proud,’ Charles said, then kissed two fingers and set them on his sleeping son’s brow, it pulsed into a frown, the baby wriggling free of the shadow of his father’s hand. Closing the door softly, Charles made his way down the staircase to the library. The house had absorbed them into its routines. Even the stairs were familiar now; the low creak at the first turn of the stairs, the way the light struck the oils in their gold frames, that stormy seascape with its battle scene, the landscapes with their hummingbirds and orchids in soft cerises and pinks, all there as Charles left with Mayhew in the morning or in the evenings, as now, when all the colours deepened and the fine detail returned, the hummingbirds eye suddenly clear, the rippling crenulations in the silken orchids visible. Each night as the house was moving towards rest Charles would meet with Mayhew in the library to discuss the day’s business. As Charles entered he saw Mayhew in his smoking jacket, loosely belted, a swirling mess of mauves, soft crimson and chocolate piping. He was standing by a set of bookshelves above which was mounted a six point stag’s head in a shield-shaped surround, a leather riding crop and long huntsman’s whip hung from the antlers, fanned around the head half a dozen or so heavy-looking cutlasses and sabres and above two ancient flintlock muskets resting on a thickly-nubbed sets of smaller horns. When Mayhew saw Charles he held up a stiff white envelope. Charles shook his head as if declining a cigarette or a further drink.

‘Really my dear boy, you should write, your mother shall only receives information from me otherwise and you know I am wont to elaborate and embroider’

‘No, thank you,’

‘It has been almost a year,’

‘I know very well how long it has been,’
‘As you wish.’ Mayhew said setting the letter down on the table then picking up the stub of his cigar. ‘Now, those water logged pits up near the nurseries?’

‘Drained this morning,’

‘Good. Last thing we want is the root-collars to hard-pan. What about the Peruvian Guano? I hear Gleason over in Eau Gallie has been boasting his days grinding pig’s bones are behind him. You know’ said Mayhew drawing hard on a stub of his cigar, the red deepening then fading in its layers ‘when I first came over with Trench Townsend in ’74 - Gleason was nothing more than a storekeeper’s son. I remember there was this fellow Mansfield who was with our party, Master of the Kildare Hunt. Mansfield had an absolutely blazing row with Gleason about a pair of Cuban bloodhounds – savage creatures, cropped ears, six feet high on their hind legs – brought over on the boat from Sagua La Grande. Gleason somehow got into his skull Mansfield had promised them in payment for debts at the store in Fernadina. That was the night we made camp in the Myyaka Swamp. Mansfield was furious but Gleason kept insisting they were his, followed us all that way on a pony of his father’s to claim them. Threatened to turn very nasty. Mansfield ended up giving him a demi-john of whiskey and Ballard Rifle rather than part with the dogs, which left him only a double-barrel breach loader. Mansfield shot more egret and ibis than anyone in the party, very silly birds, we ribbed him for it no end. Still wonder what happened to those bloodhounds. I mean, he could hardly have taken them back to Ireland with him, could he?’ Mayhew paused and made a brief attempt to relight his cigar before abandoning the stub in a bronze pedestal ashtray where the smouldering leaves lay, the soft fire slowly dying in them.

‘Forgive me Charles. Where was I?

‘Peru,’
'Ah, yes, guano. And?’

‘I sent Samuel for it this afternoon.’

‘You’re not overworking him are you?’

‘Samuel?’

‘Yes,’

‘Hardly’

Charles thought of the cufflinks he had seen Samuel wearing that afternoon, sterling silver with little agate pebbles at their centre, his coyness when he had complimented him on them.

‘Well now, dear boy, to business,’ said Mayhew ‘I wondered if I might ask your assistance in a small matter.’ Mayhew had a brandy decanter balanced in his hand. He set about filling two glasses, a carelessly large measure at first then splash by tiny splash until both glasses contained an equal amount of the deep teak liquid. Mayhew passed one to Charles, who stood watching Mayhew’s reflection in the mirrored overmantle, his body blurred in the green of the fireplace below. Mayhew settled himself into an oversized wing chair upholstered in faded beige linen.

‘As the purchases were finally completed this week I intend to advertise for a manager for our Oregon operation’ said Mayhew heaving himself up in the chair to free his smoking jacket from under his buttock.

‘What I require is a man of calibre.’

Mayhew was becoming animated.

‘Not some fly by night, he must be a person of keen ability and drive,’

Mayhew held out a piece of paper on which he had listed each trait, appended with a roman numeral, under the heading ‘Requirements and Characteristics’.

Among other qualities it called for a man of *spiritual cleanliness* and *unambiguous*
moral excellence. ‘Wondered if you might be able to help word the advertisement, snare us the right fellow.’

Charles pretended to study the particulars more closely.

‘I think I know the perfect candidate,’

‘Really?’ said Mayhew.

Without looking up from the list Charles tapped his index finger three times above his heart.

‘You are aware of the distances,?’

‘We have travelled already have we not?’

‘My dear boy, you are a father now, your place is here for the time being at least,’

Mayhew affected a pained, plaintive expression, turning down the corners of his mouth, making wide his pale blue eyes.

‘Are you not content?’

Unfair, thought Charles, who decided to hold his ground.

‘You’ll not find a better candidate,’

‘It is a very long way Charles,’ Mayhew said a little patronisingly then realising this added, ‘and your help here is invaluable.’

Mayhew took a sip of brandy then held it for a moment in a bulging reservoir below his bottom lip before swallowing.

‘And I know of at least one reason its shall remain an impossibility,’

‘Why is that then?’ said Charles a little wearied now.

‘I should miss you all terribly.’

*
A week passed and then another week, Charles began to wonder if Mayhew had simply ignored his offer. It was Friday morning when Charles saw the advert for the position in the Orchard and Farm section of the newspaper. Someone had left it open on the sideboard in the hallway. The advert sat in a black edged box opposite the news from the County Clerks Office and the list of Hotel Arrivals, above an article on the Virtues of the Pawpaw and the Big Profits to be had from the Bartlett Pear, its capitalised, emboldened first line proclaiming: HJ MAYHEW IS HIRING. ‘We shall snare him yet,’ Mayhew said brightly, tapping the advert with the looped leather tip of his hunting crop, then placing a braided heavy-looking straw hat had on his head and stepping out into the sunlight toward Samuel in the waiting trap. Charles resolved he would speak to Mayhew after supper and setting down his coffee so the saucer obscured the advert, hurried to join them in the buggy. That evening when they had finished eating a supper of sardines in aspic, a Puget Sound Salmon, followed by Broiled Teal duck on toast and a stick of celery a piece, Mayhew asked Lottie and Charles to join him in the library.

‘Now,’ Mayhew said, clumsily wiping his mouth and hands on a large linen napkin he had carried through from the dining room then pulling a series of rolled maps from the stand and bearing them in his arms piled like oversized sticks of firewood to the table where he released them with a airy brittle clatter.

‘There is business to attend to. Lottie, my dear, why don’t you come and listen, this concerns you too.’ Mayhew took the topmost map and spread it out across the table, weighting its corners with candlesticks. The sheets of corpse-grey paper were veined with rivers and trails. The evening was hot and the windows were open bearing in the night sounds. Lottie had begun to recognize the sounds, sitting on the
porch. Mayhew spread his hands over the map, the candle light flickering four points in each corner.

‘As you will see Charles, these are the lands I have newly purchased in Oregon, acres that within these three months you shall be occupying’

Mayhew leant over and set a hand on Charles shoulder. It was heavy and warm and the scent of grapefruit and lemon from his Hoyts Cologne, came from the cuff.

‘I have been selfish with your company.’ Mayhew said straightening himself up.

‘You have proved yourself as good as any in my employment. I shall speak plainly with you Charles. I secured a manager for the Oregon estates, man by the name of Sulivant with a diploma from the Ohio Agricultural and Mechanical College and a decade with the State Department in Georgia but his wife has been taken ill, some form of palsy he claims only the Georgia doctors can cure, so I am willing, on a strictly probationary basis, to allow you to oversee the first year…’

Lottie watched Charles’ body tense, shoulders hunching forward, a broad smile break across his face. Lottie was barely listening to the men as they talked in their hushed, serious way. She was looking at the map, the fineness of the lines that marked each parcel of land in the county, the parcels shaded amber and cochineal pink, the numbers of those for sale and the question marks at the centre of those whose ownership was somewhere in dispute. Charles pointed to where the house stood that would be theirs and then, a palm’s span on the map, the plots set aside for the new orchards. Looking at the map she saw the closest farm was a knuckle’s width away, which meant a mile if not more.
The Grand National Hotel dance took place each Friday in the huge and airy dining saloons that lay empty and bereft of guests throughout the week. The soprano wore a ruby red gown and kid leather slippers, struggling with the notes at the higher end of the register, where her voice would grow thin then fray into a reedy tremolo, her head tipped back, pale mouth yawning open to reveal a set of discoloured teeth, and stretch marks that ran in wide creases along the cartilage in her neck. Behind her the Kissimee Concert Band kept time as the dancers moved around the crowded room. Among the thick heat of bodies, the susurrus of skirts as their flared hems swished over the boards, Charles’ hand rested on the small of Lottie’s back. White light from the chandeliers prickled on the polished floor, the clashing perfumes and the hot musk of men and women alike barely tamed beneath them. Charles guided Lottie through the swaying shapes. When they were too tired to dance any longer, Charles led her from the floor and ladled two cups of punch into cranberry coloured glasses in silver holders. Sickly sweet then bitter. Afterwards the colours of the women’s gowns more vivid among whole great swirl of music and laughter. They danced again then Lottie told Charles she must sit else she would faint. At the far side of the saloon, on a bank of ladder-back chairs a lady sat alone, cooling herself with a point de gaze lace fan, its silk cord and heavy tassel nested in her lap.

‘I must confess when I learned a young English couple would be among the party this evening I consulted my Sherwood,’ the lady with the fan said, a little drily, as Lottie took a seat beside her, then in a confiding, intimate tone, as if they were old friends already, half-whispered

‘There is a chapter on How to treat the English’.
The lady with the pont de gaze lace fan smiled and the two women laughed. Lottie felt profoundly contented to be speaking with this woman, with the hushed, knowing intimacy they were sharing in the hot ballroom. Everything about the moment felt correct, the lady’s voice, her soft slightly down-turned eyes, her gentle, half-mocking tone as she introduced herself as Miss Martha Anderson and explained how, at thirty five, she was already known as an ‘elderly girl’ and had given up any hope of marrying, contenting herself with life in her father’s house, an engineer who had worked on the Gulf Coast Canal and written a textbook on hydraulic cements and mortars with a friend from Westpoint.

‘Now’ she said to Lottie ‘Let me see what I can recall from my Sherwood,’

She closed her eyes and pressed her forefinger to her lips.

‘The English lady always appears in a semi-grand toilette, with open Pompadour corsage and elbow sleeves,’

She paused as she tried to recall the pronouncements that followed.

‘While her daughters are uniformly sleeveless, and,’ she hesitated again

‘Generally in white dresses, often low-necked in depth of winter.’

Martha Anderson applauded herself, a tiny patter of her hands in their mousquetaire suede gloves, a glimpse of her narrow and powdered wrists beneath.

They laughed again but before Lottie could respond Martha Anderson insisted they take to their feet to join the quadrille that was about to begin.

The night was Mayhew’s gift. It was a week until Charles and Lottie were leaving for Oregon. Mayhew had arranged the carriage to take them to the Grand National Hotel. When Lottie worried aloud that they would know no one there Mayhew soothed her and promised to make the proper introductions in the weeks before, assuring them they would not enter the room as strangers. He had been as good as his
word and as they entered the bustling ballroom they were greeted by kind words and dozens of faces already familiar to them. The evening felt to Lottie an inexhaustible seam of pleasure and yet before she knew it the end was upon them and Charles was helping her up into the carriage. Lottie dozed in the carriage on the way back from the hotel, flushed from the cup of punch, Charles humming the tunes the soprano had been singing. Between the nodding snatches of deep weary sleep, Lottie thought back to the night that has passed of the dance at the Grand National Hotel. The unasked for kindnesses that led them there; Mayhew’s offer to have the maids stay with Wallace, the shining faces of the women who stood at his side as Mayhew waved them away, stately, formal, as if the group were posing for a visiting photographer. ‘A taste of the native hospitality before you depart’ Mayhew called it. The carriage and driver Mayhew arranged for them. Charles’s beard, scrappy and spare at his neck, flecked with red at his jaw, hardly a beard at all. Laughing in the carriage as she told him he would need a new voice to match it and how he ran through several including an impersonation of Mayhew and a version of Thomas.

In the heat of the carriage Lottie thought of America in all its vastness and splendour. She allowed herself to believe life might be filled with evenings like this. With a certainty that would never return, as the carriage rattled along and her husband dozed, a little flushed in the seat beside her, Lottie was convinced life might still unfold as she had imagined. As the hotel ballroom receded and Mayhew’s estates drew nearer, the heat of the new day already thickening, she thought that life might be filled with the good and beautiful things she imagined in girlhood. She was almost certain of it.
II.

Mahlo, Oregon 1893
1.

It began in the high places, above the old Indian trails, places the settlers didn’t have names for; places only a few trappers ever passed through dragging half-starved pack-horses, cursing having come this far and found nothing to kill or skin, no furs of any worth. It began with falcons and mud-eyed hawks gliding in tight circles above madrone and poison oak, the gold-crested kinglets that flitted above the snowpack gone now as it decayed and fed the summer streams. Soon the force of the thaw was converging: crystal veins snaking across the Cascades until it spent its power here at the creek, a mile or so from the little trading post of Mahloh, ten from the town of Medford in the heart of the county’s fruit belt. The falling water framing the stones in the riverbed so they glinted and shimmered like gems on the dark velvet of a jeweller’s tray.

Bright water flowing all the way down to the swimming hole where it stilled suddenly; the place Charles came the summer they arrived, his shins and hips covered in welts when he hauled himself from the water. For Lottie being here alone was new; beyond the house; beyond the cinder path that led to the Prentiss farm, their nearest neighbours. It wasn’t easy leaving her boy. At first she could only walk as far as the boundary fence, her hand on the stacked logs of the split rail, the knotted grain, her mind swarming with black thoughts as she hurried back across the field to find him sleeping: not taken by foxes or wild dogs, his eyes not glistening jellied hollows pecked out by crows. Now this place was almost sacred. She felt it as a craving every morning: a need to stand under that bright vault, that cathedral of leaves, the trilling choir of birdsong, to have her cotton skirts wetted and made dark by the spray from the falling water. In a moment she would return home; the small,
bare house, the single-story building where they had lived for almost two years now, its sun faded panelling cornflower blue, the shingling on the roof in need of replacement, to her sleeping boy, to her life. But for now she stood, eyes closed, listening to the falling water.

They had travelled from Florida on the transcontinental railroad. When they reached California Charles decided they would join the Oregon Trail at Twin Falls up from the Hot Springs in Nevada. He had fallen into conversation with a young man called Napier, a journalist, who intended to do the same and was writing about it for a newspaper back east. Napier assured Charles they could easily find a berth on one of the wagons. Lottie asked Charles to rethink his decision. Plead with him to telegraph Mayhew in Florida to advise. The train was running and could take them in half the time. But he was adamant. He was tired of the bone-shaking railroad, the locomotives with their airless cabins, the hours staring out of the window, the violent jerking. Despite the promises of the posters that this was the route which carried the U.S. Mail, used by Government in transportation of supplies, the boast that all old miners, plainsmen and hunters would testify to its superiority. ‘I will not arrive at our new home via the railway like some provincial clerk,’ Charles told her.

At Twin Falls they found the wagoners in their frayed woollen pantaloons and worn rubber coats exhausted from their journey, searching for an extra set of augers or gimlets, bartering for a kingbolt. Their feather beds rotting, their oxen, sore footed in need of shoeing. Schoolbooks and iron stoves and other luxuries abandoned hundreds of miles ago; left to rot and rust by roadsides, in culverts and cuttings. One elderly man clutched a set of seedlings, frail stems of peach and plum, in tiny terracotta pots. The final stage of the journey would take them over the Blue Mountains and the Cascades until they reached the Willamette River. Lottie
remembered the mewling of the oxen as they rose from folded legs that seemed too delicate to hold their huge hollow-looking bodies. She remembered walking with the baby in the early morning as the camp was rising, the bitter smell of burned coffee brewed too long on the fire, the poorest wagoners picking grubs from their hardtack, before hitching up their teams, at which Lottie would take to the covered wagon for the day under the bent bows, the canvas taut above her. The tented light where she would try to doze as the wagon rattled and jostled her. The sail-shaped shadow of Ignatius Roper curved huge on the canvas, whistling as he trotted alongside their wagon. Roper who rode a jackass and wore a wig made from muskox wool, that he would remove to wipe the sweat from his brow, his bald scalp fiercely red and mottled. His mule baring its teeth if you passed too close, its grating bray tearing the air. The mule so small and undernourished other wagoners teased its owner: ‘A fine rabbit you have there sir, do you plan to ride that thing all the way to the Pacific?’

They shared their wagon with Clough a wheelwright from Idaho who wore a set of porcelain dentures, sprung with wire. His travelling companion, Laughton Fox, had left the wagoners after contracting typhoid fever. Clough, snub-nosed, flushed, with watery grey eyes, had a habit of staring when people talked, as children stare at strangers, longer than is proper. An absent, patient, courteous look: as if the conversation were in a language he did not understand but would soon be translated for him. Clough was moving to Medford to work with his brother manufacturing furniture. His brother travelled the trail twelve years ago, he claimed, and had killed an Indian with a bullwhip, the thong ripping his throat clean out; his tongue lolling in the long red void where his windpipe should have sat. Clough, who was not there and could not have heard it, described the drowning sound as he fell to his knees, the pale torch of his bloodied trachea lay in the dirt a few paces away. It was a story
Charles asked Clough to repeat as they sat together above the jockey box under the wagon bow. It worried Lottie how these stories affected Charles. How he began to mimic the other wagoners accents and eccentricities of speech. When they made camp – the wagoners passing a battered canteen of liquor between them as they stood around the newly dug fire trench - she would walk with Wallace in her arms, she was sure she heard them talking about Charles, laughing at the English boy with all his questions—she was certain she heard the word ‘boy’— the tourist who joined them on the final stage of their journey. The women asking her about what brought him to travel among them when he could afford rail passage for his family. The women told her the story of the roping of the wolf by the outriders early in their journey. How they throttled it, a female, butchered the carcass in front of the entire camp. Cutting out the tongue. Keeping tail and ears tied to their belts. How they, the women, could hear the cubs howling for their mother in the woods beyond.

They lodged in Mahloh for a week on arriving as preparations were being made at the house. Mahloh little more than a single street, that served a handful of clapboard houses, a few rough timber beam farmsteads, occasionally workers from the lumberyard or orchards. The churned mud, slurry thick and sticky after rain, the clouds of tiny black flies like mist above the horse-dung. The three of them sharing a narrow iron bed in the boarding house. The owner insisting she saw proof of their marriage before she rented the room. On the first night a brawl in the street outside woke Lottie. First she heard whistling as if someone were calling a team of horses to a halt. She went to the window in her nightdress. On the street she saw a huge man in a pale check waistcoat standing inches from another who, on first glance, looked a boy but for his whiskers and the stoop in his shoulders. ‘Gyt, gyt, gyt’ someone was shouting. The tiny man was jabbing the air, pointing back to the house, the lamp lit
window and the part open door as if to show something in there that might settle their dispute. Then the tiny man hurled himself forwards, like a hare raised up on hind legs, landing blow after blow at the huge man’s face and when his fists failed him, flailing and scratching with his nails. There was a ribbon of blood streaming from the huge man’s brow, the colour of egg yolk in the light cast by the lamp in the window. Lottie watched as he tried to brush the blood away with his fingertips, delicately, as if it were a stray eyelash. Then their arms wrapped around each other they fell to the ground. Now the huge man had his opponent pinned by the crook of his arms, the tiny man twisting, flipping like a fish on dry land, as he tried to avoid the blows falling down on him, rhythmic as a piston from the huge man’s fists. The tiny man’s body grew limp and lifeless. Lottie turned away then came the sound of breaking glass and a single round from a pistol fired into the air, the muzzle flare visible through the drawn curtain. When they passed the next morning Lottie saw a patch of blood in the dirt, biscuit coloured and the size of a picnic blanket.

That afternoon they bought a buggy in Mahlo and a mare they named Bella given to crow-hopping if saddled but cheaper than any of the others at auction. The next day, as arranged, they rode the buggy, with its high yellow wheels and worn leather seat, east where their new neighbours the Prentisses had sent word they would meet them. Mrs Prentiss small, forthright, her dull platinum hair wound tight in a bun, her eyes black beads shrunken behind a pair of eyeglasses. Elijah Prentiss three heads higher than his wife, lugubrious, thick hands and oval head. Earlobes long and very pink, not much given to conversation or talk of any kind. Clarissa Prentiss introduced herself and inspected the young couple and their child as if they were goods she had ordered and had ridden out with her husband that morning to collect. Clarissa insisted Charles ride in their trap with her husband, the route
involved a series of turns through the woods that Charles needed to memorise. She would follow with Lottie and the boy in the buggy. Clarissa Prentiss was harder with the horse than Charles, clicking and hissing, snapping the reins down hard. Bella resisted at first, swinging her jaw, blowing hard her lips but Clarissa did not relent, each time pulling harder on the reins, snapping them down fiercely until the horse trotted with its chestnut head down. Clarissa turned to Lottie: ‘Horses and husbands’ she said smiling, showing the broken teeth in her mouth, nudging her spectacles higher up the bridge of her nose with her thumb.

From the buggy, sitting beside Clarissa Prentiss, Lottie saw their new house for the first time. The rough unpainted planks on the wide porch secured with barn nails the size of a man’s thumb. The blue paint flaking from the clapboard walls. The mildewed water butt, the filthy windows. Lottie got down from the buggy and walked to the porch. She placed her hand against the hollow columns of the portico, there was warmth in the blistered paint. She pushed the door and walked inside: a hot locked-in smell hit her, the floor coated with dust thick as mouse fur. In the pantry she stood with her back to the window looking at her shadow as it fell across the floor. On the table was a tin plate with dried beans, a fork with two bent tines. Beside the pantry there were three more rooms of roughly equal size. All emptied but with dark squares and little circles in the dust where furniture must have sat until recently. Outside Clarissa was explaining to Charles where the well was and the outhouse, and where their own property lay in relation. The first night alone in the house they found a bundle of old newspaper and twigs the Prentisses had left in the grate. Charles took a match to it. The chimney smoked, sooty clouds filling the room. He stamped out the fire. Lottie stood holding Wallace outside, a streak of stars visible through the silver cloud line. Listening as Charles coughed and beat away at the smoke. As the lit
twigs smouldered, he brought down with a broom the body of a bird trapped from the chimney. The bones showing through its feathered breast, its scarlet innards spilling out like an expensive handkerchief. Lottie suggested they bury it. Charles laughed and tossed its carcass from the porch into the long grass. They passed the first night the three of them shivering under horse blankets, their travelling trunks untouched beside them.

*Lottie made her way back from the creek along the narrow pony track through the woods. The trail curled through the tall cool bodies of the pines and the ponderosas bound and badged around their trunks with moss. As she picked her way back along the path her eye was drawn to some flowers with fat stalks and white, round heads. She would take them back, she thought, something to soften the shelves and sills in the stark house. Something to sit beside the Kilner and the mason jars, the sacks of flour and sugar. The stalks gave easily, her fingers sticky where she broke the stems. As the house came into sight Lottie began to hurry. The pale blue of its walls at the edge the field made Wallace real again; present, almost visible. Lottie gathered her skirts in her hands like the reins of a woman riding side-saddle. Lottie broke into a run as she crossed the field. The sun was burning on the brown earth where the field beside the house had been turned. Once inside she checked on Wallace. He was lying, rosy cheeked staring up at the planks of the ceiling. She leant in and kissed his forehead.

When lunchtime came Lottie stewed apples for Wallace. The porcelain pale half-moons of fruit simmering on the stove-top, bobbing and colliding as the water temperature rose, sweetened with ash grey sugar from the sack slumped in the corner of the kitchen. Glancing through the kitchen window Lottie saw Clarissa Prentiss
approaching. Clarissa was crossing the field of Poland-China hogs imported from Minnesota and bought at auction in Jacksonville that lay between their house and the Prentiss farm. The hogs with their black coats and pink legs scattered as Clarissa walked among them. The Prentiss house in the distance covered in ivy sagging under its own weight. The windows on the ground floor framed by split logs piled for winter. The house ill suited for summer; in the parlour the smell of fur gone stale and of old fires. Full of dark wood furniture; a cabinet, a dresser and above them bleached antlers hung from the walls. Clarissa walked into the house, the door swinging closed behind her.

‘I’ve brought you some baked goods and a basket of black morels,’ Clarissa said, setting the straw basket with its tattered brown floss silk ribbon on the table in the pantry. Inside were the morels with their honeycomb caps and ghostly hollow chambers that Clarissa cut from the trunk of the conifers near their house that morning. Clarissa inspected the flowers in the jug at the window.

‘Bittercress and bear grass, there’s two new names for you,’ Clarissa said pointing to the in the glazed jug Mayhew gave to them before they left which held the flowers on the window sill ‘we shall make a native of you yet’.

Lottie felt a stab of embarrassment at not knowing the names of the flowers, the feeling spread as Clarissa surveyed the room: the skillet with its film of grease, the dishes that lay uncleared on the cloth from breakfast. Wallace’s toys scattered across the floor of the pantry where she let him play. The rug that needed taking out and beating. Clarissa reached into her apron pocket and pulled out a newspaper folded into a triangle.
‘My eyes are weak today’ she said, unfolding the newspaper on the table, smoothing it out with the sides of her hands. A black fly landed on the newsprint and she shooed it. ‘I was hoping you might read to me for a little while.’

They carried two high-backed chairs with heavy leather seats out to the edge of the lawn where the long grass began. It was sunny. There was a breeze coming from the east. White washing hung on the line in front of the kitchen garden. The pages of the Medford News were curled at the edges, print all but invisible along the folds. Lottie read aloud a piece on the railroad. As she read she felt the little debt, one of hundreds accrued since their arrival, slowly annulled. Clarissa sat in the sunlight with her eyes closed, listening.

‘I do not believe that is all there is?’ she said with a sharpness that surprised Lottie

‘Give me the advertisements also’

Lottie read the adverts for flour-mills and merchant tailors; news from the Baptist society, the name of a new store in Medford where a man might buy the best cigars. Clarissa stopped her.

‘Now small pleasures is all the pleasures there is,’ she turned her face directly into the sun, broken veins in her pale cheeks reddening. ‘I’ve been known to steal a cigar from the draw where Elijah keeps them.’ Clarissa continued, one eye open now looking at Lottie, head still tilted back into the sun. ‘I like the taste and I like to watch that fine blue smoke rising up’ Clarissa gave a nod of satisfaction then with a note of caution, ‘I bury the butts so he will not find them.’

Lottie laughed at Clarissa’s confession.

‘It is a shame,’ Clarissa continued ‘they do not sell cigars in Mahloh. Otherwise I might arrange my own private supply’
‘Mahloh is starved of everything’, said Lottie setting down the newspaper by the chair, ‘everything but wood.’

Clarissa laughed, her chest rattling, eyes tightening, sets of deeply furrowed wrinkles cushioning the socket. Encouraged, Lottie continued;

‘The words Hotel and General Store cannot hide the fact the place is simply a forest, a wood made mock-up of a place people live.’

‘I’m sure come next snow storm or fire the whole place could very easily be struck off of the map.’ Clarissa said, as if she might be able to dictate the events,

‘But then we should have to use Medford for our sundries’

The women had laughed together on the chairs by the long grass.

*

It was dark when Charles returned from the orchards, cold in the house. He hung the storm lantern by a nail at the doorway. It cast a buttery light in dappled patches down his front. A moth, its body honey-coloured, its ragged wings the colour of coffee, butted up at the lamp glass attempting to breach the sides. A leather tongue on Charles’ suspenders had come loose. He tried to re-attach it to the horn button at the waistband. He fiddled clumsily with his thumb and forefinger then exhaled through his teeth when it would not take.

‘Here, let me,’ Lottie said.

She felt satisfaction as the tongue bit the button. Warmth rising through the open collar of his shirt. The smells his body accumulated over the day sharpened and revived in the night air; the blood and iron of the soil on his fingers, the tobacco smoke around his lips and hair, the salt, alkaline and chalk of sweat gone dry at the armpits of his shirt and his shoulder blades. She smoothed down the rough cotton of his collarless shirt, the one he had taken to wearing in imitation of the hired men at
the orchard. She took off his hat, brushing his hair from his brow. He ran his sleeve across his forehead. His hair had begun to kink and curl as it grew longer. He ignored her requests to let her cut it. Earlier in the summer he returned with a sprig of Oregon Grape pushed into the split straw of the hat, tightly folded yellow buds and bruise-blue berries and a yellow toy-bright dahlia tucked into his ear. Telling her how he drew the buggy to a halt a mile from the house and how strange it must have looked to any one passing to see him striding out into the woods, Bella motionless on the track save for the swish of her tail, a cloud of midges gathered in the air above her pricked ears. He had bought the hat in Jacksonville. The other Jacksonville. It was deemed necessary for every state in the union to have one Charles had joked. But after his first meeting with the men, contracted in advance by Mayhew, and the men he took on at the orchard, she found Charles outside that evening working dirt into its brim with his thumb. He tore off the ribbon she had tied around the crown. She ran from the porch to stop him. But he persisted, folding it over his knee until the straw gave and sprung loose from the weave. He left it out in the sun, under rocks, to let the colours of the new straw fade and bleed from it. On the second night it rained and the damp smell never left its brim and crown.

Charles settled into the press-back rocker with barley-twist arms and the broken seat. Lottie opened a tin of lima beans, forcing the lid with a paring knife. She cut an onion, dry and papery, tossed it in with white fatty cubes of salt pork. She had made this meal three times this week. The smell of the pork and beans filled the house. Steam wetting the uncurtained window in the pantry. As the moisture built the glass grew opaque against the night outside, a bead of moisture rolled down the pane. When the food was ready, she skimmed the bean scum and ladled the meal onto a tin plate. She set a curl of butter on top and parsley for garnish, finding two or three
stalks that still held some colour in the Kilner jar on the window then placed it before Charles who had come to the table. The butter was beginning to curdle, white deepening to a fatty yellow, hardening at the edge, she would ask Clarissa for more next week. It had been like this since December when the big snows came. They had gone to stay at the Prentiss farm. Lottie remembered Elijah Prentiss calling from outside. Sent at his wife’s insistence to collect them and bring them to the farm. The white clouds of breath from his mare as it stamped in the snow. Elijah Prentiss bellowing down from his white horse for the two of them come to their house at once before the snow thickened and they reached a point where they could not be responsible.

They were difficult weeks. The three of them confined to one room. It was understood they would not pay for their lodging but Charles should help on the farm in return. Lottie blamed herself, she missed the prompts Clarissa left each time she called: how she would ask about their provisioning fruit that was ready now for preserving on the farm, how three hog carcasses now hung, caramel-coloured dismembered, waiting to be preserved in salt and how they might easily sell them a hog or part of a hog should they need it. One evening, the snow now three feet deep outside, talk turned to entertainment and Charles told them that Lottie was an accomplished musician. Mr Prentiss rose from the table and disappeared up stairs. A few moments later he returned with a steel piano the size of a child’s coffin. The casing damaged and dented. He placed it on the table in front of Lottie. The tiny bells inside off-key and grating when played so that she had abandoned her recital almost as soon as it had begun.
As Lottie cleared the table after supper, Charles stood over Wallace’s crib looking down at the boy.

‘May I come with you tomorrow?’ Lottie said.

‘With me?’

‘To Mahloh, to the orchards’

At first, when Charles had told her the baby was too young to travel, Lottie had constructed her own version of the orchards from his stories: Hagstromm. Kanzler and Volz who sold their own small plots to Mayhew and agreed to work with Charles. She imagined a gathering for them when the harvest was over and before it began to cool. Great rugs laid out on the grass before the house, cooking and games their young might play together, meeting their wives. But she worried too that her presence at his place of work might weaken him; that the men who worked under him might see the burns at her shoulders; scars healed and hardened; the tiny, pitted indentations in the skin of her shoulders. The skin discoloured and ridged, soaking cotton pads in camomile and marigold and yarrow oil in an attempt to lighten their raw, livid colouration. She feared that the men at the orchard might question him about life before they came to America, might gossip among themselves or with their wives, the life they were trying to make might become a thing of fun or scorn. Charles looked across the room to her. She sensed his hesitation.

‘We can bring the boy.’ Then she added ‘It has been over a year.’

‘There is much to do still.’

‘I would very much like the see them,’ Lottie said hoping her nerve would hold.
Sunrise made prominent the black line of the ridges in the distance, dark trunks of pines scored against the skyline. Tendrils of cloud blushed pink and violet at their edges. There was dew on the blue glass bottling jars lined along the porch front. Jars Lottie kept for Wallace who would fill them sloppily with water from the butt or loose dirt from between the rows of Spanish radishes in the kitchen garden. Lottie was dressed in black as if for a funeral. The pearl buttons of her blouse, bought in Medford last autumn, fastened to her throat. Hair parted at the front, wound in a bun at her neck. It aged her, she thought as she studied her reflection in the window. It comforted her, it also felt the correct way to meet the world. Her boots laced tightly and fastened with buttons at the ankle. Stout and dowdy and proper: Clarissa Prentiss would approve. Wallace sat on the wooden rocking chair half-awake, sleep meshing his long lashes, a peg doll wrapped in calico hanging from his hand. He was looking over at his father by the buggy. Charles was checking the tackle and gear on the horse, jerking tight the leather straps so they bit above the chin groove and below the throat. A web of varicose veins on Bella’s hind leg ran, thick and glossy, down the hamstring and her chestnut hock.

‘Good girl, good girl,’ Charles said smoothing the ruffled white diamond on Bella’s forelock. He glanced into the film on her wide hazel eye and saw his wife and child on the porch. Charles had only relented and agreed to let them come that morning when he found the bed cold and Lottie fully dressed when he rose. ‘What are you doing?’ he asked ‘We’re coming with you’ Lottie said praying he wouldn’t question her, knowing if he did her resolve might fail. The scar on her neck
beginning to tingle. He paused, half awake in the predawn, surprised to find his wife dressed and ready to leave ‘I suppose, well, if you must.’

On the narrow cart track to Mahloh they passed through flashing batons of sunlight and passages of shade where the treeline rose. The black cottonwoods and the beds of wide ferns that lined the path bathed in light. The track fell away into a steep gutter at one side and Charles had to concentrate to keep the buggy on the track. Lottie kept Wallace’s face covered from the sun with a square of muslin.

Earlier in the summer when Clarissa came to call one afternoon Wallace had been playing on the grass in front of the house, ‘Let that sun at the boy too long it’ll damage him.’ Clarissa said placing herself between the porch where Lottie stood sweeping and the square of cut grass before the wigwammed rows of scarlet runner beans where Wallace played. Shielding her eyes with her hand Lottie smiled but ignored Clarissa and continued with the conversation they were having:

‘Bring him in now,’

‘Oh he’s fine just there.’

Lottie was tired of Clarissa’s instructions, weary of being told how and what was the right thing to do. They talked a little longer and when they moved inside Lottie saw pink coins on Wallace’s cheeks and laying the back of her hand on his brow felt the heat in the soft skin like meat on a griddle. His eyes were glassy from the heat. She turned to see Clarissa soaking a muslin in a pail of water. Clarissa called Wallace over to her and laid it across his forehead. Wallace calm and quiet on her knee. Later Clarissa returned with oatmeal and honey and showed Lottie how to steep the meal in another muslin and hold it to her boy’s burned cheeks and how a muslin might also be used to shield her boy from the sun on brighter days. Lottie
thought of that afternoon as she improvised the little tent of muslin over Wallace’s head as he stood in the footwell of the buggy, playing with the peg doll.

A mile outside of Mahloh they passed a boy Lottie recognized. He was sitting on an empty beehive, its slatted wooden sides painted white. His legs crossed one over the other. One eye, slow and half-lidded. Ash blonde hair sheared close to his skull. The triangular lapels of his jacket fastened tight at the line of his clavicle. She had seen him working at the Prentiss Farm, one of several boys the Prentisses employed on a casual basis to do the work of their absent sons. His name was Barzee. He was holding a cornet, the scratched and dented bell pressed flat resting against his thigh, the fingers of one hand gripping the tubing by the mouthpiece. He looked up to their buggy, his head turning slowly as they passed but he did not gesture to them.

Mahloh when they reached it was not much. A few balloon frame houses, two stories tall at most, their shingling in disrepair, their weatherboard siding beginning to green and rot. Mahloh: a handful of houses and half a dozen storefronts on the road to Medford. One store advertised ‘Stationary, Perfumes, Drugs’. It was boarded up. Thick planks hammered at angles across the broken windows. On the corner there was a Livery and Feed stable. Across the street the Hotel Condor, no more than a boarding house that would serve a meal in the fly riddled, airless rooms downstairs: slices of overboiled beef gone grey, watery gravy, rough vinegary wine, stale beer, slices of bread hard as tortoiseshell. Most travellers knew, or were advised by kindly strangers, to pass through Mahloh and travel the ten miles further to Medford for a room at the Clarendon, which advertised in the South Oregon Mail. There were deep ruts and cart tracks in the dry mud. The duckboarding before the storefronts spongy and rotted could turn an ankle as it had done Clarissa Prentiss last winter. Clarissa told Lottie that a cousin of the first mayor of Medford, a freemason named Gattis,
had founded Mahloh after a dispute. He sunk a small fortune into the floundering
town. Clarissa calculated there were maybe two hundred people or less who used the
place.

Charles pulled the cart to a halt by a wooden water trough, hollowed from a single
trunk. Bella lowered her rubbery lips to the brackish water, looming distorted over
her flattened and foreshortened reflection.

As Lottie waited in the cart with Wallace, Charles made his way to the Condor to
collect the post. For his weekly cable to Mayhew Charles had to travel to Medford
but the mail to Mahloh was regular, passing through town every three or four days
depending on the weather. Wallace was banging at the cart seat with a tiny clenched
fist.

‘What is it?’ Lottie said

Wallace gestured to his father’s hat, left behind on the seat. She placed it on
Wallace’s head. It covered his ears so his small round chin and little red mouth were
just visible beneath.

‘Would you like to hold the reins?’

Lottie lifted Wallace from the where he stood in the footwell and sat him on the
cart seat. The worn reins, veined and cracked, looked heavy in his small fat hands.
Feeling their slight, repeated pressure, like the first drops of rain, on her back Bella
lifted her head blinking, wide nostrils twitching. When she saw she was not being
instructed to move, she slowly lowered her head back to the water in the trough. A
black bird with wide ragged wings circled slowly above the street. Lottie tracked it
as it glided down and landed on the roof of the Condor. It hopped along the wooden
shingling. A lame dog tethered in front the Livery and Feed Stable barked. A breeze
moved through the scrubby cottonwoods flourishing beside the stream that ran
behind the main street. Lottie closed her eyes and felt the light fall on her face.

Suddenly the stillness of the morning in Mahloh was broken: a pair of linked wagons pulled by a team black horses passed at speed, Wallace dropped the reins and lurched towards his mother, gripping her, pushing his face into her skirts.

There was lichen and moss at the centre of the spokes of the wheels on the linked wagons, as if they had been dredged from the bottom of a river. Lottie heard bridles and tackle the great black moving mass, rattling and clanking as it rushed past. The horses’ hooves throwing sods of dirt from the dry and rutted road, breaking open the soil and revealing the dark moistness beneath. The driver stood, legs bent for balance, a half-dozen reins gathered in his hand, a long tapered whip in the other which he brought down hard on the back of the front most beasts. ‘Yah, Yah,’ he shouted, over the horses and the rattling of the carts. The birds scattered from the roof of the Condor. When the carts had passed the street fell quiet. The crows slowly returning to the roof of the Condor like fragments of dark ash pulled up into a chimney.

‘Good morning to you M’am.’

First came the impression of scale. Nothing more. The impression of something large beneath her. Next Lottie saw the hat: an eagle feather, teal with grey smudges, in the hatband, and around it smaller soft grey feathers: underwing, belly, throat, thigh and chest. Then the man removed his hat, sweeping it before him in a lazily theatrical arc. His hair was drab, matted, in need of washing, thin behind the forehead but falling in greasy ringlets at his shoulders. Behind the broad bones of his sallow face, glacially blue eyes. Unshaven. He wore a rifle frock coat with a beaver fur collar, stifling on such a warm day Lottie thought. It was open and the lining was torn. It had been repaired and patched at the elbow.
‘Might I introduce myself, my name is Quinn. Lorenzo Quinn.’

‘Good morning,’ Lottie replied, looking off down the road where the team of black horses pulling the linked carts had passed. Quinn leaned on the wheel of the buggy, setting his foot on the felloes plate below the painted yellow spokes. His hands on the flat steel tyre, he hoisted himself up so he was face to face with Lottie. She glanced over to the entrance to the Condor.

‘That is a bonny boy you have there,’ Quinn said, lifting the brim on the hat Wallace was wearing. He pinched Wallace’s cheek then brushed his chin with the knuckles of his index and forefingers. Wallace seemed oblivious to the man. Lorenzo Quinn was saying something now but it was her mother’s voice that Lottie heard. A voice that sensed ill. Quinn seemed to love the words he was using, to relish each sound. He was profligate with language and that marked him out in Mahloah. Lottie had quickly learned people here never used more than the words they needed, as if words were an expense they would be billed for at the end of the season.

‘May I hold the boy?’ Quinn asked.

‘Mr Quinn I think he is a little large for holding.’

Quinn looked at her, pursing his mouth, his lips twitched, he nodded as if calculating something, like a tailor pricing a job by inspecting the customer. Lottie put her arm around Wallace, who continued to play with the slack reins. She looked over towards the Condor and saw Charles approaching. Quinn swung himself down from the wheel landing heavily on his heels in the dirt.

‘And this must be your husband, good day to you Sir.’

‘Good day,’ Charles replied. Lottie watched Charles taking in the man. The coat, the eagle feather in the hatband, the air of languid theatricality.

‘Lorenzo Quinn.’
‘Charles Wright, how do you do?’

‘How do I do?’ Quinn said, touching his breast with three splayed fingers, his wrist made limp, thumb bent back at an awkward angle, then with a smile and a wink at Lottie. ‘I do very well indeed. Now from that accent I hear you are not a native. Do I detect Plymouth or perhaps Carlisle somewhere in your voice?’

‘Draw a line between the two and you’re halfway there’ Charles said tossing the mail into the back of the buggy. Standing back to take the man in fully. ‘I was just on my way to the store.’

Lottie watched Charles and Quinn walk together in the direction of the store, over the rutted cart tracks and mud of the main street. She wondered if Charles was apologizing for her, making light of her guarded behaviour, confiding in this stranger as she had heard him confide in the wagoners Clough and Roper, relieved to have an outlet, a confidante, someone to tell all. Charles sensed no danger in Quinn and Lottie saw that. She watched them enter the store, Quinn holding the door wide for Charles. Eventually the men returned, Quinn carrying a bag of flour under his arm. His free arm around Charles shoulder. Both men laughing. Charles so hard Lottie saw his eyes had begun to water.

‘Now if I may, it would give me great pleasure to call on you some time,’ Quinn said taking a finger-length, bark coloured cigar from his pocket, holding it for a moment below his nose.

‘Your husband here has been telling me about the great journeying you have undertaken.’ Quinn said casting the cigar in the direction of Charles.

‘I have stories of my own, I’m sure you would be pleased to hear, having come to these parts on a fairly circuitous route’ at this Quinn nodded at Charles as if alluding to some earlier conversation Lottie had not been party to.
‘Yes, we should like that, should we not Lottie?’ Charles said. ‘Mr Quinn here is a writer.’

‘What you might call a poet of the sierras,’

‘And also’ Charles paused to recall ‘a former newspaper man, an amateur player and a sometime miner’

‘Guilty as charged.’

‘You are quite accomplished Mr Quinn.’

‘Indeed I am. I was telling your husband here,’ Quinn paused checking himself ‘but the street is not the place to conduct polite conversation.’

‘No,’ said Lottie

‘I shall pay a visit sometime. I know the Prentiss place and you cannot be too hard to find from there.’

Quinn placed his hat with the eagle feather back on his head, shook Charles’ hand, gave Wallace’s cheek a playful pinch and a quick nod to Lottie. As they left Mahloh they passed the Barzee boy again. He was still at his post beside the beehive. There were two more hives beside to him now. He looked up at them, his slow eye fixed on a point in the distance. Still he gave no nod of recognition just the blank, almost vacant stare. When they were a few yards away Lottie heard a three notes from his cornet. Charles seemed unaware of the boy at the roadside with the beehives.

‘You might have made a little effort to converse with Mr Quinn.’

Bella’s ear flicked and beat away a black fly.

‘I do not trust him.’ Immediately Lottie regretted speaking so freely.

There was a pause. Charles stared ahead along the track in silence. There was the sound of the buggy wheels passing over the stones, the slight percussive swish of
Bella’s tail. Wallace banged his peg doll on the worn seat of the buggy. Charles shook his head then blew through his lips as if impersonating Bella.

‘It is kind of you to bring us today.’ Lottie said attempting to dilute the silence.

‘We are looking forward to seeing the orchards are we not Wallace’

She shook Wallace gently by the shoulders. Charles looked at Wallace who was turning the peg doll over in his hands on the seat between them. Wallace said nothing.

‘Well we are,’ Lottie said to Charles.

They passed a sign for Medford ten miles north, a roughly grained piece of wood nailed to a rotting post, the limewash of the lettering faded. Medford: the word conjured well-stocked stores and civility, a sense of bustle and order and newness in the clean cool air of those Oregon mornings. The navigable grid it was built on, the shining, polished orange-peel, bell brass and terracotta of all that new brick hauled in to build the town a few years earlier. The bright and certain voices of the congregation at the Presbyterian Church singing Creator of the Stars at Night and Comfort, Comfort You My People. The Baptists, a block away, singing the Old Hundred and the King of Glory. The big stages departing daily for Jacksonville and weekly to Butte. Medford sitting clean and new and polished at the centre of the fruit belt with its planing and grist mills. The town Lottie had visited a handful of times in the past year, twice with Charles and once with Clarissa and Wallace when Charles was detained at the orchard and had sent word her would not be back for a day at least and possibly two. They turned away from the sign for Medford and Lottie felt a slight deflation as they continued down the narrowing track deeper into the woods. The trees were tall now and so numerous they almost obliterated the sky, making it a thin and palely wavering line overhead. They turned up onto a tightly winding path,
overhung and almost obscured by branches so they had to duck as Charles drove the buggy under it. The track led up the side of a low hill. Halfway up Charles pulled Bella to a halt. The bit clashed hard against her teeth. She whinnied, kicking out a hoof on her hind leg. Lottie worried Charles had hurt her, worried about broken teeth, veterinarians, the cost of replacing the horse should it sicken. Charles jumped from the buggy. Lottie watched him scrambling up the hillside. She saw him break a skinny sapling into a switch. Now he was whacking away at the splayed fern stems, bending down, rooting and digging with his fingers in the undergrowth, as if he had dropped an article of great value, a pocket watch or his mother’s wedding ring, that he was determined to recover at all cost. After scrabbling in the dirt, Charles tossed the switch into the ferns, and picked his way down, hands behind his back. When he reached the cart he was smirking. He held out two fists to Lottie, gesturing with a nod that she choose one. She tapped his left hand lightly. He opened it to reveal a dull white crystal like a fragment chipped from a tooth.

‘Do you know what this is?’

Lottie shook her head.

‘Quartz.’

Lottie picked the shard from his hand and held it to the light. It seemed nothing much.

‘And this?’ Charles said opening his right.

At the centre of his palm, where the lines Lottie learned as a girl represented heart and fate, there was a speckled black rock the size of a penny.

‘Granite,’ Charles said.

‘And more often than not, quartz and granite equal…’

Charles waited for Lottie to respond but she looked at him blankly.
‘Gold.’ his eyes widened, pupils blooming as he formed the word.

‘If I could persuade Mayhew… we could be sitting on a fortune.’

Snapping shut his hand Charles pocketed the rock and heaved himself back onto the buggy. Soon they were descending the breast-shaped hill down into a shallow valley. Charles pointed out the orchards, sandy paths dissecting the rows of low shrubs and beyond them taller more established trees. Once in the valley they drove the buggy down a long avenue, rattling over the pitted and potholed surface as Charles coaxed Bella into a quick trot, then on under a hand-painted sign for the Mayhew Holdings. The offices and outbuildings occupied a space the size of two tennis courts. From the buildings a shallow bank gave down onto the orchards. In the distance Lottie picked out rows of not yet planted saplings their root systems tied in sack-cloth and beyond them glum, monotonous lines of bushes in blossom, crème and powder pink, already blown on some, but others yet to bloom. There were lines of yellowing turf rolled out between them. It smelled of recent rain, a damp, stale, urine smell. There were several heads of undernourished cattle wandering through the trees, rubbing their bony backs against the trunks. The place was almost deserted. As they alighted from the buggy two dogs with pinched, flat faces and thickly muscular bodies raced towards Charles from where they had been sleeping in the sun. They wore no collars. Their erect, fleshy tail stubs beat side to side. Charles cupped the muzzle of each dog. Lottie thought she would recognise Hagstromm, Kanzler and Volz. She felt she knew these men already, but wondered if Charles had let them go, if he had replaced them for all she could see was a tired-looking, browless man with an heavily lined face - as if scored by a fork in clay - and an air of weary lethargy like a paid mourner at a funeral.

‘Hagstromm,’ Charles said pointing at the man then ‘and this is Kanzler.’
Beside Hagstromm stood a much bigger man, his huge frame run to fat, younger than
the others but almost entirely bald with wide shoulders and a drill coat the sleeves of
which were far too short. Hagstromm and Kanzler were talking rapidly in German
and did not break from their conversation to acknowledge Lottie’s presence. Then,
almost as an afterthought, Charles gestured to a third man. ‘And that’s Volz’.

Volz was small with a heavy brow, onyx black hair and tiny eyes. He was
working on some kind of decrepit looking steam plough or tractor clearly purchased
at expense but ill maintained. The wheels, taller than Volz, had metal spikes on them
as if designed to brutalise the land into fecundity. The smokebox door at the front of
the engine was open and Volz was peering inside down into the barrel of the boiler.
The rivets along the lap seam were rusted solid. The wooden water barrel balanced
on the back of the engine was rotted through with holes. The running boards on
either side of the machine had snapped off. The name plate had fallen or been pulled
away and Hagstromm had scribbled his own name in chalk on the rusted barrel of the
boiler only to have it struck though by Volz who had replaced it with his own.

After talking with the men, Charles led Lottie over to the office, timber building
with a rotten shingle roof. There were hops growing high up the back of the building.
Inside the desk was piled with papers, chits, bills, telegrams from Mayhew some of
which Charles had scribbled on. There was a wooden cabinet and maps spread out
over the floor. An old pair of unlaced leather boots. On the desk was a photograph
taken in Jacksonville last summer. It had slipped in the frame so half of her face was
lost in the silver surround. Lying open beside it was sketch book in which were ink-
drawn diagrams of various apples their aspect when on the branch, their cores and
pips and notes below: size, form, colour, basin, seeds, core, calyx. For a moment
Lottie felt a mother’s tenderness towards Charles but bound in it was a sense of
anxiety. She imagined him in his office with his watercolours painting apples and pondering the varieties to plant while the everyday running of the orchard was left to Hagstromm, Kanzler and Volz. She imagined Charles signing off payments for unnecessary machinery like the steam plough rusting outside. She began to wonder if he did anything more than sit around the fire talking with the men on the nights he didn’t return, beholden to their stories as he had been to the wagoners.

Charles picked some papers from the floor and tossed them onto the brimming desk. He led Lottie from the office and to a lean-to a few yards away. There was a fire pit outside, bottles thrown into it, sides opaque. The ash was wet in places as if someone had relieved himself into the embers of the fire. Charles held the door to the lean-to open. The rough-sawn log construction, the windows cloth covered. Lottie ducked as she entered. Inside was a grey blanket and single wooden bed base. A squat, three-legged stool, a mirror for shaving hung low on the wall. Some brown quart beer bottles by the bed. Charles stepped in front of them but did not obscure her view.

‘Not much is it?’ he said, ‘the packing house is a little more impressive’

Lottie nodded then lifted Wallace to her hip.

‘I had Kanzler and Hagstromm work on it all through the autumn until the weather got so bad they were forced to stop. Whitman and Stuart over in Ashland are already ahead of us, by next year their fruit will be reaching New York but I’m confident once the packing house is up and running we’ll be shipping out our own fruit in no time. Mayhew has promised more funds should this year’s harvest be a success. I’m convinced the advantage lies in selecting the right breed. You saw my work in the office. Kanzler still talks about the plague of grasshoppers that affected his first crop. It’s in the selection, thinking ahead of time, selecting the breeds best
suited to our conditions here, the limitations of the irrigation and so forth. So much of my work is theoretical. I’m fortunate to have Hagstromm Kanzler and Volz to keep on top of things here. Otherwise I fear nothing would ever get done.’

They walked the two hundred yards to the packinghouse. Charles lifted the latch on the wide wooden loading doors and ushered Lottie inside. They stood in the centre of the great, empty room. The unfinished floorboards. The roof was covered over in canvas and oxhide, in other places bare so that light fell through in dusty shafts that dappled the oak floor. There were nests in the eaves: feathers, droppings and debris on the floor below. A jagged-toothed, two-man saw, the teeth rusted and broken, sat beside an unused lathe turned over on its side. In the centre of the room a sawing horse with a man’s stained longjohns draped across it, drying in a patch of sun that came in through the roof.

‘Volz took two black tails, what the men called grey ghosts, yesterday.’

Lottie surveyed the sight where in sport the men had hoisted the bodies up by their hooves in the Packing House which had served as a temporary abattoir. The longbed apple cart had become a butcher’s block and was still soaked with blood.

‘I would have brought some back but Volz took the largest share’ Charles said ‘it was his shot you see that took them, with the Springfield. The buck dropped a hundred yards out in the orchard. The hind was only clipped so Volz had had to run along the corridor of trees before dropping to his knee to get a second shot off, the bullet passed clean through.’ Charles gestured toward the longbed cart. ‘We found these when we cut her open.’

Twin foetus, the long whiskers and eyelashes already in place with long limbs and soft hoofs, the purple leaf pattern of veins under their skin lay on the longbed apple cart.
‘I’ve been at a loss as what to do with them.’

Below the longbed cart was a deer skull Hagstromm left soaking in a bucket of salt water until the flesh came away. Looking down at the floor Lottie saw cakes of dried cow dung run through with straw; a black beetle scuttled between them.

‘I let Volz keep his cattle in here over winter.’

Lottie glanced across at him then back into the huge, half-finished space.

‘There seemed no harm at the time.’
Autumn bit quickly in Mahloh. The first leaves on the ash trees along the path to the Prentiss farm bronze at their edges by late September. A steam locomotive had come off the track a mile outside of Medford, injuring the driver and killing the fireman. There was talk in town that the snows would be back this year. A rumour went around that a man called Eldridge McCollough had been found starved to death in his cabin, his extremities, nose and ears, eaten away by his own dog, a heavy-chested wolfhound-cross McCollough could be seen leading on a ragged string on his trips in to Mahloh for supplies. Clarissa had relayed the stories to Lottie, though hard as she looked Lottie could find no mention of the dead man or predictions of the big snows in the copies of the Medford News that came her way.

In the days that had followed Lottie tried not to think about her visit to the orchard; the squalor and disrepair in which she had found the place. There was work to be done at home and Lottie tried to content herself with that. She wouldn’t need Clarissa Prentiss to tell her again about provisioning for winter. She would make sure this time they were prepared should the snows come. She began by drawing up lists of items and sundries they would need if they were to avoid the embarrassment of lodging with the Prentisses. Tallow candles and pine knots to use in their place should they run low on fuel for the spirit lamps; lists of preserves and tinned goods Charles would be charged with collecting on his trips to Medford; cans of powdered Broma they would drink at evenings sweetened with a pinch of sugar; there were bushels of apples and pears to be peeled and preserved in Mason jars. Lottie borrowed an iron broad -axe with a flattened cheek from Elijah Prentiss the head mottled with rust, the handle worn thin and smooth, she would take it out in the
afternoons her upper arm burning after an hour or so of steady hacking at the log pile. She was determined their log store, stacked up high against the south flank of the house, would rival the Prentisses. That if the big snows did come, as Clarissa had augured, they would be prepared and self-sufficient.

It was a week after their meeting in Mahloh. There was a chill to the air that afternoon, fine, thin cloud, the colour of millet husks, scudding rapidly to the west. Charles was sitting on the porch the worn seat of a wooden stool upturned on his lap: a leg had come loose and he sat poking slivers of wood into the mortise in the hope the leg might fix. It was mid afternoon when Quinn arrived. There was a thin and sickly looking boy riding beside him. They emerged on horseback from the track at the edge of the woods and not from the direction of the Mahloh road as most callers would. Lottie was standing by the washing line, a blue sheen on the wet white washing in the tin tub at her feet. A bolt tied to the forelock of the boy’s horse, caught the late sun and sent a wink of light over to the porch. The tails of the horses were longer than any Lottie had ever seen. Bright threads of gold and emerald green plaited their manes, blue glass beads through the threads, the mane of the boy’s horse was part braided but the mane on Quinn’s horse fell loose and long, down well below its brisket. They reminded Lottie of figures from the Cirque d’Hiver they had seen in Medford last year, sent out on horseback to entertain the audience between acts in the damp tent. She stifled a laugh when she saw them. Lottie watched as Quinn dismounted, patting his horse on the nose. Ignoring entirely the boy riding beside him, who did not dismount, but leant forward in his saddle to take Quinn’s own reins in his hand. Quinn undid the leather saddlebag and pulled out something bone coloured and oval in shape. Lottie could not make out what it was, but it looked
heavy, a little larger than a human skull. Picking up the tin tub she made her way back to the porch where she alerted Charles to Quinn’s arrival.

‘Now Mr Wright I have brought some liquor.’

Quinn held a salt-glazed crock in the air by its hooked handle.

‘Hard sometimes to gauge where a man stands on liquor but I thought you might be for it.’

Charles smiled and rose to greet Quinn, setting down the stool on the porch.

‘Fine horses Mr Quinn.’ Charles said, making a visor of his hand where the low sun was beginning to drop behind the tree line.

‘They are indeed,’ Quinn said. ‘Won them at a game of cards at the Four Sixes Ranch, Texas.’ Quinn looked over his shoulder to the horses and stifled a belch.

‘Back when I still played that was,’ He grinned at Charles. ‘You can trace their line back to bloodstock Cortes brought over with the Conquistadors. How about that now?’

Charles gestured toward the boy on the pony. ‘Would your boy…’

Quinn shook his head, cutting Charles off midsentence. ‘My boy will wait up with the horses.’

Quinn was wearing a faded black poncho fastened at the neck with a piece of bone, a rabbit’s rib worn smooth, with a fur lined waistcoat and the tall hat with the eagle feather in the band. He was unshaven; threads of red and gold and silver in his stubble covered muzzle. He rested himself in the wicker rocking chair, the rolled arms, reed weave and beadwork, the diamond patterned back. The reeds creaked as he lowered his weight onto it.

‘Good day to you Mrs Wright,’ Quinn said reclining in the chair, patting his jacket for his cigar case. Lottie had come to the porch with the empty washing tub.
‘Good day Mr Quinn. I shall get you some mugs’

Lottie returned a few moments later with two enamel mugs, chipped at the rim, the metal showing through, still wet with shining beads of water where she had rinsed them. ‘I need to feed Wallace,’ Lottie said to Charles, setting the mugs down for the men.

‘Oh we boys shall not disturb you,’ Quinn said.

‘Now Charlie, pour out a measure of that liquor. Let’s see if we can’t make some sense of this foolish world we find ourselves living in.’

Lottie went inside to tend to Wallace. After an hour she came out onto the porch to light the spirit lantern. The day was beginning to wane; the fields to the east of the house fading to rust and berry reds, a line of blue smoke rising up from the Prentiss farm in the distance. Out on the porch the men were merging with their shadows. Charles was flushed. Quinn had taken off his hat and his cape lay thickly rumpled at his feet. Lottie could smell the drink heavy on both men. Quinn looked up at Lottie, insinuating her into the scene, she felt complicit in some joke at her husband’s expense she did not understand. She looked over to the boy sitting on the pony. The thick reins of Quinn’s horse in his free hand, a flat brimmed felt hat pulled down obscuring his eyes.

‘Would your boy not care for some water Mr Quinn?’

‘No, he’s fine looking after the horses. Thank you.’

The flame jumped in the spirit lamp then settled.

‘Now do not get me started, Charlie, on the killing predators,’

Quinn lowered his voice, hauling himself forward in the chair, the plaisted reeds creaking. ‘If you have not already I’d advise you to drill that wife of yours in the use of a pistol. I am assuming you keep a pistol?’
‘I do not.’

Quinn folded his lower lip, pinching it between the knuckle of his finger and the pad of his thumb, exposing the vein-crossed glossy underside. He reclined into the chair. ‘Bear, that’ll kill a man, no question. I killed a black bear in the Cascades. Still carry one of her teeth with me for luck.’ He reached inside his shirt and pulled out a bear’s tooth strung between two pieces of jasper, the colour of an overcooked corn kernel. ‘Wolf, will kill a man, slower, I’d say, but no less painful. Coyotes, I made some money in my time as a young’un killing coyotes, nickel a skin, they’ll take a man but only if he’s injured. A cougar, I shot a few of those, need avoiding if they’re with their young. Then we got bobcat, lynx, boar.’ Quinn counted them on his fingers like a child playing cat’s cradle. ‘I’ve taken them down with dogs. Takes a dog sometimes to catch a bobcat. Now the red fox, just a slip of a thing, won’t bother you none but sure to eat away at all that soft flesh of your face, cheeks and chin and eyes and make it damn near hard to identify you should you be unlucky enough to drop dead out there in them woods. That fellow McCoullogh, people claiming his dog that did that to him. Nonsense, it was a fox ate away his face.’ Quinn looked up to Lottie and grinned, baring his large, spittle polished teeth. ‘Oh! Do not be affrighted, this boy will take good care o’ you I am sure.’ The drink had deepened the colour of the broken veins in the tip of Quinn’s nose and across the tops of his cheeks, Lottie looked away. ‘Where was I? Damn it Charlie your pretty wife has thrown me from my loquaciousness. Pour me out a slop more that whisky.’

Back inside the house Lottie stood by the dry sink for a moment with the skillet then set it down and moved closer to the door. Charles was filling both mugs, the amber liquid glugging from the lip of the crock. The air outside thick and dry with cigar smoke. Lottie saw Charles’ head in silhouette, a fine shadow cast by the spirit.
lamp against the open door, he was nodding like a holy man in a trance, encouraging Quinn to continue with his story.

‘Gold, in a word, the seeking thereof. Believe it or not I was once a rich man.’

Lottie stepped closer, her body shielded behind the half-open door.

‘Would have made an admirable lawyer, that’s what my father intended. But I was an adventuresome young man, not long after sixteen left my father’s home, to the teary consternation of my dear mother. At eighteen I served as a skirmisher for the Confederacy. I happened to be passing through South Carolina the week of secession though later, afflicted by a change of heart, I fought for the Union. I was much in demand having been close to G. T. Beauregard and coming over as I did with certain documents belonging to his camp. Now I had been with Beauregard at Sumter but was I was also at Paducah with the Union the day they killed Zollicoffer.’

Quinn whistled, repeating the dead general’s name, as if it were new to him and he were attempting to learn it by heart.

'Zol-li-cof-fer. Saw him from the picket that morning lying dead in the mud in that white raincoat of his. Not an hour later caught a minié in the shoulder, shattering my subscapular fossa, I later learned.’

Quinn prodded the place where the bullet had entered.

‘Would have lost my arm had it not been for my foresight in calling for a skilled surgeon, knowing there were at least half dozen in the field and not liking the look of the oafish wretch they sent to saw off my arm. Anyhow once I was patched up, arm more or less intact, my war was over, the fighting part of it anyhow. I spent time travelling with a photographer named Sutro who took a bullet in the belly that shredded his insides to mush, sat beside him as he bled out on the field, promised I’d take care of his photographs, see they got into the papers. Later I traded furs in
Alberta under special licence from the governor. Later still, grew to be a rich man in the California gold fields in the years after the war ended when the wisdom was that there was no gold left to find out there. I proved them wrong, many times over.’

Quinn worked his hand inside his shirt again and this time pulled out a gold ingot from inside a scuffed leather pouch laced around his neck.

‘Though much of what I made I lost at the tables. Before I was cured of vice I gambled away the budget surplus of several of the smaller states.’

Quinn lowered his voice and Lottie could no longer make out what he was saying. There was laughter. Lottie hesitated for a moment then walked onto the porch. Charles glanced up, his face complicated by shadows from the spirit lantern. It was dark now Lottie heard the horses in the distance by the trough then Quinn’s boy coughing. Quinn inspected her then sniffed loudly.

‘Your woman is tired Charlie. I should take my leave of you.’

Quinn was on his feet, he bowed to Lottie, picking up his hat from the floor, his matted ringlets falling at his shoulders.

‘And remember me now to Hill,’ Quinn said poking Charles in the shoulder, ‘He will give a good price, better still if you mention me by name.’

*Lorenzo Quinn visited three times more before the month was out, always on a Sunday when he knew he would find Charles at home and not away at the orchards. With each visit Quinn and Charles seemed to grow more conspiratorial, breaking from their conversation or abruptly changing the topic should Lottie appear. As he had on his first visit, Quinn’s boy would remain with the horses by the trough at the boundary fence. When Lottie asked about the bolt tied to the forelock of the boy’s horse Quinn said that it was common knowledge that it stopped the horse from
bucking, it had thrown the boy, he said, and almost broken his back. Lottie noticed the joints at the horse’s knees were swollen, a concave dip where the hind leg met the hipbone.

‘We are currently learning the gelding throwing the boy is not acceptable. Had he not I dare say he might have made a fine stallion. I cut his testes off myself.’

Quinn patted the bowie knife in a beaded hide belt with long tassels fastened at his hip. He was sitting on an upturned tea chest by the rabbit hutches behind the house watching as Charles cleared them out. The row of six hutches sat on top of a wide platform, bales of straw below and rotting cabbage and kale leaves piled on top. The rabbits were docile greys with glossy coats and long ears, their hutches stank like skin rubbed sore. Lottie had been reluctant to keep them but Clarissa insisted they took two breeding pairs from her, promising good meat through the winter should they need it. Quinn was leafing through a copy of Harpers as Charles raked out the wet and decaying straw. On the floor by the hutches were two tin mugs, in them a rough home brew Quinn claimed an acquaintance had run off a still in Mahloh.

‘How are those orchards of yours Charlie? Are you yet a rich man?’

Quinn pulled a metal canteen from the pocket of his coat and topped up the two mugs. ‘Surprised I found you here when I called. You’ll be hard at it now right through to November I imagine? Quinn was standing peering into the cage. He unfastened the latch on the mesh door and took a large buck from the hutch, ‘You are a pretty rabbit. Yes you are.’ Quinn said, lifting it in the air, fingers tucked under its forelegs and around its ribs. ‘Mrs Wright,’ he said turning to Lottie ‘would you mind if I took this for my pot? A man sometimes misses the simple things. It has been an age since I ate rabbit.’
Quinn pressed the rabbit against him, paws against his chest, stroking it between the ears as he spoke. Before Lottie could answer Quinn lifted the rabbit by its hind legs, holding it at arms length. It jerked, then twisted, blinking rapidly, beating at the air with its paws. Quinn grinned as he watched the rabbit struggle. Eventually the buck hung still. It wide eyes dark as marbles, ears pinned to its back. Quinn studied it for a moment, then brought the side of his hand down, flat as an axe head, again the rabbit’s neck. The rabbit flinched then jerked but the blow was not enough: Quinn struck again, once, twice, three times, hacking at the rabbit until the small bones its neck were broken. He tossed the body on the ground. Lottie watched as its chest rose and quickly fell then stopped. The buck’s back leg jerked then it was still. There was blood in the wide dark of its wet nostrils.

‘Thought I’d lost the trick of it for a minute.’ Quinn said looking at the buck.

He unfastened his bowie knife from his belt. Holding the rabbit by its hind legs again he ran the tip of the knife down its pale sternum. The knife’s groove pooled with blood. Quinn gave the rabbit a clumsy shake. Blood splashed against the hutches, a few drops on Lottie’s apron.

‘Excuse me while I take this to my boy.’ Quinn said wiping his hand on his coat.

‘Nothing stinks worse than dead rabbit left too long before cleaning.’

* 

That evening after supper Charles announced that he intended to travel to Corvallis. He would take the train from Grants Pass to Eugene and from there the mail boat up the Williamatte River. He told Lottie that he had cabled Mayhew for permission to take a few days leave from the orchards. Mayhew had replied immediately, questioning his absence during the harvest but Charles had given assurances that Hagstromm, Kanzler and Volz were capable of bringing in the remaining fruit
themselves. They were not expecting the big yield until next year and Charles argued that he expected to be so busy then that this trip would need to be taken now. He told both Lottie and Mayhew that there were people there in Corvallis he needed to meet with, but beyond that he was vague and when Lottie pressed him and asked for more details he told her it wasn’t important and that she would know soon enough.

‘Do you not think you should be concentrating your efforts on the orchards Charles?’

Lottie asked, her voice wavering slightly as she stood behind him at the table.

‘Do you not think you should be concentrating your efforts in the home?’

came Charles reply sharp as the crack of a bullwhip.

That night after she had cleared the supper things Lottie watched as Charles assembled the items he would pack in his travelling bag on the kitchen table; two shirts, a straight razor, a pair of socks she had darned, into the cotton-canvas harvest bag with the broad wide straps she has seen the men at the orchard placing the picked apples into.

When Charles departed the next morning Lottie was sitting with Wallace on the steps of the porch. She looked tired, the skin beneath her eyes was dark and her lips dry and cracking. Wallace was wriggling in her arms. She was pointing out to him a pair of birds that are swooping down, zig-zagging across one another’s flight path. She and Charles hadn’t spoken since retiring to bed the night before. Charles had stayed up working by lantern light repairing the horses’ tackle and gathering together items for his journey. Charles assured Lottie he had spoken with the Prentisses and that Clarissa agreed to call to make sure everything was in order at the house, that they were well provisioned and she will want for nothing in his absence. Charles had shaved, Lottie noticed, the skin at his neck red and raised where he had run the
straight razor over it with too much vigour. He left a moustache, there was a nick at
the corner of his lip and a dot of congealed blood. He was wearing a white shirt with
a black ribbon tied at the throat and a teal-weave waistcoat she had not seen him in
before. Over it he wore a pair of dark blue overalls, legs tucked into his work boots,
half laced but open at the top of his shins. He had combed his hair, which was parted
severely and pomaded. In his hand he held a pair of worn riding gloves and a black
fur felt bowler, with a thin satin band that looked a recent addition to the hat, whose
provenance she could not recall. He leant forward and kissed her forehead and then
kissed two fingers and rested them on Wallace’s forehead. He turned and looked at
the birds as they twisted and turned in the still morning air in front of the house, the
early golden light catching the undersides of their open wings.
Dawn was breaking on the Willamette river; wide rays of copper coloured light striking the trees on the far bank: white alders, red alders, a big pacific willow rising twenty feet above the others. Charles stood on the foredeck of the mail-boat as it slipped from its moorings. It had rained in the night; the curved wood and polished metal of the paddle steamer shone where the water had yet to trickle away or be wiped down by the deckhand who was making his way along the upper decks. Charles’s back ached and he felt a shiver run through him. He tasted the morning’s coffee bitter on his palate and the underside of his tongue. His eye followed the line of the tallest tree down until it came to rest on an azalea flourishing among the trunks. Behind Charles on the opposite bank the trees cast deep, complicated shadows on the molten silver surface of the water. On the pontoon, a fair-haired boy, one arm pinned in a pristine sling to his grubby shirtfront, was running from bollard to bollard unhooking the remaining ropes.

The boy, a feral look about him redeemed only by the brightness of the sling, had developed a technique: lowering the shoulder of the arm without the sling, twisting his hips then casting the looped rope - slimy, rat grey, bearded with weed - up onto the deck. When all the ropes were on board the deckhand tossed a coin to the boy. The boy had the sun in his eyes and when he reached to catch the coin he missed. It skidded along the pontoon, the boy hurrying after it, slapping his foot down hard to trap it before it rolled into the water. The boy bent on one knee and pushed the coin into his sling. The riverboat drifted for a moment before the paddles started up and pushed the craft against the current. The big wheels on either side of the paddle steamer scooped the turgid water from river then dumped it back. Up in the
pilothouse the captain, face erased by the morning light, gestured toward the pier. A whistle blew.

Charles had arranged to meet Volz in Medford yesterday. He tarried an hour at the station. Charles knew he should have collected Volz in person but that would have meant extending his journey, and Volz’s suspicious wife cursing under her breath in that coarse, guttural Volga German Charles heard them use around the house. The cabin where Volz lived with his family was at the western edge of the orchards, on six acres of scrubland Volz had retained after the sale to Mayhew. The cabin was low and dark and smelled of spiced meat and the iron tang of stagnant water. Children with tangled blond hair ran barefoot through the dirt in front of the cabin, skinny hens pecked at soil and a single sow sat cramped and listless in a pen clumsily improvised from scrap metal at the side of the cabin. Charles was always reluctant to go there and felt a change in the usually taciturn but acquiescent Volz whenever he was within the orbit of his frau. In the end, with no sign of Volz, Charles decided to set off alone for Eugene.

He paid for his ticket and boarded the train which had arrived at the station three minutes early: Grants Pass, Alta, Glendale, Riddles, Myrtle Creek, Roseburg, Oakland, Drain, Cottage Grove finally Eugene where he alighted. He stood for a moment in front of the station waiting room. Its board-and-batten siding was painted a dusty mustard-yellow with a thick trim the colour of a blade of beef below the shallow eaves. There was a broken pane in one of the windows covered by an old sack that had once held Meeker & Allup Hops. Inside it was unfurnished save a church pew pushed up against the back wall, the floorboards bare with wide gaps between them, which seemed to catch the breeze and pull the loose dust down into them, like smoke above a grill. As he stood on the platform Charles wondered if
Volz might have taken the earlier train, he wondered if he had misunderstood their communication as they had stood talking in the estate office at the orchards, if he might find him there at the station waiting for him, whittling at a piece of pine with his walnut handled patch knife he kept tied in a sheaf at his ankle. Again Charles found himself giving Volz the benefit of the doubt. Charles wandered up and down the platform as he waited to see if Volz was on the next train. When the train arrived with thick puffs of mineral-smelling steam bellowing along the platform, not a single door on the two carriages opened. Charles hurried along trying to get a better view inside the stationary carriages, hoping he might see Volz slumped asleep against a window. But it was clear Volz had ignored his request and their agreement that he accompany him. When the trip was being planned, Quinn had insisted that Charles take someone along with him. Standing now at the little shed that passed as a station in Eugene, Charles had decided he would go alone, despite Quinn’s warning to the contrary.

The river was moving sluggishly as the mail boat beat against the current. The air smelled of wood smoke and the sweet thin reek of manure. Charles glanced to his left and saw he was not alone on deck. A few yards away stood a very thin man with a stoop and a small hump between his shoulders. He wore a slate grey sack suit, baggy at the knees, a black tie with fraying edges tied in a lopsided bow. His ivory-white beard was closely clipped and he held a cane in his right hand. Around his neck a tin plate and when he turned, sensing Charles close by, he revealed the word BLIND written on the plate in white paint. Charles watched him breathing in the air on the river as the boat moved along.

‘Good day sir,’ the man said sensing Charles close by.

‘Good day,’ Charles replied and moved toward him.
‘Travelling far?’ The man asked. Charles said nothing but stood watching as the boat cut through water, dark edged swirls and eddies forming around the paddles.

‘I have been to Eugene to receive my healing’ the man continued, ‘I have travelled there each year. I am returning now to Harrisburg where I make brooms with my brother. I am hopeful still for my healing. You have to keep hope in your heart.’

The man’s hand inched along the guardrail until it covered Charles’. His palm was cold and papery. ‘One day my healing will come,’ he said patting Charles’ hand.

The men were silent.

‘I was eight before my vision left me after breakbone fever struck me down, but I can recollect the colours, and my mother’s face which is more than many. Where you travelling young man?’

‘Corvallis,’ Charles said.

‘What takes you there?’

The man ran his tongue across his upper lip. Charles paused, remembering Quinn’s warnings.

‘I’m going to visit a cousin.’

It was Quinn who suggested Charles take the mail boat. It would be easier to enter Corvallis unnoticed, he said as they sat on the porch planning the journey. Charles wondered if Quinn was joking, and he had almost laughed, but something in the set of Quinn’s mouth, his unblinking stare from the red-rimmed waterlines of his eyes, had convinced Charles otherwise. When the paddle steamer docked at Harrisburg Charles watched the blind man being led from the boat. He was unsteady on the ramp and was helped by the deckhand Charles had seen toss the coin to the bandaged boy. On the pier the blind man was greeted by his brother. The man who met him
wore a suit the colour of buffalo grass and possessed a compact, restless energy that reminded Charles of the curb-stone brokers he had seen outside the Merchant’s Exchange in New York. Charles watched as he placed his hands either side of the blind man’s narrow skull, tipping his head back so light struck the tiny tadpole colour irises. When his brother saw the blind man had not received the long hoped for healing, that his eyes offered the same milky, frog-spawn pale colour, his shoulders dropped and he led his brother away by the elbow to a waiting cart, swinging his lariat back and forth in the air, snapping the twisted braids of hide, at his side in frustration.

* 

If she worked for long enough she would always find a rhythm. The pitted thimble, cool where it cupped her finger, the needle puncturing the soft ivory cloth: vanishing, reappearing, vanishing again. Working by the window in the north light at the machine-turned wooden table that had been there when they took possession of the house. Her worries: the house, the boy, Charles’s changes in mood, all softening, still there but cooler and less intensely felt. Lottie reminded herself there was only a finite amount of thread. Along with the spool of cotton and Helix needles, Charles had given her a fifty-yard spool of embroidery silk in midnight blue but now there were only a few turns left and after that more would have to be sent for from Medford. They had been bickering about expenses: what Lottie thought essential and Charles deemed excessive and ordered only in the fear of snows that might never come. Lottie had taken the patterns from a book given as a gift by Clarissa: gaudy flowers with fragile, thin-limbed birds walking among them. When she tired of the patterns sometimes Lottie would stitch her name into the cloth. Sometimes she would stitch whole sentences before unpicking them, winding the rich silk back into a hank like a
river running in reverse. Meaningless phrases peppered with words that conjured life beyond the house, names of the soap or the candles, names of the fruiterers Mayhew did business with, odd bits of information that brought back memories of summer with Mayhew. Things she could see from where she sat: willow pattern bridge, baby boy asleep, light in the far trees, skillet in the sink, colander upturned on the draining board. Lottie felt the cloth give to the needle and beyond, piercing the skin on her ring finger, a brilliant red drop suddenly present and welling up on the pricked skin.

She rose from her sewing and glancing to the window, Lottie saw Clarissa Prentiss at the boundary fence. Clarissa proceeded to pace ten yards in each direction wiggling and flexing the split wood fence posts, testing that they were rooted solid in the ground; ripping clumps of moss from the posts where it flourished. The post nearest the gate was loose and Clarissa shook her head as it gave in her hand. Lottie watched Clarissa hitch her cotton drill overskirt, the bunched cornmeal layers of petticoats and climb over the gate. Lottie watched Clarissa as she strode across the field, past the milk cow; thin spine showing knots at the backbone, tar black at its flanks that blurred to auburn at its withers and brisket. It was raining and the cow was turning a muzzle full of yellowed grass lazily in its jaw. Clarissa slapped its flank hard with a crack that rang out across the field. The cow had provided Charles and Lottie with milk since they arrived, its low hanging udders were swollen. The beast was unmoved by the smack and continued chewing its cud. It lifted its tail and a thick golden rope sluiced from the beast into the earth, steam rising from the soil in the soft rain.

‘That wants fixing’ Clarissa said as she walked towards the porch where Lottie had come to greet her. Clarissa had taken her spectacles from her face and was wiping them on her apron. She gestured back to the fence post with her thumb.
‘Always is something wants fixing round here’ she said before embracing Lottie. Her large, warm bosom pressed against her, a smell like sour milk coming off her skin.

‘How’s that milk cow?’ she pronounced the word ‘coo’, like a noise made to calm a baby. Clarissa did not give Lottie chance to respond.

‘The first milk cow we owned got her teats frostbitten one winter. Nothing worse than mastitis in a fresh heifer.’ Clarissa stood looking at the cow in the field, its tail was still lifted in the air. It’s back was slightly arched as moss green pelts of dung dropped onto the wet earth. ‘Bottle jaw, lump jaw,’ Clarissa shook her head as she listed the ailments, ‘We had a bull a few years back broke himself when we loaned him out for breeding,’ Clarissa made a gesture as if snapping a twig in two, ‘penile haematoma the veterinarian from Medford called it.’

They were inside the house now. Soft rain falling faintly at the window, the droplets catching the colours of the woods in their tiny glittering prisms, the cow in the field by the boundary fence a blur of reds and browns and blacks. Clarissa’s spectacles had steamed up, the oval lens semi-opaque. She wiped them on her apron. Sensing Lottie was in no mood to discuss ailments of cattle Clarissa became more direct.

‘I hear he’s gone to hire men’ Clarissa’s eyes narrowed as she sought to bring Lottie, who stood only a few feet away, into focus. ‘What does he need men for?’ Lottie asked trying hard to disguise the urgency in her voice, ‘there is barely enough work for those he employs at the orchards.’

Clarissa set her spectacles back on her face. She sniffed, wiping a drip from the tip of her nose then took a handkerchief from her apron pocket and dabbed the rain from her forehead.
‘ Strikes me your husband might be setting out on a venture of his own.’
Corvallis from the riverfront presented a dozen grimy buildings. A planing mill; some single storey warehouses; a pair of weather-beaten workshops. Pipes, thickly rusted, ran to the water’s edge where they spewed a cloudy, noxious mass of chicken-fat yellow bubbles into the river. Behind the berth where the mail boat had docked a water tower rose forty feet in the air: a haphazard construction of sharply angled planks; provisional, improvised, it looked inclined to fall at any moment onto the burly craftsmen criss-crossing the courtyard. Beside the mill, set back from the riverfront, was a huge sign that advertised in faded grey and emerald lettering: Doors, Mouldings, Glass & Putty. In the courtyard, visible from where Charles stood on the deck waiting to disembark, a carpenter, in a royal blue apron, stood on a pile of unvarnished doors talking to a bearded man who nursed a massive brass bottle jack in the crook of his arm. Nearby on a patch of scrubby ground, a dappled mare grazed by a freshly split and quarter-sawn red oak. Quinn had assured Charles an associate named Philomore Hervieux would meet him from the boat in Corvallis. Quinn had told Charles to expect a tall man ‘not quite a giant but suffering with his height, dressed in garb you might think better suited to an impoverished prelate or some undertaker come to bury you.’ Charles wondered how meeting at the riverside with the giant Hervieux would not attract attention but Quinn had been confident in his instructions and Charles thought it best to follow them.

As he stepped down from the boat he could see no sign of Hervieux or any man who came close to matching his description. There was a small animated crowd gathered around a notice board at the foot of the pontoon and further down men loading a cargo of doors, carefully wrapped and sealed in brown paper, from a
handcart to the mailboat. The air smelled of sawdust, and a sharp coldness that heralded snow. Several shallow-hulled skiffs were pulled up on the riverfront, overturned, paint flaking in thick and shimmering fish scales from their hulls. He went to sit against one of the upturned boats. He slung his apple bag down by his feet and pushed his hands in his pockets against the chill of the morning. There was nothing in this situation he could not think his way through. He reminded himself, no impediment to his journey he could not rationally overcome. Hervieux was sure to appear. There was, after all, no reason he should not, no evidence in anything he had seen so far of Quinn to suggest he was anything but invested in the plan at hand.

An hour passed then two. Charles heard the steam whistle at the factory and then at the planing mill the buzzing quietened, the steam powered saws wound down for a half hour while the workers took their lunch. Charles grew more frustrated. He felt worryingly conspicuous as the third hour passed and no one that came close to matching Quinn’s description of the fixer Philomore Hervieux whom he had been sent to meet. Rain fell, dampening the canvas of the apple bag, dripping from the brim of Charles’ felt hat, cold against his collar where the drops pooled at his neck. He had been sitting on the hull of the upturned skiff for so long, his legs and buttocks had begun to ache, a creeping low pain spreading up the backs of his legs. First Volz, now Hervieux. Charles retrieved a scrap of paper from his apple bag and a piece of charcoal. Leaning against the flaking hull he scribbled out a message for Hervieux. The notice board at the foot of the pontoon was patched with flaking remnants of timetables and notices, over which he pinned his own note:  

\textit{ATTN: PHILOMORE HERVIEUX – WILL RETURN IN ONE HOUR - MR C. WRIGHT.}
Charles set off by foot into Corvallis. He followed a trail of newly laid duck-boarding, the planed boards stamped with the morning’s footprints, their edges pocked with beads of amber resin. Frost had set hard in the mud on either side leaving it dark and glittering. In the distance, towards the centre of the town, men were working on scaffolding around a tall stone building. The stones were a cool metallic blue, like sheets of steel in the autumn light. It was the only building in the whole of the town not built from wood. A church Charles supposed, though it gave no clue to the denomination. He stood in a patch of sunlight, grateful for the brief warmth against his face. He watched a thin man moving up and down the tall ladder. At the apex of the stone building another man in a black brimmed hat was directing the steeplejacks. They were taking down the scaffolding, the man in the black hat barking instructions to the boy at the bottom of the pulley as the bundles of scaffold were fastened and lowered down.

Charles decided to take the road that ran through Corvallis, half hoping that if he wandered for long enough he might run in to Hervieux. When he reached the main street he passed a group of nuns in brown habits, starched bonnets tight against their faces, the youngest, her pale eyes set delicately in a sallow face, held his glance as they passed. In the window of an empty store Charles saw a notice for an auction of Draft Ploughs and Seed Drills that had taken place the previous week. When he pressed his face to the thin glass he saw the room where the auction must have taken place was empty. The dusty floor dissected by weak beams of light that fell from the back of the room.

After an hour of wandering around the town he returned to the pontoon and sat again against the upturned boat looking across the river. The riverboat was gone, tiny waves from the boats and canoes lapping against the wooden legs that sunk far down
into the water. He felt a mounting sense of worry as another hour and then another hour passed. He watched the workers at the planing mill drifting from the gates. Then a little later, the sky above the tree line a pastel blue smeared with nursery pinks, he saw the foreman, a wire-coated terrier yapping at his feet, securing the building, which lay entirely empty now, with a latch and dead bolt. Charles set off for The River Inn. He had been hoping all afternoon he would not have to. Quinn told him if else failed he might find Malachi Priddy, the man to whom Hervieux was meant to introduce him at the River Inn. Quinn had grown stern, warning that Charles should approach Priddy alone only as a last resort ‘I’m not sure he would take too well to a boy, that is to say a gentlemen, of your ilk.’ Leaning in so close Charles could feel Quinn’s sour breath hot at his cheek ‘Best let Hervieux do the petitioning.’

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The bar of the River Inn was empty. Flimsy bentwood chairs angled at oak tables. The ornately carved bar-back, like something from a Spanish galleon, inlaid with faded mirrors, above it bunches of dried flowers, roses and black dahlias, hung by their stems, covered in dust, the petals dark crimson. In gaslight from an ancient bat-wing burner the bartender was holding up a glass. A smear ran along the inside. He took a rag from his apron pocket and worked it around the rim. He had a weak chin and the bristles of his moustache were tobacco-stained at the tips. He was thin, the thinness of a man who drank too much and rarely ate, the folds of sagging flesh around his Adam’s apple unable to fill his collar.

‘Excuse me Sir,’ Charles said ‘I am looking for Malachi Priddy. I was told I might find him here?’
The bartender set down the glass, the wet brim blooming where it touched the counter. The barman turned his gaze around the empty room. He picked up the glass. His sleeve was rolled above the elbow. Charles watched the tendons in his forearm, his jaundiced hands as they turned the glass in the gaslight. They reminded him of the bones in the claw of the first known bird: Archaeopteryx, the word came to him. ‘I’ll take a bottle of beer, if you have one,’ he said settling on stool at the bar; the gold moquette decorated with a fleur-de-lys worn and blurred with grease spots. The bartender reached under the counter and brought up a bottle by its dust-coated shoulders. He set it with a bang on the bar top, flicking the lever wire, pouring dark beer into the glass he had been failing to make clean.

‘Nickel.’

As the bartender made his way to a stool at the far end, Charles saw that his trousers were gathered at the belt, the material bunched, as if due to a sudden loss of weight. He lowered himself onto the stool. The leather stool top had come loose, horsehair showing through. There was a newspaper spread on the bar top, its corners curled. The barman turned the pages, fanning stale air down towards Charles.

‘You’ve missed Priddy. He was in here earlier with a couple of his boys,’ he said, then looking up from the newspaper and directly at Charles. ‘Some in town don’t like me serving him. But who I serve is my business.’ He prodded his finger at the newspaper then inclined his head towards it weakly like a famished man spooning soup: ‘Miss-Emmaline-Cox-of-Floras-Creek has-been-charged,’ he took his time over the next words ‘with-the-murder’ he shook his head ‘this world has gone to the devil.’
The bartender tried to stifle a yawn but gave in, two gossamer threads of spittle stretching from his eye teeth, his jaw extended then jerking back like a cat’s. He worked a knuckle into his eye socket,

‘You’ll find Priddy’s camp three miles from here.’ he gestured vaguely in the direction of the camp with his free hand as if it was the source of irritation in his eye.

‘Take the road north of town and make a left at the second crossroads. I’m going to close up soon. I suggest you either find yourself a place to bed for the night or else go and find Priddy.’ The bartender spat at a pewter spittoon a yard away on the barroom floor. A globule of phlegm threaded with red clung to the rim then slowly elongated until it touched the floor. ‘Fine night for walk, I’d say.’

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From behind the saloon bar doors, open out onto the cold night, the barman pointed in the direction of Priddy’s camp. The moon was out now casting a radiance on the buildings lining the main street. Charles thanked him, buttoning his jacket at the neck as he set off, past a tipcart uncoupled from its horse, the tongue and neck yoke swung high in the air, like a an improvised gallows, the tackle left in an untidy pile nearby. The beer was strong and he felt light headed. Charles moved to the centre of the main street, walking between the rutted cart tracks, tired from his travelling but eager to make contact with Priddy before the day was out.

When he was half a mile or so from town he looked back and saw the lights fading behind him. There was snow on the far hills, pale blue in the moonlight, and a dusting of hoar frost on the ground around him. He had a tallow candle in his apple bag but resisted lighting it. The wind was up now and the skin on his nose and cheeks began to feel burning and tight. As he walked on the woods grew steadily higher and darker around him. He had followed the bartender’s instructions but
calculated that he must have walked at least three or four miles since taking the turn at the cross roads which had quickly led deeper into the high, dark sided woods. Just a thin rail of pale, star loaded sky visible above him. He thought of a boat drifting in some vast uncharted sector of the ocean. Just when he was considering turning back to see if the River Inn might put him up for the night he glimpsed a fire from the path, flickering in the distance. There was a deep, steep-sided ditch, overgrown with brambles, broken branches that had come down in the recent bad weather. He stepped through the tangle of thicket but as he clambered from the ditch, pushing away branches, he felt whatever he was stepping on give, then a searing pain shoot through his ankle. He felt dizzy but pulled himself up out of the ditch. He had lost sight of the fire. He could hear the voices, the faint smell of cooking, burned fat mixed with charcoal and a whiff of something wet and sour behind it like unemptied latrines. He was moving as quickly as his ankle would allow. He heard a hiss from the darkness. He forced himself to pause. Closing his eyes he listened, a wrong turn could send him right past Priddy’s camp. Charles concentrated on the voices. The whole forest seemed filled with sounds, it was hard to gauge what was close and what was distant; a low whooping bird call, then cutting through the night sounds came the harried, close to hysterical bark Charles had heard on the wagon train as he had lain with Lottie on the yankee bed; canis latrans, the coyote. Quinn’s warning about the killing predators came back to him. He cursed Volz for not being here. He must keep moving he thought, ducking under a branch, now with great relief saw he was within sight of a camp.

As he drew closer Charles saw men sitting on stones in a circle around a huge pyramid of fire. It was giving off a massive heat, sparks drifting in great swathes on the night air. He heard the pop and crackle as bark split from wood. The men’s
shadows fell long on the ground behind them. Some sat wrapped in blankets bulking their shoulders, one wore a buffalo-hide coat fastened with horn pegs, double the size of his companions. Behind the fire in a clearing there were a pair of huge bell tents, canvas sagging and patched, guy ropes staked into the ground or secured with big rocks, a blackened iron tripod holding a cooking pot over a small fire a few yards from the bell tents. An iron kettle hung from another. There was a wooden barrow upturned and long-handled shovels and pickaxes leaning against one another, a row of hammocks strung up between the trees.

‘Good evening’ Charles said shifting his weight onto his uninjured leg, the men turned to catch his voice ‘apologies for calling on you here at such a late hour,’ he continued. ‘If I may, I should like to introduce myself, my name is Charles Wright. I hail from Mahloh, I have orchards three hours from Medford. I am, as you will hear, an Englishman…’

There was a murmur among the men, though none of them rose. Charles tried again:

‘I wonder if I might talk with Mr Malachi Priddy?’

Charles saw the shadow first, thrown huge against the side of the bell tent, then the man emerging from between the sagging ropes. Malachi Priddy was tall. He carried himself with a stateliness more suited, Charles thought seeing for the first time, to the ball at the Grand National Hotel than a camp in the woods three miles outside Corvallis. Priddy’s skin, a shade of burnt sienna, was deepened in the firelight, almost burgundy. A spray of dark freckles fanned across his broad nose and high cheekbones. He wore a double-breasted greatcoat, collar upturned, the brass buttons odd and unevenly placed. Malachi Priddy seemed unflustered by Charles’ appearance after dark at his camp.
‘You hurt your leg?’ Priddy asked. There was a honeyed quality to his voice, a voice of the south, an accent not unlike those Charles had heard on the overseers on Mayhew’s estate. ‘You got your weight all on one foot there.’

Charles leaned forward but felt the pain, like a hot iron being plunged into a trough, shoot through his ankle. Priddy gestured to a bench improvised by a plank across two upturned buckets.

‘So, Mr Wright how might we help you? You will forgive the state of our camp we ain’t in the habit of receiving visitors.’

There was a breath of laughter from the far side of the fire.

‘I have come with an offer of work.’ Charles said turning to share his address with the men around the fire. The flames had calmed. A charred beam, shining black and pocketed with glossy blisters, collapsed into the centre of the fire.

‘You a capitalist?’

‘Not as such.’

‘You got labour debts?’

‘No,’ Charles said, then lowering his voice ‘If I might speak privately with you.’

‘This as private as it gets Mr Wright.’

Charles glanced across at the men by the fire, none seeming particularly interested in the conversation, still he hesitated for a moment, wondering what Quinn would advise. He wished Volz or the giant Hervieux were at hand to help him navigate the situation.

‘Well’ Charles began tentatively ‘On the land which I oversee we have found what I believe to be deposits of quartz and perhaps some other stones of value.’

Charles paused to take in Priddy’s expression: it was unwavering, implacable. He looked in the firelight like an army general sitting for a portrait at the end of a winter
campaign. ‘We are seeking to sink an exploratory shaft and I am informed that your
men possess the skills to undertake such a task?’

‘Quartz?’ Priddy said biting a mottled nub of cork from the bottle he had taken
from his greatcoat pocket. ‘You got porphyry contact?’ he asked as he covered the
bottom of a tin mug with whisky. ‘Sure you ain’t got purple florite in there with it?

Charles looked back blankly at Malachi Priddy.

‘You know big jagged chunks all touching up together? What load do you think
you’re sitting on? We talking a five stamp mill or just some placer claim two men
could work with a hydraulic? And if that the case maybe you just out to see if you
can’t take a couple of hundred each month until it run dry? Or are you after bringing
us in to do the work some old boy could with his rocker and sluice because you
fancy you might be sitting on something other than quartz?’

Charles was taken aback by the speed of Priddy’s questioning. He tried
to formulate a response but the words were muddy and clotted and before he could
reply Malachi Priddy continued, rounding on him now:

‘I see you blinked there Mr Wright. See that tells me something. Maybe there
ain’t no quartz and you looking to take us down to Medford or Mahloh or wherever it
is you say you from in order to draw us away from work we were promised up in
Washington State this very afternoon.’ Malachi Priddy paused, he swirled the whisky
in the mug, then inclined his head to one side. ‘In fact, come think of it, you’re gonna
to have to work hard to convince me it might be worth our while packing up camp
and coming on down there at all.’

For the next ten minutes Charles laid out the terms to Priddy, taking the diagrams
from his apple bag and spreading them out across the wide stones by the fireside, he
delivered the points he had rehearsed meticulously. As he talked he began to imagine
how the scheme he spent those afternoons with Quinn discussing might unfold. Once Priddy’s services had been secured the sinking of the exploratory shaft could commence. Mayhew could be cabled in good faith and told matters were in hand. In a few months Charles would present Mayhew with a clear and unqualified argument for sinking further shafts. He would keep Quinn as an advisor. He would stop short of a share of the profits. He pictured Mayhew’s delight at having turned a distant experiment into a fortune for both men. Malachi Priddy’s voice pulled him from his reverie.

‘Mr Wright, I enjoyed your disquisition. I’m minded to sleep on it. I find the dawn in these parts brings most things into clarity.’ Priddy scratched the underside of his chin, sparsely patched with black hair. ‘Too far to go back to Corvallis now. Stay with us if you wish. Immanuel can fix you a hammock.’ Priddy flung the remnants of whisky at the fire. It brightened briefly.

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Charles felt his face flushing in the firelight as the alcohol worked on him. He listened to the men, the low burr of their voices. After stringing up a hammock, Immanuel, stocky, in his sixties, hair hanging down his back in fine, dull braids like chain in a butcher’s curtain, came to the fire with an instrument. A guitar, Charles thought at first, or some form of mandolin. But as he studied it he saw the strings were too thick for a mandolin, and the neck, like a broom handle, too long. A gust of wind blew through the camp, lifting the door flaps to the bell tents. When he had settled himself on the far side of the fire, Immanuel began to play: warm notes, slowly, bleeding into one another. Charles closed his eyes and pictured rain falling. Immanuel played each phrase as if discovering it for the first time, ear pitched toward the instrument’s body. Charles saw the gourd was not hollow like a mandolin
but had a skin stretched across it; mottled grey like the face of the moon, an animal
skin. The men around the fire began to clap, the rhythm changed and Immanuel’s
head began dipping, his hand moving faster, rapidly plucking the melody from the
strings. The clapping increased to match it. Malachi Priddy had been watching
Charles,

‘There clapping to keep themselves afloat otherwise they might drown out in the
music.’ Malachi Priddy said the words matter-of-factly, as if describing the course
of falling water. The music stopped, Immanuel stood and rested his instrument on the
stone. Charles saw the tissue above his right eye was ridged and puckered, a shallow
where the living eye once sat, smooth as the inside of a sea-shell. Immanuel let his
braids fall to cover his missing eye. After the whisky bottle has been passed around a
dozen times Charles began to feel dizzy, the pain in his foot had numbed but he was
overcome by the need to sleep. He closed his eyes and saw swirling blocks of colour,
he was hot, as if on the verge of a fever, his mouth watering and he had to resist the
urge to vomit. Charles bid Priddy goodnight and stumbled towards the hammock laid
out for him earlier by Immanuel.

He hung cocooned in his hammock, the cold cloth smelled of sweat and stale
semen, a screech owl in the high branches gave its bubbling monotonic trill. In his
drunkenness and near delirium it sounded to Charles as if the sound of a foal and
steam whistle fused together. He was cold to his bones and his ankle ached. He
thought of the orchards last autumn, not long after he arrived when he was still
taking stock of the place; of the men and the work at hand, sounds of the men’s
voices, Hagstromm bellowing and Volz banging on an iron pan to rouse the other
men, voices in the darkness as they hurried to light the fires on the night of the first
frost of the year. The lines of fires burning in the darkness for miles along the lines
the trees, the branches thrown in silhouette against the clouds of smoke and cloud that rolled by. Like a signal fire lit along a coastline in warning, or bearing back the news of some great victory out at sea. How he had felt peace descending on him, standing there in the stillness of the scene, awake until first light when the fire had petered out. He looked into the ashes of Priddy’s fire and thought of that first frost.

In the morning Malachai Priddy greeted Charles with a cup of coffee. The tepid water tasted faintly of chicory and Charles wondered what had gone into the mug he was holding, while pressing his hands against its hot flanks for warmth. Priddy looked different in the daylight; thinner, less powerfully built than he had appeared when half in shadow the previous night. Charles saw too his hair had a rust colour to it. A blue neckerchief fastened above his collarless shirt. They sat together around the embers of last night’s fire, wind scattering the ash in wisps outside the stone circle. There was still heat below the ruffled ashes and both men leant in against the chill of the morning. Charles felt heavy in the head from the night’s liquor. Looking around him he saw that the camp was closer to the roadside than he thought, that his own route had taken him veering off into the thick woods. There was a calm and composure to Malachi Priddy, unruffled by Charles’ arrival late last night, amused almost, almost as if he had been expecting him.

‘Sweet dreams Mr Wright?’

Charles nodded. He had been swimming out into the sea at Livorno, the Scalo di Gorgona growing slowly smaller in the distance.
‘Sure you won’t come stay with us now? Elijah is a curmudgeon but he’d be glad to have you. And you know he adores that little one.’

Clarissa Prentiss held the looped reins in her ungloved hand as she squinted down toward Lottie. She must have sensed a wavering in her young neighbour as she added for good measure,

‘Lords knows when that man of yours will be back from his wanderings.’

‘We’ll be fine, won’t we Wallace?’ Lottie said stepping from the buggy, lifting her little boy after her, with a sigh, as if her were a bag of sugar.

‘Well I shall call by tomorrow to make sure that is so.’

Clarissa brought the reins down hard and the buggy set off with a jerk. It was a Studebaker, brand new last summer, its decals and labels still in place, the warm, deep, honey-sweet odour clinging to its upholstery. Elijah had caught the leather with the edge of a baling hook the first afternoon they took it into town and a big and badly stitched scar ran at an angle across the seat back. Clarissa and Lottie had spent the morning at the Indian School. Twice a month Clarissa would ride over taking the valley road west out of Mahloh. Since the summer Clarissa had been taking Lottie with her to the chicken farm where they had erected a timber frame hut that acted as the schoolhouse. It was unlike the big Indian school in the north of the state, this was for the little ones Clarissa explained, peering over the green lenses of the d-frame spectacles she wore when driving the buggy ‘that they might learn some of the language and how to put their marks on paper’. At the Indian School Clarissa assisted a man called Pattison Kinley, a Baptist whose mother was half Umpqua, a seam of small pox scars pitting and dimpling the tired skin at his chin, his nose
coarse and rubbery. Lottie had been wary of the children at first, big eyed, owlish, seeming to move within their own world like reflections watched in a mirror. Talking quickly in a language she did not understand, their crow-black hair and dresses stitched from worn hides and fibrous plants. But something pleased in her in the way they mocked the order Kinley willed on them when asked to form a line or take their seats at the wooden desks, lapsing into some older way. Watching them from the tin roofed school room at their dances and games, listening to the children gathered in a singing circle, learning to fathom their words for fernroot, muskrat, salmon. Pattison Kinley warned Lottie that it was not far from their games to the beaver teeth dice and liquor that blighted the lives of their parents. In the afternoons after lessons Clarissa asked Lottie to play hymns on a primitive German action piano that Pattison Kinley had been given and repaired himself. Lottie enjoyed Clarissa’s company and being there among the children.

On the journey out Clarissa would give her news from Medford, stories Elijah had heard at the auction house or Clarissa picked up on her trips into town; rivalries and interests, the competing ambitions of the Medford’s prominent men. More and more Lottie heard Quinn’s name mentioned, the story of a picnic he’d organized for the mayor’s daughter with performances from Hamlet, a masque they had called it, all the guests arriving in costume, stories of Quinn shooting geese with the mayor the week the state governor was visiting. When she had asked about Quinn, Clarissa told her all anyone knew for certain was he arrived in Mahloch at the end of last summer and that was renting a huge wooden folly on the road to Medford, known locally as the gingerbread house. It had been built at huge expense, designed by an architect from Illinois called Cicero Hine, at the time the first blocks were being laid out in
Medford. Rumour had it that Quinn was practically camping out in the place as the dormers and gaudily painted trim disintegrated round him.

As Lottie approached the house she saw a figure slumped in the rocker on the porch. There were sparrows feeding from a suet ball behind him, skinny passerines flitting in and out frantically beating their tiny tan and grey wings. The face - part shaded by the portico, the figure was wearing a tartan lounge suit, weft a dark holly, warp a midnight blue. He had retrieved Wallace’s peg doll from down among the Mason jars and had it balanced on the arm of the chair. The figure slumped in the chair was either drunk or deep in contemplation, too large and powerfully built to be Charles and it took a moment to register who it was as she walked towards the house.

‘He is not here Mr Quinn, but I think you know that,’ Lottie called out.

‘I have come to talk with you Mrs Wright,’ Quinn said rising uneasily to his feet, picking up the peg doll. Quinn smoothed down the fronts of his trousers and grinned. His dry lips stretched thin against his teeth. Quinn clicked his heels, like a sentry, and nodded down to Wallace. On previous visits Quinn had been no further than the porch or the outhouse over by the rabbit hutchies to relieve himself, disguising the sound of his water with humming or singing a few bars of the spirituals and field songs Lottie heard him mock, his low and rolling basso reaching the porch. Now he held the flimsy door open wide and then without invitation followed Lottie into the house. Three iron skillets were piled in the sink; a red-wheeled coffee grinder on the pine kitchen table; a side table draped with an embroidered cloth. At the window the lace curtains with their vinegar stained hem pulsed faintly. The room was filled with the smell of burned coffee and behind it the sharp, greasy odour of onions gone cold in the fat they were cooked in. Lottie set Wallace down and sent him off to his room.
She began raking the cinders in the wood burner, piling on the feather-soft ashes, bone-pale and rippled split sticks.

‘Not sure exactly what your husband might have told you Mrs Wright,’ Quinn said standing in the centre of the room, ‘but we are starting out on a venture which might benefit us all. Put food in the mouth of your boy next winter.’

Quinn gestured at Wallace with the peg doll. The coyness of Quinn’s opening statement was replaced by a more solemn tone,

‘From what your husband tells me last winter was a close run thing.’

‘Charles has work,’ Lottie said.

‘Oh, I seen that orchard. Now cultivation of fruit is not my forte, your husband once spent a whole afternoon out there on that porch explaining the whys and wherefores of a certain form of sclerotia on the bark of rootstock. He is a learned young man but even after all those fine and scientific words I was more or less none the wiser.’

Quinn let out a dry laugh.

‘But what I do know is a going concern when I see one.’

Lottie glanced from the wood burner to Quinn.

‘And that orchard of his is not a going concern.’

Lottie felt her cheeks flush. She did not want to let Quinn see her like this, to give him the satisfaction of seeing her thrown by his comments.

‘It is not your husband’s fault those men are so sullen and workshy, they resent having to have sold their land. I understand that,’ Quinn said, cupping his hands as he spoke as if nursing a baby bird that fallen from its nest.

‘I had my way I would have got new workers in that were hungry for it. Plenty of men in this county are.’
Lottie continued attending to the fire, weak, water-white flames flickered around the sticks. There was a sack of apples by the dry sink, skin flecked by an ailment Charles had identified as flyspeck. Quinn took one of the apples then unclipped his bowie knife and began to slice the tart fruit into slivers, pressing the glistering segments to the blade, pink tongue against the wet metal as he brought the apple to his mouth.

‘Now Mayhew, I believe that is his name, owns a fair portion of land in these parts. And if my enquiries in Medford are to be believed not just them raggedy old orchards. We, that is your husband and I,’ Quinn said, speaking as he chewed a mouthful of the tart apple, ‘simply showing Mayhew how he might best put that land to use. Where is the harm in that?’

Quinn was by the dresser now, peering at the plate with the willow pattern bridge on it Charles had given to Lottie the Christmas she was recuperating at the hospital. Even at the time she had not liked it. Had not known what to do with it, afraid she would offend Charles were she to let her real feeling be known. She had packed it and it had followed them from Manchester to Florida, from Florida to here. It had sat gathering dust since they moved into the house. Quinn pushed the blade of his bowie knife into the sheath at his hip. He inspected the plate,

‘What have we here?’ Quinn said ‘Look at that now, three Chinese crossing over that little hump of a bridge,’ Quinn carried the picture over to the light, pulling the curtain open, ‘I once fell into dispute with a Chinaman in Laguna de la Merced. Ever speculated Mrs Wright?’ Quinn asked looking back over his shoulder, ‘I would advise you not to, especially where the Chinaman’s involved.’

Quinn’s tone was conversational, the oratorical tone of earlier gone from his voice:
‘This fellow, we found out him and his family living in a claim I’d left empty. Got word of it returning to the state after a spell of fine living back east. Soon as I heard I rounded up a few of my boys to investigate. It was only a short ride and we tethered the horses a quarter mile up the track so they would not hear us approach. It was a hot day, I remember this huge bone-bleaching sun burning down as we picked our way along that path looking for the Chinaman, just the slightest trickle of a breeze. I remember hearing wind chimes. His woman had done her best to make a home of the place, hanging fabrics of oriental design, even a had a tea set laid out they were sat around drinking from it as we approached. The Chinaman must’ve been taking a rest from his labour and I did not blame him for it was a blistering day. There was something tender and lovely about that scene and under other circumstances it might have inspired in some finer feelings. As you might imagine his woman was mightily surprised to see us,’ Quinn laughed.

‘Chinaman was dandling his boy when she alerted him. He was slow to his feet, and there was something resigned in his demeanour which I took as an admission he had done wrong. Though why he did not send away his wife and child is a puzzle. I gave him opportunity, intimated so by looking over and shooing them.’

Quinn mimed the action for Lottie, as if shaking residual water from the fingers of his freshly washed hands. Through the window Lottie saw Quinn’s boy standing by the horses by a patch of shadow where the twisted branches threw a marble pattern onto the ground. The manes of both the mares were plaited, woven tightly in glossy braids against the horse’s necks. Quinn’s boy had the head of one the horses in his hands, and pulled it by the braided mane towards his face, as if he were a foal seeking comfort from his mother. Quinn let the curtain drop.
‘Once I had ascertained from the Chinaman the particulars of the situation and his being there - though in all honesty his English was not up to much and the tattered deed he offered me I could not make head nor tail of – I had my boys teach him a lesson. Beat him so badly that lying there on the ground, you couldn’t tell if it was the head of a Chinaman or an Esquieumeux or some deformed gourd dug up from the wet clay that very morning. Eyes like two yellow-flesh peaches, teeth all smashed in the front of his mouth. And that lip o’his’ Quinn gently pulled his own, ‘hanging loose off his face like a segment of a blood orange, the very bones in his jaw shown though, right where the roots of his teeth bedded in at the gum.’

Quinn rubbed a finger back and forth against his own gumline. ‘Well, gripping him by the unbroken part of his face to better assess the damage I began to suspect one of my boys had used a brass knuckle on him. It takes a brass knuckle to do that to a fellow’s face. I remember his whimpering. Made me reach for my Remington thinking it better to spare his wife and child that unbecoming sound, had the hammer cocked but something in my nature made me demur. Never heard a man wail so, mind you they was wild boys, had my very own Anti-Coolie Club right there.’

Quinn smiled at Lottie as if half expecting some expression of approval. ‘Once the punishing was done we stood watching his woman pack the place quickly as she could, bundling possessions into a bed sheet, little boy wailing just like his daddy, then standing still as statue looking on him. Took all my power to keep those boys off his mother, if you follow my meaning.’

Quinn puffed his chest then rolled his shoulders backwards. ‘Should be glad we living in more civilised times Mrs Wright. Hard to imagine a situation where that kind of self-governance might be called for nowadays.’
Quinn raised an eyebrow, pushing his brow into a crease, he lowered his chin and fixed his stare on Lottie ‘Principle of the thing, you understand?’ then he repeated the words ‘Principle of the thing.’

Quinn returned his attention to the willow pattern plate with the image of the bridge on it. He weighed it in his hands, then began to move it slowly it in a circular motion, like a gold pan.

‘Fine piece,’ Quinn said as he set the plate back on the dresser.

He tugged the tartan lapels of his jacket and inspected himself in the tin mirror on the wall. He wetted his thumb and forefinger with spittle and pushed them through his moustache and then over his stubbled chin. He pulled himself to his full height then tugged again at his tartan lapels, pursing his lips and nodding to himself,

‘I am lunching with Plymale and Strang in Medford. You may have heard there is some discussion over who will stand for Marshall. They are eager to hear my opinion. I dare say they are hoping I might stand. Imagine that now…’

Quinn looked back at the plate with the willow pattern bridge on it, like a man at an auction who cannot decide if a lot is worth bidding on.

‘Do not get in the way of our enterprise.’

Quinn said flatly, pointing the rag doll in the direction of Wallace who had come to the door of his room.

‘Made myself clear?’

Silence.

‘Then I wish you a good day Mrs Wright.’ Quinn said, the menace suddenly gone from his voice. Quinn paused when he reached the front door, the space around him painfully bright, Lottie shielded her eyes.
‘Best not mention my visit to your husband when he returns. You have a good day now. Certainly is peachy out there, just peachy.’
In the empty packinghouse the air still held that faintly unguent, brandy-like odour.

A cool blue light was coming through the gaps in the roof that Volz, despite his promises, had failed to repair. Scores of unused apple crates were stacked against the far wall, the late sun bringing out the knotted grain in their blond panels. Charles Wright stood at entrance, palms pressed to his thighs, elbows drawn forward, his arms forming two hollow wings. He felt his lungs expand, then begin to burn as they filled to their limit. He exhaled, the sound like rice spilling from a slit sack, straightened himself and felt for his heart, floating somewhere in the sealed darkness beneath his ribs.

A few minutes earlier Charles had been overcome by the need to see the packinghouse. He had been examining the year’s outgoings when the figures in the ledger began to swim, the meaning bled from them. Charles needed to remind himself what the numbers signified: exactly what their deficits amounted to. Charles swung the ledger shut, the pink chits, the telegram’s onionskin, lifting in a wave from his desk. An elderly labourer, one of Hagstomm’s men, whose name Charles did not know, was leaning against the steam tractor. Charles did not bother to acknowledge him, but when beyond his line of sight broke into a run. At the packinghouse the thin loop of rusted chain gave a dry snarl as Charles pulled it through the handles. Fighting against the stiffness in their rolling track Charles pushed the doors wide open. There it was: the unswept floor, the faded aprons abandoned flat across the packing tables, the big field boxes at the far end of the line, a few half-packed crates of apples mouldering on the tables. It was not enough.
Nowhere near enough. There was no getting around it: the harvest had been a disaster.

Charles’ thumbnail was bitten to the quick but he brought it to his mouth and teased away a shard of skin from the cuticle. Immediately it began to bleed: watery, intensely bright blood, trickling to his knuckle. He licked at it, clumsily, the iron tang filling his mouth. He had caught his breath but could still feel his heart beating beneath his ribs like a mechanical toy. Charles scanned the room again as if he might alter the course of the harvest, roll back time to that point four weeks ago when he had watched the harvest hands arrive, noisy and malnourished from Lookinglass and Clatskanie, from Clackamas and Jawbone Flats. Heads cropped, suits stained and reeking of sweat, cigarette burns at their cuffs, sun-faded muskrat coloured hats, callouses like wax set hard on their overworked palms, arms tanned, young faces shaped by the weather and their work out in it over the summer months, cast and pinched into the countenance of old men.

Looking around the packinghouse all Charles saw was the mountain of empty boxes, looming over him the accusing quiet of the building, The packinghouse seemed a folly, epic as any mad king’s castle or temple in a French garden. He approached the wall of boxes, a corn doll hung from a nail by the door, twisting in the breeze. Beside the apple crates the clean scent of pine was like a loud sound, visible almost. He ran his fingers over the empty crates, all stamped with the scarlet crest he had devised for Mayhew Holdings. He spent weeks refining the lettering, corresponding with the firm of typographers, paying extra for the boxes to be shipped to Mahloh, He even specified the ink they should use adding an extra cent per three hundred to the crates. He hadn’t cared at the time, he was pleased to look at them: the thick trunks of the interlocking M and H, the fine serif that flowed off
each. He felt a surge of panic when he considered what it had cost him, just one of many outgoings recorded in those heavy leather bound ledgers. A week ago the packinghouse had seen women fulfilling the last batches before the season was over, small hands fluent amongst the gathered fruit, pale bands on their fingers where they had temporarily removed their wedding rings should they catch on a splinter of wood or protruding nail. Watching them he had known it was not enough.

He felt his stomach knot, then a tingling in his fingertips, and the hairline above his temples. Four carloads at one cent per pound, from the forty or so acres Hagstromm, Kanzler and Volz planted when they were new to the county, rivals from the same village on the banks of the Volga. They had predicted fifteen carloads, five thousand bushels from the four hundred trees that might have fruited. Even last week, when it had been clear the harvest was coming in low, Charles had been predicting a dozen carloads. He had resisted checking the number until the apples were all in. Five of the acres Volz oversaw came in blighted with apple scab, the lesions thick and fungus dark on the apple skin. Volz must have known months ago. His acres had been covered with aphids when Charles had ridden over to inspect them in the summer, their woolly galls all along the apple branches. Volz assured him all was in hand. It was seasonal, Volz assured him, easily treated. Charles could send for a remedy from Medford, better still Volz had three drums of the stuff he could sell him for cost or close to cost, he added after a split second hesitation. The trees in Hagstromm’s acres were no better: beset by coddling moths and fire blight, whole swathes left unpruned through the growing season, else cut back brutally, at random, on Hagstromm’s whim. Charles had seen the piles of leaf debris decomposing at the bases of the trees, like ruined clothes thrown out onto the street after a housefire. He had argued with him over irrigation channels. Hagstromm
barking replies in German, until in the end he was reduced to one word: nein, nein, nein, over and over, shooing him off his patch. Only Kanzler’s trees were healthy but even they produced a lower yield than Charles predicted, for a moment he had entertained the idea Kanzler was taking the pick of the crop for himself, but such enterprise seemed well beyond his wit. It was humiliating, sending the packers and the harvest hands home a week early when other orchards were still packing fruit at their peak. Charles bitterly regretted devolving the running of Mayhew Holdings to its previous owners. It had seemed common sense to let Hagstromm, Kanzler and Volz run the orchards as their own, dividing between them the patchwork of other parcels of land Mayhew had bought up.

At first it seemed to work as Charles had planned: Hagstromm and Kanzler arriving at his office daily to request monies for treatments or remedies or extra labour, Charles’ signature on chits and bills of sale. Coming to him with ideas for how they might better irrigate a section. As long as the money from Mayhew was available he was happy to indulge them. In return they listened when he summoned them to the estate office to talk about his innovations; ideas for cross breeding, the manner in which he intended to adapt certain machines, even helping him tie the tiny paper envelopes to the branches of the oldest tree on the orchard in order to collect the seeds and pollen, the four of them working late into the night like a family dressing a Christmas Tree. Some nights the ideas came so quickly it was all he could do to get them down, scribbling into his notebook until the light was at the window and it had grown cold. It hadn’t mattered Hagstromm, Kanzler and Volz had failed to run their orchards at a profit, Charles would correct this. The new planting would transform the orchard.
He spent months planning how best to join the disparate parcels of land, conducting soil studies, measuring the fall of light with expensive equipment sent for from San Diego, plotting the aspect and dimensions of the land they needed to plant. Within five years there would be over a hundred acres planted. Standing before the wall of empty apple crates he felt a growing, nauseating sense of failure. As if the floor were giving way beneath him. Disappointment he might in time reconcile himself to but the ledgers told another story too, there were debts now, bigger than he had ever imagined. The debts had grown in the darkness like fungus or dry rot, spawning and spawning, now nakedly visible when he opened the ledgers in the dank air of his office.

On the morning before the harvest was due to begin Charles had woken in a panic. His hands clammy, his mouth dry as chalk. He was convinced they would be short on workers so he sent Volz to hire men from Mahloh and beyond. Charles even enlisted the help of Volz’s wife and children in the packinghouse. Volz billed him, charging his children out at double the rate of his wife. Volz proved himself adept at finding men, trawling the saloons and gaming rooms in a time when labour was in short supply, harvest hands swallowed up by the bigger orchards across the county. Volz had way of persuading men to come to Mayhew Holdings. When the mood took him, an impresario on top of his apple crate, his quick darting movements like a monkey chained to a barrel organ, his heavily accented English, wiping his nose with a rag, an object of humour at first when he approached groups of young men, impervious to their laughter. Charles stood at the gates of the Mayhew Holdings watching the hired men arrive. Weaker, more dishevelled than Volz promised. Charles had prepared a short speech to read to them, explaining how he intended to expand Mayhew Holdings over the coming years; how he hoped to see the same
faces returning year on year as the business grew; how they planned not just to rival but to excel against all the other applemen in the area. This last line pleased Charles. He thought it would inspire industry in his workers. When the men were assembled Charles had to fight to make himself heard as their voices rose amid the clatter of tin cans, the hubbub of chatter, the smell of unwashed bodies and old liquor, some were drinking, dark beer that smelled of hops, so that in the end Charles stepped down from the apple crate from which he was addressing them and signalled to Hagstromm to lead them away. He burned the speech in the brazier outside his offices later that day.

Charles pulled the corn doll from the door and tossed it away. The arrival of the men seemed an age ago he reflected as he walked back from the packinghouse to the estate office. He stopped to run his hand over the nose of the spotted dog that slept by the door, one of the pups Volz sold to him from a litter he would drown if Charles could not help. The dog licked his palm with its rough wet tongue. It tried to follow him into the estate office but he pushed it away with the side of his boot. He shut the door. The room smelled of damp wood, old rain, oil and cold. He sat at his desk looking at the illustrations, water-colours and ink drawings, plans he had spent hours drawing up that Volz and Hagstromm had yet only vaguely, half-heartedly followed. The work always slower, longer met by some impediment or hold up. Hagstromm, Kanzler and Volz more concerned about the strawberries and sugar beets they demanded Charles they keep on to provided them in the summer with extra income. When he last called them to his office Volz looked around the room, the plans and apple illustrations tacked to walls, inkwashed rows of Yellow Pippins, Bellflower Pipins, Newtons; apples Charles could tell you everything about. ‘Kunstgalerie’ Volz said, slyly, under his breath but loud enough Charles and the others to hear. Volz’s
brow knitted, dark folds of flesh sagging under his eyes, as if the little ties and knots of muscles refused any longer to hold them open, as if they would give at any moment and leave his eyes permanently closed. He gave a tut. Hagstromm and Kanzler, like over sized schoolboys, suppressed little throaty retches of laughter.

Back from the packinghouse Charles sat in the estate office going back over the sums, the ledgers and account books, Mayhew had sent him to spend a day with his clerks before they departed, stressing the importance of keeping accurate records, a tongue-tied man who wearing a dirty gabardine mackintosh, black hair falling in slick curls at his forehead. Charles knew the line of credit extended by Mayhew was not indefinite. Perhaps he had been overzealous in those first months. The steam tractor that sat rusting outside –ownership argued over by Volz and Hagstromm – most of the outgoings he could account for, in his head at least, at least he thought he could; on paper it was another matter. Charles ran his finger down the columns, the system of coding and reference had once made sense to him but now seemed opaque. Farrier, Livery, Varnishing a Dog Cart. How could so much money have slipped through his fingers in a year? He saw the asterisk against amounts loaned to Quinn, dollars here and there, growing over the weeks. Quinn explained his money was caught up in enterprises which made it easy to access large sums but anything under a thousand dollars was impossible to get his hands on. Then there were the monies he had loaned to Hagstromm and Volz at various times, the easy line of credit kept coming from Mayhew but Charles saw there was a gulf between the amount spent and the returns shown so far.

Charles calculated it would take a decade at this rate to see any return. Mayhew had opened four accounts, three of which he instructed Charles not to touch. Each one was empty now. Against two of them Charles had secured an overdraft. Charles
grew angry, felt his face hot, a burning glow he could not control, why had Mayhew trusted him with such large amounts of capital? Why had he not questioned any of the expenses? What stripe of man could countenance haemorrhaging money so easily and be satisfied by so little as a weekly telegram? Thousands of dollars were gone. Charles knew he had only himself to blame. He remembered Mayhew’s reticence when he had asked him for the position that evening in Florida. Charles felt himself every inch the orchardist but the figures, the ones he had managed to record, the ones he had bothered to, the figures he omitted, the sundries, the seasonal costs, the extras. Charles closed the ledger as a man might a coffin lid.

He would write to Mayhew, setting out exactly the string of bad luck and ill fortune that had attended them this year, outlining the admirable manner in which Hagstromm, Kanzler and Volz had attempted new initiatives. There was too much to tell Mayhew to put it in a single cable. He would take his time over the letter. He retrieved his writing paper from the desk drawer, his pot of ink. Laying them out like a surgeon his instruments prior to an operation. He would be frank and honest about the state of Mayhew Holdings, accept responsibility, explain how in the confusion and desire to generate success certain funds had been misappropriated, had gone towards things other than their stated aim. He wouldn’t mention the overdrafts, or the loans he secured against Mayhew Holdings. Charles knew in his heart, it was obvious, apparent to anyone who cared look, that this land was capable of yielding more than apples. The failure of the orchard would be eclipsed by the success of these other enterprises.

Charles looked at the calendar on his desktop, tomorrow Malachi Priddy and his men would arrive. There was a chance to correct the situation. None of this would matter once the enterprise with Priddy and Quinn was underway. These figures
would be seen for what they were: paltry, trifling amounts. Chicken feed, Quinn would call it. They would joke about it in years to come. Quinn and his boy had already been up in the woods marking out sites with canes for Priddy to start work on as soon as they arrived. Charles leaving Hagstromm to oversee the work at the orchard as he rode off in the buggy to discuss important matters with Quinn.

Everything rested on the success of the mine.
Immanuel was driving the mules. Shaggy coated sorrels and bays wheezing by under the sign for Mayhew Holdings. Massive canvas panniers strapped to their withers and hips, the worn ropes rubbing a mottled salami of dime-size sores, cracked and yellowing at their edges, the mules’ knees swollen with fluid. Occasionally one would stop, raising its head, letting out a breathless, near-hysterical, whinny. Grey-rimmed lips quivering then drawn back tightly on pale pink gums, long teeth the colour of damp and rotted plaster. Immanuel would strike the mule with a whip fashioned from the plaited length of an old harness strap. If the mule refused to move, as Charles had seen one do, Immanuel would grab its mane, digging his heels into the dirt, jerking it roughly until, patience spent, he would simply let go, walk behind, lift the dry, dense strands of its tail then swing the metal-studded whip handle up into its testicles, the stunned beast pricking the black tips of its tick-ridden ears, narrow hooves shocked into a quick trot.

Behind the mules Malachi Priddy and his men walked in a ragged, wide-spaced line. A dozen or so, carrying short-handled picks and rusting drop-forged heads. Picks, spades, hammers, dented Davy lamps, tins of ancient-looking blasting powder insouciantly strung around their necks. Walking next to Priddy was an older man whose face looked chiselled from rosewood. He wore a faded gingham shirt, two sizes too large, and leather gaiters. Further back two tanned Chinese in ill-fitting Derbies, collarless cyan shirts stitched from rough cotton walked side by side. At the end of the line was a long limbed boy with matt molasses skin. He moved slowly, ambling along, the whites of his eyes hemmed by lashes so thick they looked as if
the lids were lined with khole, his demeanour peaceful as a painted statue in the side-altar of a church. The boy looked no older than twelve or thirteen.

Charles watched the men pass from his buggy. Hunched forward, the corduroy collar of his duck cloth cotton jacket turned up against the cold, taking each man in. It would work. Of course it would. And if not? The alternatives simply didn’t bear thinking about. Hagstromm and Kanzler stood below Charles, Kanzler toying with the buggy’s tug buckle. Charles noticed Kanzler had combed his thinning blonde hair across his pink scalp. Dry skin nested in the parting like flakes of a yeasty bread gone stale. The work shirt Kanzler wore was unlaunched, an oily ring around the inside of the collar, his faded needlepoint braces embroidered with pansies and ears of wheat which seemed at odds with the big man’s powerful and fleshy frame. Kanzler, Charles thought, was dressed like a Bisque doll. He had never asked Kanzler his age but his bulk, thinning hair, boyish, flushed complexion, features which seemed compressed, collapsing in on themselves, as if there were something essentially wrong in the design and construction of his face - made it hard to guess. Beside Kanzler, occasionally glancing up to his employer, Hagstromm stood, the creased forehead of his sallow browless face, furrowing more thickly as each miner passed. Hands thrust in the pockets of his overalls, knuckles working against the cloth like an animal trapped in a sack. Hagstromm, in his wide lapelled, waxed canvas jacket, rusted copper rivets, muttered something in German.

Kanzler looked up from the tug buckle, nodded, hooked his thumbs under his braces, then bellowed over to Volz, as his braces snapped back against his fleshy breasts. Volz stood by his dogcart a few feet away, arms folded low across the hard pouch of his gut, a black wool bowler adding inches to his height, shook his head. As the final miners walked by, Kanzler, who had now given them his full attention, spat...
through his teeth. He hooked the tobacco plug of from his lip and flung it on to the
dirt. He took a tin from his back pocket, opened it, selected a palm full of dark
threads he rolled with his fingertips into a ball and placed in his mouth. Pushing the
lump with his tongue until it sat like a bruise below his cheekbone.

Priddy’s men struck camp in one of the strawberry fields on the southern edge of
Mayhew Holdings, a half-acre of tatty looking plants, criss-crossed with tracks of
deer that had decimated the crop, tended by Kanzler or maybe Hagstromm. Charles
couldn’t recall who he delegated the acres to when some diversification had seemed
a fine idea. Seepage water made it marshy at the western end, unusable really,
unplantable, at least for now, after just one crop of berries last summer but fine for
Priddy and his men. Before turning the buggy around and returning to the estate
office Charles sent Kanzler to see if there was anything Malachi Priddy needed.
Kanzler returned, his fat lips sourly pursed, shaking his head. Charles decided it
would be best to call by once Priddy and his men had established their camp. ‘Space
if you want to come back with me?’ Charles offered. But Kanzler just shook his fat
face and set off back to the Estate Office on foot.

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It had grown colder with the onset of evening. Charles approached Priddy’s camp
along the yellow trail, a shallow incline that led from the estate office down to the
strawberry field. Charles had named all the trails and paths across Mayhew Holdings
on his arrival. It was one of the first things he had done, pacing the paths with a
wooden surveyor’s wheel, its clacking wooden tongue, while Hagstromm and
Kanzler looked on. Charles pictured the pathways as a great venous system, the
estate office as the heart. But the names, taken from his circulatory system, he had
ascribed each path had not stuck, the Latinate words jumbled in the Volga German
mouths of Hagstromm, Kanzler and Volz who now referred to them by the colours on the chart in the Charles’ office, if at all. Along the yellow path there were knots of tall grasses tangled at the side. The grasses lent the sense that Mayhew Holdings was slowly being clawed back by the wilderness around it. Grasses tall and wide and brittle and swollen, then a new, densely tufted grass Charles thought might be Western fescue. A stem lay on his desk on a grease-smeared glass slide under the microscope, cut with his pocket knife that morning on the way back from watching Priddy and his men arrive, Charles had lost an hour trying to identify it. A stem of Western fescue, cut at the whim of a Philomath, he thought to himself. And behind it the dark shadows, the debts, sat like birds nesting in his mind. He could not divest himself of the blurred and unformed notion that knowing the names and behaviour of these grasses, native and imported, might be of use.

Hagstromm walked a few paces behind making heavy weather of carrying a crate of beer, sighing as the bottles clinked like billiard balls in their worn-smooth wooden casing. Charles had passed Hagstromm as he was leaving the estate office and after feigning blankly not to understand his instructions, Hagstromm had relented and agreed to carry the crate down to Priddy’s camp. As the camp came into view Hagstromm lifted the crate to his shoulder, the set of his mouth mournful as a man carrying the casket of infant lost to influenza. Charles and Hagstromm stepped through a hedgerow into the strawberry field. Priddy’s men were finishing erecting the tents. The dull metallic thud of hammer heads on iron tent pegs sounding out across the ground, dying somewhere at the far edges of the field where the woods began.

Charles watched the baggy canvas of the bell tents growing taught around the high poles as the men raised them. A faded Confederate flag sewn onto the side of
the larger of the two, torn in half, stained and faded. In the area between the tents Priddy’s men had started some small fires, assembling their cooking apparatus: kettles, pans, skillets, a few rickety looking trestle tables, on top of one an improvised butcher’s block behind which stood Immanuel in a filthy apron. Already the rows of planting had been trodden so the neat lines of undersized shrubs were no longer clear. A hen wandered from its broken cage: wattles and combs bobbing as it ran, giving a strangulated b’kok, b’kok, as the boy with matt molasses skin chased it across the camp, trying to scoop the bird with his long arms and return it to the cage. The air of weariness that hung around them earlier had lifted. The two Chinese sat playing dominoes on a upturned crate. Nearby the elderly man Charles had seen walking beside Priddy stood by a improvised canvas portico shaving by the light of a paraffin lamp, the blade scratched at the scraps of sparse hair on his dark skin. Beside the two bell tents there were dog tents, propped up with sticks, rotting tarpaulins laid over them and rubber mats inside. Malachi Priddy’s men had brought an undersized heifer with them to Mayhew Holdings. Charles noticed it earlier, stiff hipped, wallowing along behind the mules.

Charles saw the cow had been reduced to a rusted washing tub full of slippery viscera, a startling wet mess shot through with nudes and soft pinks. Hooves and severed head set beside the washtub on a sheet of newspaper, threads of sinew and ligament sprouting from the hooves, blank-eyes staring out blindly from under the horns. Immanuel and the old man Charles had seen walking beside Priddy earlier were butchering the carcass; large pieces of meat were hung on the wooden washing frame propped up against the bales of straw Priddy had requested for the mules in advance of their arrival. Behind the camp, near to where two fresh pit lanterns had been dug, the mules were tethered in a circle around an old iron hay trough.
‘A gift Mr Priddy, on the commencement of your work here,’ Charles said, manoeuvring around a pile of manure. The light was in his eyes and he had to squint across at Priddy. Beside Charles, Hagstromm made to set down the crate, but let go an inch too high off the ground so the thick sides rattled where the crate fell. Malachi Priddy moved from where the sun was at his back, took a moment to coolly observe the man with the creased and browless face, who was helping Charles. Priddy thanked Charles then, with his gaze still fixed on Hagstromm, shook him by the hand. ‘Please take a bottle for yourself’ Priddy said gesturing toward the crate. Hagstromm reached down, nodded to Priddy, then to Charles, then walked away with beer bottle balanced in the crook of his arm. Now the two men were alone Priddy turned to Charles.

‘Mr Wright will you join us for a drink? Priddy said opening a bottle of beer and taking a long pull as the liquid levelled and righted itself inside the glass neck. ‘Immanuel throw a little tongue on the fire for our host.’

Priddy gestured with the bottle lip toward the iron skillet that hung empty over the fire. Charles watched as Immanuel lifted the slab of tongue from the bucket at his feet. It flopped in his hand, glistening and thick, like a fish, on to the chopping block. Immanuel nicked the skin with the point of his knife and peeled it back with his fingertips. He then massaged the cow’s tongue with the heel of his hand, and began to strip and slice away at the black scales with a longer, triangular slate-coloured blade. Immanuel carried the slices in his hands over to the frying pan, the fatty tongue hissing as it hit the hot metal then shrank on surface of the pan. When it was done Immanuel brought the cooked tongue to Malachi Priddy and Charles on a dented pewter plate.
‘You’re probably wondering about the provenance of those tents.’ Priddy said picking up a slice of the cooked cow’s tongue and lowering it into his open mouth, a half-smile playing at the corner as he offered the plate to Charles. ‘I was informed the larger of the two bell tents,’ Priddy said as he chewed ‘is where Robert E. Lee spent the first night of war, though these things are almost impossible to prove.’

Priddy swallowed, running his tongue over his lips. Charles looked back towards the orchards and saw one of Priddy’s men returning with a milk pail with dented sides full of water drawn from the well by the outbuildings. Priddy and Charles talked for a while, pleasantries at first and a few words about the work that would commence tomorrow. The light was almost gone from the day, and Charles was slowly overcome with a sense of trespass. The conversation seemed to stall. The two men stood chewing the fatty tongue. A puzzled look came over Malachi Priddy’s face which then gave to a look of satisfaction.

‘Loam,’ Priddy said

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘Clay, you got clay and poor drainage.’

Priddy licked his lips. He took another sip then gestured with the bottleneck to the boggy end of the field.

‘You want loam for your berry crops, ideally.’

‘A little late for these now I fear’ Charles said looking down at the mud, the shapes of waves, set hard in the cold.

‘I had a cousin work for the soil survey in Utah.’

Priddy ran his tongue under his lip then sucked it against his front teeth with a thin, high sound, like something shrivelling on a fire.
‘Responsible for the transportation mainly, driving the wagons, fixing the sprocket wheel when it came off, the under buggy stuff, dirty work. Lived for a year with the Mormons. Knew more about the soil, the science of it, than some of the men who hired him. Worked with Grove Gilbert tracing Lake Boneville. Deltas, drifting sands, wave built terraces: I got all his letters, observations about rainfall on the fertile plain, the treeless lowlands, the cedar passes. Got some cuttings too; box elder and locust and hackberry he sent on enclosed. He left Boneville after six months to set up a plane table surveying business—just him and a saddle horse Gilbert gave to him as a gift, in recognition of his works for the survey. Week later got himself stabbed in heart in an argument over cards in a town on the edge of the Escalante Desert,’

Priddy pinched the remaining tongue from the plate.

‘The puntilla went in over his ribs, that’s a Mexican’s horse killing knife, so hard it snapped at the hilt and left the blade buried there in his chest, three days off his twenty third birthday.’

Priddy swallowed the remaining scraps of tongue then drained the contents of the bottle. He set the plate and the empty bottle down on the ground.

‘Some men’s dreams don’t never amount to much Mr Wright.’

Malachi Priddy spoke matter-of-factly, clapping his hands at angles, like a woman carding wool, wiping the grease from his fingertips on his trousers. It had begun to rain, the drops loud against the tight canvas of the tents. Priddy’s men had taken shelter inside.

‘Anyhow Charles’ Priddy said ‘work begins at dawn. Trust you will want to be there for breaking ground? Joe Tubb over there,’ Priddy pointed to a stoutly built man with corn-rowed white braids moving slowly with a bucket between the two bell
tents, ‘don’t like the nitro on account of being at Vicksburg where the confederate cannons smashed open one of his ear drums. You can take his place.’
The strip of bald ground had been cleared in a dense section of forest midway up the hill that marked the boundary of Mayhew Holdings. Beyond the crest lay a barren plateau dotted with a few knots of chaparral, extending for several miles before dropping off into a valley where the farmsteads began with their vast and fertile acres of gold standard wheat. To reach the place Malachi Priddy and his men were to sink the first shaft you needed to walk for an hour or more from the road through the massed woods, buckbrush, wildrye, sticky whiteleaf manzanita, ascending a narrow mule-track that ran precariously above a steep gully, then diverting at a sharp angle from the path and pulling your way up through fern stems and the lobed leaves of the pacific poison oak. Hidden here behind a ridge was a naturally occurring bowl; a small, stony amphitheatre of newly denuded space. Quinn and his boy had marked out the area and a day later, plucked suddenly from their duties at the orchard, Hagstromm and Kanzler had been set to work clearing the trees: some cedar, maple and ash but mainly spindly pines and youngish black cottonwoods leaving a shale of loose stones and rainwater filled hollows where the stumps had been dragged from the ground. Hagstromm bitterly resented the work, complaining to Charles as he drove them up in the buggy, cross-saw and the felling axes resting against their shins in the footwell.

They made their way into the woods, following the red cotton flags Quinn tied in the branches to guide them. Hagstromm tapped Charles on the shoulder and reminded him that his specialism was ‘the cultivation of fruit not the cutting down of trees’. Hagstromm’s deeply-creased, turnipy face, shrunken in his massive coat. It had taken a week to clear the timber, Hagstromm and Kanzler making heavy going
of the two-man saw, a hair-line fracture spreading through the blade until it snapped after the first day. Volz had to be sent to fetch a replacement from Mahloleh.

Hagstromm and Kanzler viewed the work as a kind of punishment, payback for the disappointing harvest. At the end of the third day Charles rode over, Hagstromm and Kanzler set down tools in front of him, feathers of fresh sawdust blowing around their boots. Hagstromm greeting Charles in silence, simply raising his palms to show the black-edged blisters from the handle of the cross-cut saw. Charles handed him a hunk of bread wrapped in cloth, which he took grudgingly.

‘This is, I am thinking, is a very bad place to build a house’ Hagstromm said, unfastening the top button of his huge coat. ‘Too far from the road,’ he pointed with the heel of bread toward the mule track, ‘too far from water. Useless. Really, a very bad idea. And yet for three days now we work…’

Hagstromm pursed his lips and shook his head like a child refusing medicine. Kanzler, who stood close by, shrugged mutely and picked a shred of moist tobacco from his lips. He had trapped a garter snake earlier in the day and it lay curled in a burlap sack at his feet. Kanzler seemed more interested in the captive creature, peering into the sack at the wet erect ribbon of its forked tongue, the wide pink of its fanged mouth, prodding it with a long kindling stick, than any dispute with Charles or potential show of solidarity with Hagstromm. Charles saw no reason to disabuse Hagstromm of the idea that they were there to build a house. Hagstromm and the others would no doubt realise the true nature of the enterprise when Priddy and his men arrived, but the longer Charles could delay word spreading beyond the orchard the more chance he believed the enterprise had of success. He had already considered the deductions and enticements needed to maintain the silence of Hagstromm, Kanzler and Volz. Hagstromm might betray the enterprise through malice unless
made to feel somehow invested in it, Kanzler through ignorance loud-mouthed in Mahloh or visiting cousins in Medford. Volz, Charles thought, might be bought the most cheaply but he would also be the first to suggest being bought at all. And if pushed it would be quartz alone that Charles would admit to being in the market for and having hired Malachi Priddy and his men for this purpose solely.

* 

The morning the blasting was to begin Charles arrived at dawn as promised. It had rained in the night. High pigeon-coloured clouds that had hovered all day over Mahloh finally moved in and dropped their cargo on the hills around Mayhew Holdings just as night was falling. Charles sat awake in the estate office listening to the rain, the soft, rhythm on the corrugated roof, wondering if it would delay Priddy’s work. He had sent word to Lottie that he would not be home until tomorrow at the earliest. He ate a few slices of venison from a stoneware jar kept for such occasions in the bottom draw of his desk, the meat deep red and tough as leather, and then half a can of desiccated coconut scooped out with his hand - the tin’s rippled and slick inner cool against his fingers.

Afterwards he dozed a while in the heat from the cast-iron parlour stove, slipping in and out of sleep until he woke for a final time, an hour before first light. He made himself a jug of metallic-tasting coffee on the stove, stumbling around the office in the half-light, kicking over the cast-iron cuspidor kept for Quinn’s visits, as he lit the kerosene lamps. The kerosene lamps flared, illuminating the mass of papers on his desk, the fading watercolours, the complex plans and estate maps tacked to the walls. Charles opened the door an inch and the cool air flooded in diluting the hutch-smell the cluttered room accumulated overnight. Charles pulled on his duckcloth jacket with the corduroy collar and went to ready Bella in the stable block abutting the
Estate Office. Charles set off in the buggy at first-light, the long bodies of the trees emerging from the vastness of the night, the sizzling mechanical sound of nighthawks in the air above, blazes of white bright on their long wings.

With swift efficiency one of Malachi Priddy’s men had fixed a rope ladder in place to access the blasting area. Charles lowered himself down the spars of worn wood in the coarsely knotted rope, the fibres ripping at the skin of his hands, the rain-wetted stone cold and bright by his face. He glanced over his shoulder and saw Priddy’s men assembling the head frame on the ground below, four tall squared-topped A shapes, the arms of each made from single trunks, leant in together, a long St Andrew’s Cross running down the upper half of each. They had used timber left over from the packinghouse. Volz, who escaped the task of clearing the ground, had transported the wood up with his youngest son. Charles ordering him to transport enough for the house Hagstromm imagined they were building. Priddy’s men would carry the head frame into position after the blasting. As his men busied themselves Malachi Priddy explained to Charles how the haulway would be sunk down a hundred feet, the main haul tunnel held in place by the timber sets, teams of three working at the face, setting charges into the rock, any gold found, bedded in quartz or otherwise, would be sent directly to Quinn to assay. Quinn had contacted Priddy to tell him this and Charles saw no reason to demur. It was all that easy, at least it seemed that way when Malachi Priddy spoke with his calm authority, voice a little dry from underuse, his southern vowels tightened by last night’s home brew run off the still Charles had seen Immanuel assembling.

Charles felt his pulse quicken, the artery in his neck throb, a tingling lightness that began in his wrists then ran across his palms and fingertips. The prospect of gold as a physical pleasure: capable of annihilating his losses, the debts accrued in his time in
charge of Mayhew Holdings. There was no room for any doubt: circumstances had
conspired to place him here: first Mayhew granting him the opportunity to come
west, then meeting Quinn, and his journey to find Malachi Priddy at his camp in
Corvallis. As Malachi Priddy talked Charles heard a chesty coughing up on the ridge.
He looked up to see the Barzee boy standing above the rope ladder. His cornet tied
by a piece of leather to his belt, hanging at his side. Since the summer Quinn had
taken to using the boy as a messenger. Charles turned and beckoned Barzee to come
down. Barzee shimmied down the rope ladder and trotted towards Charles, fishing in
his pocket and retrieving a thickly folded pellet of paper. This latest missive,
scrawled in Quinn’s smudged, uneven hand, told Charles Quinn had been called
away upstate on a matter of business, but that he trusted all was going well. As
Charles read Barzee stood smiling faintly. The boy did not look well; his skin was
pale as candle wax, purple grey circles beneath his eyes, nostrils red rimmed, his
narrow, slightly pointed skull recently cropped. There were wet scabs, like millet
husks with moist red centres around his lower lip. Barzee held out his palm. Charles
wondered if Barzee wanted payment or some kind of tip for his services. He looked
for a coin and found a nickel in his trouser pocket. But still Barzee did not leave, just
stood smirking, so it fell to Charles to send him away saying

‘Thank you, that will be all now.’

Barzee looked hurt, his eyes narrowing, then the corners of his scab-ridden mouth
turned down in the attitude of the profoundly rebuked. Charles thought no more of
Quinn’s message or the sickly-looking courier Quinn had chosen to employ, until
later, a few minutes before the blasting was about to begin. It had rained again, the
clay scents of the wet earth heavy on the air. Malachi Priddy was showing Charles
around the blasting area, explaining where the charges were laid, how he expected
the rocks to open up, and where work would commence. Immanuel came over and
signalled to Priddy the charges were wired and ready to go. Priddy ushered Charles
to a safe distance. It was at that moment, just as he and Priddy were taking cover
behind a handcart, overturned and buttressed with hay bails, that Charles glanced
into the woods above the ridge. Barzee was sitting in the low branches of a
cottonwood, on the edge of blasting area, closer than any of Priddy’s men and within
reach of the fallout from the blast. Charles screamed out,

‘Get out of here for God’s sake, you’ll get yourself killed.’

Barzee smiled down from the branch, swinging his legs beneath him, trousers
riding up his hairless shins. Malachi Priddy, now aware of the situation, scrambled
up the escarpment towards Barzee, bellowing to Immanuel to halt the lighting of the
charges. Charles watched as Priddy pulled himself up into the branches, snatching
Barzee by the wrist then tugging him toward him. Barzee came tumbling down.
Priddy tried to pick him up but Barzee kicked and squirmed then made his body
rigid, arms flat to his sides, hands pushed against his thighs. Priddy managed to
wrestle Barzee under his arm as if he were a rug. He carried Barzee like this for a
few yards, then suddenly dropped him. Barzee was on his feet, trousers torn and his
bloodied knee was showing through. He didn’t move, just stared at Malachi Priddy,
as one might something behind glass in a museum.

Charles arrived just in time to see Priddy strike Barzee; sickeningly hard on the
side of the head with his open hand. The blow’s report ricocheted around the
amphitheatre of the clearing. Charles saw the flickering the instant the shockwave
passed through the flesh of Barzee’s face, his whole cheek hollow for a moment and
then hideously misshapen before it reformed. A stunned silence followed. Barzee
clutched his ear, still smirking faintly, a thick trickle of blood oozing from his ear.
‘Get out of here,’ Priddy said ‘men got work to do.’

Barzee’s expression was almost beatific, the smile spreading across his face. He turned on his heels and trotted into the woods with a strange hyena-ish whimper.

‘Ain’t right in the head that boy’ Priddy said, visibly shaken, ‘and he bites worse than a fox.’

Priddy rolled back his sleeve to reveal a bloody double horse-shoe of teeth marks, flecks of fat and gristle showing through in the deep puncture wounds in his forearm.
Lord it was hot. Hotter than he ever known. And there he was taking little sips of breath just to try and get some air into his lungs. There was a meanness to the smell down here; the rock, the blasting powder, the wetness, the dark, the way it all closed in on you. The sound of axe heads on the stone, then murmurs, words he couldn’t make out. Was he being asked to do something? Was that his name being called? All noise sounded strange down here. He thought he might pass out. Stabbing pains, needling him in the guts like he’d eaten rotten meat. He’d thrown up twice already, bile, vomit that left his mouth sour and dry for hours after. Sweat trickled down his back like an insect crawling on his skin, to the base of his spine. Then Immanuel coming up behind, fingers on his shoulder, a canteen, smooth sides and pewter spout, passed up. He took a gulp of lukewarm water. Yesterday Immanuel let him set the charges but he confused the wires and Immanuel had to finish the job. So now he was pushing the ore cart, its dead-weight, all his might just to move it a yard or two along the track. Immanuel said he would talk to Mr Priddy about getting him off the teams for a day or two. Though he had to wait until the time was opportune as Mr Priddy’s temper was sometimes hard to gauge. Last night as they were sitting at the fire that nervous Englishman had come calling again, deep in conversation with Mr Priddy. He tried to remember Immanuel’s lesson on the size of rocks: clay, silt, sand, pebble, cobble, boulder. The other new words, words that sounded more like they had to do with magic, words like a conjurer might use: Granulite, Quartzite, Skarn.

‘Keep going now Sonny’ Immanuel said from the darkness behind him, ‘the sooner we start, sooner we be done’.
Charles arrived in the buggy at midday, he knew Priddy and his men would be
breaking now. He had invited Priddy for supper that evening and had ridden over to
remind him of the engagement. He looked down to the headframe. Some of the men
had already emerged from the mine. The two Chinamen were squatting by their
kettle at their own small fire, sipping from their glazed blue cups. Dark skulls shaved
to the skin save their long black tails of hair, thin and tightly braided, that fell at their
backs. The brothers recently re-joined the camp from San Francisco where they had
gone to despatch the body of a cousin buried for three years in a blanket in an
unmarked plot as they saved enough money to have his remains shipped back to
Xiāng shān. Their cousin, Charles learned from Priddy, had choked on sulphur fumes
when they were smelting lead in a mine a few miles from Corvallis.

First out of the mine was Sonny, absconder from a steam boat where he worked
as cabin boy on the rivers between Louisville and New Orleans, the brim of his
slouch hat tipped back for a moment as he stood in the sun by the entrance to the
mine. Behind him was Immanuel, then Joe Tubb, the oldest at sixty, stone-deaf, who
studied Charles’s lips as he spoke to him around the campfire that first night in
Corvallis. Charles watched as Joe Tubb braced himself against the entrance, retching,
his back arched like a cat that had swallowed a bone. Wet phlegm and bright blood
spat from his curled tongue dripping down the smashed rock. Priddy walked over to
Charles,

‘We all got it coming.’ he said wiping his hands then neck with a rag.

‘The nitro it blows out little pieces of rock, a kind of fine mist, when that mist that
get in your lungs, well, that’s where the blood come from.’
Joe Tubb righted himself. He rubbed his hand across his chin, spitting again, white, bloodless froth this time, it seemed to satisfy him. He nodded to Charles, flecks of blood in his white beard like tiny bugs, like the fleahoppers he had seen in Florida, crawling on raw cotton in the fields near Mayhew’s land. Beyond the mine head there was a crudely constructed oven, a domed pile of reclaimed bricks and stones. Priddy had explained the process to him:

‘We follow the ore in the vein down into the mountain. Blast it out, load the rubble into the ore cars’ Priddy had explained. ‘Throw it here, cook it up and see what we got.’

Priddy had patted the side of the primitive looking oven cut into the side of the hill a hundred yards from the entrance to the mine.

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When Charles brought the buggy over to the camp that evening Malachi Priddy had changed from his workwear. He was wearing a suit cut from a coarse oatmeal coloured wool with wide lapels, trousers riding half an inch off his ankles, a blue silk diamond-point bow tie at the collar of his thick white cotton shirt. Joe Tubb and Immanuel were playing dominoes, seeing Priddy appear from the bell tent Immanuel whistled. Priddy waved them away and then flashed them a grin.

‘Business, just business, fellas’ Priddy laughed, the men tapping down their worn ivory dominoes on the upturned keg with a clack. A strong breeze was moving the high branches of the woods, bringing the stale scent of vetch cut with the softer, sweeter autumn smells. Charles had cut a nosegay for Lottie; salvia and seaholly and monkshood, from the garden at the side of the estate office Volz tended. Charles passed the nosegay to Priddy to hold as they mounted the cart. A mile or so into their
journey Charles looked across at Priddy. He was holding the flowers primly on his lap. Charles laughed.

‘Something amusing you?’

‘The flowers. We look like a bride and groom.’

There was a long pause Malachi Priddy considered the observation. Charles wondered if he offended Priddy.

‘Well, I ain’t the bride.’

When the silence returned it was somehow lighter and more inviting.

‘Do you have a family Malachi, a wife perhaps, children?’ Charles asked, looking straight ahead along the road, lifting the reins from Bella’s back.

‘Once.’

Priddy shifted in his seat, as if against some pain or ache, then sitting up more straight.

‘Name was Child Dupree. Gave me a little boy.’

Priddy set the flowers down between him and Charles, squeezing his hand into a fist to relieve the tightness in his fingers.

‘I remember holding him, tiny thing, a whole head of black hair. And Suzie, my mother’s cousin, telling me Child had passed. I knew from the blood. Suzie pulling the sheet over Child and me standing there with the baby in my hands. I wasn’t much older than that fool Sonny. Named him Fleet, after Child’s father who went by that name.’

‘I’m sorry Malachi,’

‘So long ago now, ain’t really no sadness left in the story.’
Priddy cracked a knuckle on his hand, a dull dry pop like a log splitting on a fire.
The cart rattled on along the track, the front wheel dipping into a pothole so that both
men braced themselves and Bella gave out a low whinny.

‘I was rough with the whole world after Child Dupree died. Struck my mother
clean across the face. Broke a tooth. Made me sleep with the dogs in the yard a
month before she let me back in.’

‘See Fleet was almost a brother to me. When he was coming on fourteen, about
being that age he might be old enough to work the mines...’

Priddy paused. His voice when he continued was softer, the mirth drained from it and
something almost pleading to his tone.

‘He was always smaller than the other boys you see Charles, always talking, you
might say girlish almost in his manner. When he fell sick the scarlatina carried him
away in no time at all. Sometimes wonder if wasn’t better for him leaving this world
when he did.’

Priddy spat from the side of the cart as if he swallowed something unexpectedly
bitter. Then he shook his head.

‘Scarlatina,’ Priddy half-sang the word as if it were the name of something
delicate and nourishing. They passed a sign for Medford knotted with ivy and
breaking away at the edges. Priddy stretched his arms, turning his interlaced fingers
outwards. He yawned. Then gave a little shiver and pulled up his collar. It seemed to
revive him as when he began to speak again it was with more immediacy and
animation:

‘Now my mother, Estelle Pitts, was the smartest woman in the whole of
Fayetteville. Raised until the age of ten by the master of the house where her mother
worked, medical man who had quit to come back and take over the plantation on the
death of his father. The story that went about was this young doctor who had returned from Richmond, was in fact her father. I got a touch of the red in this hair Charles, now where you think that come from?’

Priddy ran his hand over his hair, playful for moment, before his seriousness returned.

‘I heard this from cousins, though it would account for her soft early years. Her reading and writing, her gift for numbers, how it was nurtured. Rumour was she would have been raised right through had the doctor not married. After which it all changed for the worse for her.’

‘And your father, Malachi, what of him?’

‘My father was a different proposition entirely. Name was Isaiah though the men at the mine called him Cupid. Used to watch him fight at Collier’s Station, any comer fool enough to take him on. Knuckle or gloves. Three hours, twenty, thirty rounds. Bruises all over, lumps size of goose eggs on his cheekbones. How my mother did not know what he was doing is a mystery. He hardly could have hid it from her.’

Priddy talked some more, outlining for Charles the jobs and the disputes that had led him here to Oregon.

‘And when you are a rich man Malachi, what then?’

Priddy took a long time to consider his answer. When he spoke it was with a seriousness that surprised Charles.

‘I would like a fine house made of stone, somewhere not too near to anybody, with woods and a little river twisting on along I could hear from the house. And I’d want dogs, a whole pack of them, some for retrieving what I’d take with my gun from those woods of a morning. For sport you see, not just for eating.’
‘And a woman?’

Charles glanced to the side at Priddy then flicked the reins. Bella gave a little
whinny, breath misting around her nostrils.

‘Oh I had my fill, Charles,’

Priddy turned to Charles and smiled.

‘But yes, a woman might be a good thing.’

When they arrived at the house it was still light, Lottie had laid a table for them.

She was standing in her apron with Wallace in her arms waving as the men
approached. There were candles on the table and a white linen cloth she had
borrowed from Clarissa Prentiss. There were scores of tiny black flies trapped in the
wax of the wide candle tops. There were cut flowers in the glazed jug. The kitchen as
they approached in the buggy was bathed in buttery light.

‘Lottie, this is Mr Malachi Priddy.’

‘Mr Priddy’ Lottie shook his hand, the palm was hard and cracked. She saw the
flowers he was holding.

‘For me?’

‘Oh, yes M’am I suppose they are.’

When they had eaten the three sat at the table. Lottie watched Priddy as he talked.

‘We are hopeful for the mine, are we not Charles?’

‘And tell me Mr Priddy, you are not yourself from these parts?’

‘No m’am. There have been several journeyings my men and I seem to have
drifted here. You might think of us as sojourners always.’

‘Priddy is famous, are you not, agitating down in Virginia.’

‘Your husband exaggerates. A little falling out with those in charge led us to the
road is all.’
There followed more drink, more talk. Malachi Priddy held the rapt attention of his young hosts as he spoke of his various disputes and fallings out. The candles burned to slick ponds of wax.

‘Too late to go back now Malachi. Why don’t you sleep here. Lottie will make up a bed.’

Charles steadied himself on the side of the dresser. Lottie came with blankets for Priddy.

‘Are you sure you’ll be comfortable here Mr Priddy?’

‘Slept worse places. Besides,’ he said leaning into the embers ‘some heat here yet.’

Lottie passed him the parcel of blankets and Priddy smiled.

‘Good night Mr Priddy.’

‘Good night to you too Mrs Wright.’
‘Now you come back the moment you have word from Mr Quinn. You understand me?’

The scabs around his mouth had begun to heal, a soft ash grey, like the under feathers of a pigeon’s wing. But there were new sores too now, clustered under his nostrils. It must have made it painful for the boy to breathe. Barzee stood with a corner of the note, sealed with a messy splash of scarlet wax, pinched between finger and thumb. He was wearing a pair of fingerless mittens, the wool unravelling like a soiled bandage from his palm. It was early still, a weak sun struggling out from behind a high bank of the dense autumn cloud.

‘Straight back now’ Charles said before releasing a corner of the note.

Barzee pocketed the piece of paper then wiped his hand across his nose, deposits of glittering mucus sticking to the mitt when he drew it away. Charles shut the door to the Estate Office. He stood for a moment at the window watching Barzee, trotting a little, then walking, his figure growing smaller, the dented cornet hanging from his belt. Charles shook his head and sighed. He went the box stove and opened the door, tossed a few sticks in then returned to his desk. He had tried every method of communication available. He had even ridden to Medford to try and find Quinn himself, the drinking places, the assembly rooms, the workshops of men with whom he knew Quinn did business, even driving to the door of the mayor’s mansion and waiting at the foot of the drive for three hours should Quinn appear.

Charles sent daily messages via Barzee but Quinn’s replies were sporadic. He was detained on business Barzee repeatedly told him. Charles wondered how many of the
messages were actually reaching Quinn, whether the boy Barzee could be trusted. But Quinn insisted on communicating though Barzee alone. Charles was surprised by Quinn’s distance as soon as the project was underway, he had been forthcoming in the weeks leading up to Priddy’s arrival. First putting Charles in contact with Priddy, helping him draw up plans, promising to make his own funds available; monies he assured Charles he could access through a network of backers. ‘There is not one aspect of this operation you have not considered Charles, and for that I commend you’ Quinn told him as they sat in his office the week before Priddy and his men arrived, Quinn leaning back in the wooden swivel chair, heels of his boots on top of the desk, drawing on a Mexi-Flora 5¢ cigar, a mess of smoke pooling around his part-open mouth like combings of wool.

Until he had word from Quinn Charles would need to start making adjustments of his own. He glanced at the clock on his desktop. Hagstromm would be arriving at any moment. Looking through the accounts and all of his lines of credit exhausted it had become clear that he would have to withhold money from Kanzler and Hagstromm if he was going to pay Priddy’s men even a fraction of their promised retainer. This was not his only concern, there was Mayhew chasing him now too. Charles had ignored the past dozen cables. Crumpling the chits from the Western Union Telegraph Company into balls and tossing them from the veranda of the hotel in Medford. The last read simply: ‘Contact Mayhew URGENT’. Mayhew would have to wait. Since he arrived at the office this morning Charles has been rehearsing what he would say to Hagstromm, how he would couch the idea of a temporary freeze in pay. It wouldn’t be easy. First he would enquire about his family – Marta his thin-lipped, skeletal wife and Bruno, a boy who at twelve already shared his father’s care-worn temperament and demeanour- and his own experience as a man of
business, a man of the world, then he would seek Hagstromm’s advice as an equal. Important this, Charles thought, to show Hagstromm he valued his thoughts above those of Kanzler or Volz. Charles thought if he could persuade Hagstromm that there was some benefit in it he might be able to bring him onside. If he could convince him there is profit in it for the men if the mine was a success. Though he would maintain it were quartz not gold they were digging for, perhaps promising them a percentage of the profit it they were willing to take a reduced salary this month.

When Hagstromm arrived at the office he looked whey-faced and haggard. He was nervous, Charles saw, a slight tremor in his hand, the nails of his square fingertips bitten down. A cigarette hanging from the corner of his lip, the paper scorched up one side, exposing the body of the burning tobacco.

‘No need to fret,’ Charles said ‘I’ve merely asked you here to seek your advice on a matter.’

From the window he saw Kanzler tugging on a stick in the teeth of one of the orchard dogs. Hagstromm sat, slumped from the shoulders down like a crumpled marionette in the swivel chair.

‘Now,’ Charles said ‘I know you are a man of the world.’

Hagstromm said nothing just stared back with the thick red webs of his bloodshot eyes.

‘I know you are all aware of the subsidiary project we are engaged in here at Mayhew Holdings. You’ve probably heard word too of the ventures others are planning up at Owl Hollow and Granite Hill and then there’s Golden drift down at Savage Rapids. As I made clear this is in no way connected to your work at the orchards. It is however a project that may benefit all …’
Charles studied Hagstromm as he spoke. He couldn’t quite believe what he was seeing – Hagstromm’s watery eyes narrowing, surely even Hagstromm wouldn’t make such an obvious display of his boredom. He wondered if Hagstromm were, in fact, about to fall asleep. Charles watched his eyes narrow even further, head tip forward, then his mouth contort into a grimace. It took a split second for Charles to register the sound of the explosion. The massive crashing and the boom which shook the desk and rattled the thin windows in their frames, cutting right across Charles before he could proceed any further into his speech. Hagstromm suddenly wide-eyed and alert rose to his feet and both men ran for door of the office. Kanzler had dropped the stick in the teeth of the dog and is looking up and out towards the mine. The black and white, muscular dog was bent forward, body lowered, ears pinned flat to its square head, trembling. The three men set off running towards Priddy’s camp. When they reached the camp there were thick plumes of smoke rising out and into the woods around it. Charles saw Joe Tubb and Immanuel carrying Sonny. Immanuel’s hands under the boy’s arms, Joe Tubb had him by the ankles. Sonny was shirtless. Sonny’s face turned to one side, his long arms loose and listless. The men struggling to move the boy as quickly as they could. Sonny’s knuckles dragging in the dirt.

‘We were bringing up fresh Nitro’ Joe Tubb said. Nearby there was a handcart overturned.

From a distance he seemed unharmed but as Charles drew nearer he saw the side of his face has been blown away in the explosion and his eyeball hanging from its socket. Joe Tubb, retching, covered the wound with a handkerchief, as they set him down on the ground. They set him down in a patch of sunlight but his body began to convulse, thrashing from side to side. Malachi Priddy knelt down by the boy,
‘Courage now Sonny. You’re going to be fine.’

The men formed a line behind Priddy. They stood around, some, Charles saw, had powder burns on their shirts. Sonny was still shaking but less so now. He made a groaning sound, which made Charles for some reason think of the wheezing grace note on set of bagpipes, then a raw, unclean, collapsing noise as the instrument was put away. Charles saw Barzee was standing a few yards behind him. He followed them down to the mine entrance. He turned and told him to go to town for doctor. Barzee nodded and walked off slowly.

‘Christ, boy, go and get the surgeon now.’

Charles turned to Hagstromm and told him to saddle up his horse and go to fetch the doctor. Sonny’s twitching grew worse, now Joe Tubb was holding him braced by the shoulders on the ground where he lay. Then Sonny stopped. His head fell to the side. He was still. Priddy touched Immanuel on the shoulder.

‘He’s gone.’

Immanuel continued to hold the boy braced to the ground.

‘Come on now Manny, he’s gone’

Immanuel had begun to cry. Tears running down his cheeks and gather in his cotton-coloured beard. It was five hours before the surgeon arrived. Charles met him at the entrance to Mayhew Holdings. A tall, bland man with a cowlick of sandy hair falling limply over one eye called Kendrick with a reputation in Mahloh for his lack of finesse and a history of badly botched amputations. A girl had been bought to have a cyst removed from her armpit. He ending up cutting away her whole left breast. There was a rumour he was a barber who reinvented himself when he came west from Ohio. He wore a heavy cologne, full of a rough nutmeg smell, overpowering to stand beside.
‘Well, let’s see at him then,’ he said to Charles.

Immanuel and Joe Tubb had carried Sonny’s body to the stables beside the Estate Office and were waiting outside when Charles arrived with Kendrick. Kendrick looked at the two men but did not acknowledge them. In the narrow stall with the low wooden ceiling the doctor inspected at the body of the boy. Kendrick took a glance under the sheet that had been laid over him, the patches of blood congealed now. Kendrick nodded then marked something down in his notebook with a silver pencil, licking the lead tip before he wrote. Kendrick took a bistoury, with a fine curve like a single clef and dulled tortoiseshell handle from his coat pocket. He folded out the blade, wiped its dull surface on his handkerchief, then with the blunt side lifted Sonny’s fingers from where they lay crossed over his chest. Kendrick lowered his face toward the dead boy, hesitantly, ‘Hmmm’ he said, taking the boy’s hand in his handkerchief and running the tip of the bistoury under the nails of his fingers. He held the blade to the light. Kendrick very gently turned the boy’s head, inspecting the damaged eye, scores of splinters lodged in the socket, the eye completely gone. Kendrick inhaled sharply, then stifled a yawn and smacked his lips as if suddenly afflicted with a pang of hunger.

‘A few pieces of paperwork is all.’ Kendrick spoke quickly but with a tongue that hardly moved in his mouth, lips almost closed shut, voice high in his larynx..

‘Sorry I didn’t get here earlier but by the look of him there’s little anyone might have done.’ As he spoke Kendrick gestured with the bistoury as if it were a conductor’s baton.

Later the two men stood alone in the estate office, Kendrick was washing his hands in the bowl and jug. Charles passed him a cotton towel.
‘I notice the boy has powder burns on his face?’ Kendrick said patting the towel with his wet hands.

‘And?’

‘Well, that does not strike me as the type of injury a man might sustain in the picking or boxing of fruit.’

Charles looked at the surgeon.

‘Assuming you have the appropriate licenses for the….’ he paused, ‘work you have been undertaking here? I am duty bound to make mention of the circumstance in my report.’ The surgeon paused and looked down at the ledgers open on Charles desk, then across to the safe in the corner of the office where the men’s wages were kept. Cast iron door and brass surround, a doily laid over the top. ‘Unless we came to an arrangement that might suit us both’

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Charles insisted on helping them dig the grave. The men worked silently. The soil thin and sandy fell back into the space they cleared. Sonny’s body was washed in the stable. They stood hats in hand, looking down at the shallow grave two hundred yards from the strawberry field. Immanuel began to sing. When it was quiet again Malachi Priddy stepped forward.

‘I knew Sonny only as long as you all did so I’m not going to pretend there’s more to say about the boy than rightfully there is.’

He paused for a moment and looked down at the outline of the washed body wrapped in the sheet. It seemed too small to be a human form, more like an ostentatious gift bound for transport.

‘But sitting up with the boy’s body last night I got to thinking how in the time we known him, Sonny he brought laughter to us all here. And that it was brave for a boy
to come join us and to get himself caught up in this work of ours. I do not know if
Sonny had a girl or much of a family and I guess for that short time we were his
family. Well Sonny, we gone bury you with the money you made from your work.
That’s yours, you made it.’

He knelt down to where the body lay in the grave.

‘Rest easy now.’

The men set to work covering the body. The white sheet fading under the shovels
of dirt that fell over. Joe Tubb bent and tossed in a small hand-carved wooden cross
and then leant into the grave and gently set down the hammer, head first, handle
toppling over, that Sonny was using that morning at the mine.
In the failing light Wallace saw a black shape at the window, then a fluttering of wings. Red feathers on black, the colour of the painted lead men his father brought home for him a week ago. The two of them lying on their fronts on the rag rug, lining up the soldiers in rows, his father sending them tumbling with the back of his hand as he made the sound of cannons and rifles. The wings beat again. Wallace looked out at the creature at the window; its sharp beak shone as if carved from a piece of coal. Its head dipped and swivelled, then its eyes fixed on Wallace. The word emerged slowly like a flower unfolding: Bird. The bird’s wings briefly frantic as they beat the water from its back then stilled. ‘Bird,’ he said the word and made the black thing at the window more real. He slid his hand through the bars and pointed to it with the forefinger of his hand. His mother was somewhere nearby but his whole world was the bird now. The bars of the crib were cool and smooth. He laced his fingers around them. Then he heard it again, the watery note of its song, the black fan of its tail feathers bobbing as it repeated the phrase, gripping the window with its claws. He would have liked to sing back to the bird, to make his voice into the bird’s voice.

‘Bird,’ he said.

‘Hush, hush now’ his mother told him. ‘Hush now and sleep.’

But it was still light outside and it was always hard for sleep to come, to trickle over him, to take him off when there was any light at all left in the sky.

‘Bird,’ he said the word again. His mother ran her hand across his brow. She walked away from the crib to the window and pulled the curtains. They snagged on the rail and she tugged them firmly until they met. The room unlit and the faint shape of the black bird at the window there as a shadow for a moment then it disappeared.
'Night, night Wallace, go to sleep now’ his mother said as she left the room. She left the door open a little. Just wide enough so that Wallace, lying on his side, could see into the rooms beyond. There were flies one above the other in the air over the chopping block on the tabletop in the kitchen. He watched them bouncing against the walls of an invisible maze. He saw light glinting off the rollers of the mangle above the metal bucket. He liked to watch his mother feed the rumpled, sodden garments through the rubber rollers, water trickling into the bucket below as she sighed or sang to herself. In the room beyond the kitchen there were men around the table. Wallace heard them arrive, the quiet house disturbed, the unexpected sound of their boots on the floor and the coughing. He saw his father at the head of the table. They were talking in loud voices. His mother leaning over the men at the table, lighting candles which flickered as the dark slowly came on. Their faces shone in the candlelight like polished wood.

The voices grew louder from the other room. The men at the table were angry and father was standing. He wondered if his father is reading for them like his mother does to the children with the high, flat faces and black hair. But these people were older and grown-ups. One man was much older than the others. He was very thin and the bones in his shoulders jutted through his shirt. Wallace thought he might be their father. His hair was white and long and stuck out from his head. He had not seen hair like this before on a man’s head. And his hand when he raises it has three fingers. The man with white hair was shaking his head. The others are angry. The candles on the table were flickering and there was rain at the windows. Wallace knew he should be sleeping now it was dark and there is no light left outside at all. The men were angry. One by one they were standing up to speak and when they did they put their hands on their chests or bowed their heads. Father was nodding his own head.
wondered if his father was in trouble or if the men are in trouble with him. His mother was pouring water for the men into tin cups at the table. And now his father is standing up to talk to them all. They sit in silence and listen to him. Some men bow their heads. And now all the men raise up their hands as if to reach for something they are unsure was really there. He knew if she saw him now, kneeling up in the crib looking through into the lighted room Mother would be angry. Sometimes when he could not sleep she told him to listen very carefully, as carefully and closely as he can to all the sounds he could hear. Wallace tried this now. First were the voices of the men at the table, then his father’s voice, steady and low, and calm. He listened hard, he heard rain and the rustle of the curtains his mother has drawn as a breeze moves them. Wallace lay there listening to the men. He felt sleepy now. He closed his eyes and heard the sound of chairs scraping on the floor, which pulls him from the edge of sleep. Now the men were leaving.

They nodded at his mother who stood by the door as they left. She nodded to each in turn. Some men shook his father’s hand. He listened to the quiet of the house after the men left. He wonders where the men are going. How will they find their way through the dark? The noise and heat drained away from the room he looked into, the house was empty now. Mother put her hand on his father’s shoulder. He was sitting in his chair at the head of the table looking down at the cloth. He took her fingers in one hand, holds them at his shoulder. Father stood now and turns and hugs her in his arms. Wallace could not see her face, it is turned away, but sees father, his head to one side, resting on his mother’s shoulder, looking at the floor. Wallace saw them walking hand in hand over to his crib. There was no light outside and he should be sleeping, he knows he should be sleeping. He screwed his eyes tight shut and turned on his side. Now all is dark as they come towards him. He can sense them above him
in the dim room. He feels his father’s hand stroking his hair where it falls across his forehead. He was hiding from them, it was a good game, and if he could keep his eyes closed they won’t find him.
‘We should eat. Should we not? You ain’t nothing but a bag o’ bones Charlie boy.’

Quinn clapped Charles roughly on the shoulder.

‘I have a table reserved for us at the Condor.’

The tables in the dining section of the saloon were covered in gingham cloths that had not changed in the dozen times Charles has been there. The cloths imprinted with circular stamps from beer bottles and wine glass and port glasses. The tables have machine made candelabra, ugly and ornate and half obscured in peaks and rivers of melted wax grown from the cheap candles they held.

‘Quinn where the hell have you been?’

‘You may well wonder Charlie why I have been detained in Medford. Well, I am happy to share with you today that I shall be standing for Marshall of that fine town come the next election.’

Charles hesitated, ‘Congratulations.’

‘Now I have a mind to eat some mutton. And a plate of biscuits.’

Quinn ran the tip of his pink tongue over the inside of his top lip. Charles listened to him breathing through his mouth as he contemplated the meal ahead.

‘Will you take a drink Charlie?’

The waiter who was the proprietor and sole barman came to the table. His hair was greased into dark wings plastered to the side of his head. Quinn ordered and the waiter moved off in the direction of the kitchen.

‘I read all your letters Charlie. And I have devoted serious thought to the matter. Now for all his learning and fine talk Priddy is a miner in your employment. We ain’t seen nothing much yet from that mine. You must realise Charles that what he
says does not mean he has your interests at heart. Am I clear on that? Mining is a
dirty and dangerous business and loss of life is to be expected.’

‘They have not been paid for four weeks. He walked to see me, six hours it took
them. His men are starving. I have no money to pay them Quinn.’

‘Now Charles, you of all folk will appreciate these endeavours have their teething
problems, monies will be forthcoming as I promised you they would be should you
hit upon any problem.’

The waiter set down a plate of chops the colour of mud after rain in front of
Quinn.

‘Fine as ever Billy, you give the cook my regards’ Quinn said to the waiter as he
placed a carafe of red wine on the table.

‘Now I have a possible solution.’ Quinn said, addressing Charles now, lifting a
chop by the bone, ‘if you were to sell a portion of that land of yours to an associate
of mine then we could find enough money to pay these men.’

Quinn thickly buttered a hunk of bread then dabbed it at the fat and blood from the
chops.

‘They are hungry Charlie you said that yourself.’

‘The land is not mine to sell Quinn, you know that.’

‘Oh, Charlie that is what we call a moot point. Anyhow you would not be selling
the land, simply using it as a security against the small borrowing. I am prepared to
broker the deal,’ He swabbed the plate where it pooled with blood and grease again
with the heel of bread, ‘your mine is an expensive business Charlie.’

‘My mine?’

‘Charlie. They are on your land, they are working your mine. Damnit they’re your
workers that are going hungry, getting killed down there.’
Quinn lifted another pork chop to his mouth and gnawed at the gristle, his tongue working the flesh and cartilage from the greasy bone.

‘Quinn, really.’

‘Charlie I am merely brokering this experiment of yours.’

‘Quinn this is unfair. I mean,’

‘Come now Charlie boy we can fix this very easy. There ain’t no need in the world for us to be falling out over a couple of hungry negroes.’

Quinn glanced up from his plate to Charles.

‘Now, I happen to have with me certain deeds the signing of which would release the monies you require to keep them boys of yours in work.’

‘Quinn, you know the land is not mine to sign away.’

‘Oh Charlie, I believe it is. I believe you have power of attorney over those lands. The same power your friend Mayhew gave you to buy land in his name, could well be argued gave you the right to sell land in his name.’

Quinn took a slug of the red wine from the tiny glass in front of him, barely big enough to hold more than a mouthful. He refilled it from the carafe, drips staining the tablecloth, and took a second gulp. Charles watched the sharp point of his Adam’s apple lift and sink.

‘Sign over the land, we can sign it back when this venture takes off, as we are both certain that it shall.’

Charles rose to his feet, knocking the table with his thighs, spilling the remains of Quinn’s wine down the front of his pinstripe trousers. The dregs of the red wine on the tablecloth. Quinn licked his lips then dabbed at his crotch with his napkin.

‘Think about it Charlie’ Quinn said returning to his chops as if nothing of consequence had happened.
‘I’ll send Barzee over tomorrow, should you change your mind. Don’t want them boys of yours starving now do we?’

As Charles walked out of the restaurant he heard Quinn calling to the waiter,

‘Another carafe of that good wine and forgive my young companion, he is a little temperamental and very far from home.’
When Charles reached the crossroads a mile outside of Mahloh he decided to take the short cut back towards the Prentiss Farm. The cart track was narrower, badly tended by the lumber yard who once held the freehold to this section of the forest but if he coaxed Bella he would be home in half the time. The cakes sat on the seat beside him wrapped in the cloth. It seemed pathetic now to think such an offering, cakes with their currants and cut peel, might have placated Malachi Priddy. When Charles had arrived at Priddy’s camp after his meeting with Quinn the latrines sent a thick wave of stench washing out across the field. Priddy’s camp had taken on an air of lassitude. Immanuel and Joe Tubb would not look at Charles as he passed them. A single candle in a cut down tin was burning outside Sonny’s dog tent. It was four weeks now since they had received pay. After his meeting with Quinn, Charles, shocked by the change that had come over his friend had come directly to the orchards to seek out Priddy. He hoped Priddy might offer him some solace or even in that roundabout, plain speaking, gnomic way of his, some advice. Priddy was in his bell tent shaving, a kettle of boiled water steaming over the fire just outside of the awning. Smeared lines of soap foam on the blue towel draped over his shoulder.

‘From Lottie’ Charles said passing a check cloth of wrapped cakes to Priddy.

Priddy took the parcel and set it down on the seat of a folding canvas chair.

‘She made them this morning, for you’.

Charles was underneath the awning, stooping slightly, unsure whether he should step inside the tent. Priddy gave a weary nod. His face looked thinner. Drawn.

‘Men needed paying. Same as you Charlie, we all got to eat’, he said, lifting his chin, running the blade in a backhand down his throat.
‘I know Malachi, it’s simply…’

‘Always is simply something’ Priddy said slashing cross-hatches on the surface of the washbowl with the razor until it was free of foam.

‘Seems to me we might as well pack up now and be moving along.’

‘Give me a few more days Malachi. I’ll correct the situation. You have my word.’

Priddy nodded, ran two more measured strokes along his throat, set the razor down balanced on the edge of the washbowl, then turned, picked up the cakes from the folding chair and handed them back to Charles.

‘No appetite for these. Take them home to your wife with my best regards.’

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As the cart bumped along Charles shoved the cakes from the seat beside him onto the track where they rolled from the cloth covering, crumbling apart. A pair of purple finches flitted down from the branches to the windfall, swiping at the crumbling buns with their beaks, between burst of the shrill, watery song from their scrawny bodies.

Charles rode on through the woods, slowing Bella when they came to a section of the track that was particularly bad. They knew each other now, their tempers and temperaments, how much he could ask of her, how hard he could push her if hurrying home. She seemed happy to oblige him today.

Charles pulled the buggy to a halt at the spot where the summer they arrived, he had walked out into the woods and picked that dahlia he tucked behind his ear when he returned home to Lottie and Wallace. From somewhere in the woods Charles heard the shaking of harness bells. He looked up. In a clearing a hundred yards into the woods, was Quinn’s horse, its unmistakable long mane brushed out and beaded. Charles wondered if Quinn had fallen while riding back from Mahloh. Charles had often seen him drunk clambering up then swaying unsteadily on top of his horse,
then snapping down the reins and sending it off into a startled gallop. Such an accident would not surprise Charles. It had only been a matter of time before it happened. Despite the ill feeling and anger that had arisen at their meeting Charles climbed down from the buggy. As he did so it occurred to him that saving Quinn might somehow recalibrate their relationship, that the morning’s disagreement would be forgotten, looked on as simply an attack of ill-temper by Quinn, the suggestion that Charles relinquish the land would seem foolish and be forgotten. As Charles walked though the fern stems and the undergrowth he half hoped he would find Quinn fallen, injured, not severely but enough for Charles to be of assistance, to prove his worth to Quinn, Quinn who he would find with his collar-bone dislocated or his ankle badly twisted, something Charles could be of aid with immediately. Who knew how long Quinn would have lain there if Charles had not come so eagerly to his assistance. Who knew what would have awaited him in that seldom traversed section of the forest.

When Charles reached Quinn’s horse he offered his hand up to its muzzle. He felt its rough tongue against his palm. Impressive this close up to see the horse, its combed out mane, the bright glass beads. It must take hours of Quinn’s boy’s day to keep the beast in this state. He ran his hand down the combed out mane. Charles heard another sound now. The horse shook its harness bells and the sound was obscured but Charles listened for it carefully, cupping his hand to his ear. There it was again, a breathless panting, then a groaning sound. Quinn must have fallen and be lying somewhere hereabouts. Charles cocked his head trying to locate the source of the sound from in the maze of trees. He heard it again. That breathy grunting, the sound of someone clearly in discomfort. Charles began to follow it. The rhythmical groaning growing clearer now, as if someone was trying with great force and vigour
to shift a cart that is stuck deep in tracks. Perhaps it was Quinn’s boy, Charles thought. Might he have injured himself? Bella and the buggy would be just the thing to transport Quinn’s boy back to Mahloh, to Medford even if the damage were not too much. Quinn would surely be grateful. Charles hurried on deeper into the woods. Then from within the woods, twenty yards or so away, he saw a flicker Quinn’s eagle feather. Charles moved towards it. Pushing through the dense overgrowth. He did not know why he didn’t call out, why he did not make himself known, thinking simply Quinn is somehow in distress and must be helped. Charles pushed through the bushes and there in the clearing where two or three big pines had recently been cleared was Quinn and Quinn’s boy pushed bent across a tree stump, shirtless, chest down and Quinn behind him staring straight at Charles. For a split second Charles thought Quinn was beating his boy. Quinn’s breaches were down around his ankles. As he stepped away to pull them up Charles saw the mottled red rash where his tweed trousers had worn the hairs away on the back of his thighs. The boy’s palms were spread across the rings of the tree stump. Quinn’s coat was neatly folded nearby and his hat with the eagle feather is pushed back on his head.

Charles turned and began to run but his legs had gone soft. He flinched as he heard the pistol shot, the sharp crack on the air. He must get home to Lottie and Wallace. He was running through the woods. He heard Quinn gaining on him. He felt something clip his heels, he fell slamming his head on the ground, his face on the forest floor and before he knew it Quinn was on top of him. Quinn drew his Bowie knife from its pouch. He had Charles pinned, his knees at the insides of Charles’ elbows. The full weight of Quinn bearing on him. It felt as if the joints in his elbows would snap at any moment.

Quinn pushed the tip of the blade against the soft skin under Charles’ jaw.
‘A word, a single word of this and you are a dead man, you hear me?’

Charles struggled to free himself but Quinn was too heavy. He felt Quinn’s massive weight on him, a wild look in his eyes, his mouth claret stained.

‘First you bring that boy Priddy up here making all that trouble and now you’re snooping on me.’

The tip of the knife had pierced the skin below Charles jaw, there was blood trickling down the tilted blade, pooling at the hilt. Charles felt it dripping on to his shirt.

‘I should cut your throat here. Think they’d find you?’

From the corner of his eye Charles saw Quinn’s boy, standing a few yards away with Quinn’s hat and folded coat.

‘I’m going to give you a choice Charlie.’

Charles struggled again, tried desperately to free himself from under Quinn’s weight, but Quinn pushed his finger to Charles lips, then slid his fingers in his mouth against his gums, rubbing them as Charles struggled, then back to his lips.

‘Leave and don’t never come back. Go home to your wife and boy and I’ll come for you tonight.’ Quinn spoke the words as if he were reading a telegram to himself.

The pain in Charles’ arms was increasing, there were stones stabbing into the skin of his back through his cotton shirt.

‘I will cut you groin to gizzard. Burn down that house while your family are sleeping.’

Charles was breathing heavily. There were tears rolling down his face. He could feel his bladder loosening. He saw a black bird break from the branches of a tree. Quinn sat up and swept his hair back from his face, the movement oddly feminine like a woman at her mirror.
‘I have grown to love this part of the world,’ Quinn said gathering his hair in his hand, ‘I believe folk here have taken me into their hearts. If I were you Charlie I would walk away. Do not go back to your house, or that wife of yours. I ever hear of you in again I will kill you.’

Quinn talked calmly, his words measured, like a schoolmaster explaining instructions to a child.

‘I’ll see to it your wife won’t be harmed. The boy too. You have my word. But I cannot have it Charlie, cannot have you prowling around, snooping on me, observing me in private acts.’

Quinn spat onto a fern stem, which rocked where the spittle struck it, then he straightened himself.

‘Affecting my business, no good Charlie.’

He wiped the bloody blade of the Bowie knife against his thigh, turned the blade around, then shoved the hilt hard against the bone at the tip of Charles’ chin. A bolt of pain ran across his lower jaw. In desperation he thought for a moment he might rock himself upward and land the blade in Quinn but his strength was gone.

‘I will ride to your house in an hour. If I find you there you know what I shall do.’ Quinn said, pushing himself up on to his feet, releasing Charles then waving for his boy to join him as he walked off towards the waiting horse.
Lottie was turning the sally bag over in her hands. It was woven from dogbane, the Indian hemp Clarissa had shown her growing wild behind the School House. The image on the bag was a running rabbit, its dark ears bent back, its long legs pushed out as it ran. Lottie was wondering what exactly she should keep in it, what fitting things might be stored within its woven sides; pegs perhaps for the line, though this somehow seemed a slight upon it, too casual a cargo. Something from the garden then, when summer came she could fill it with Spanish radishes. She turned it over in her hands, then brought it to her cheek, it felt rough against her face and holding in it a damp smell she couldn’t distinguish.

It was a gift, from a girl at Pattison Kinley’s Indian School. Lottie did not know her name. She thought perhaps she was the sister of one of the other older children who came less regularly to the school. The girl would approach Lottie after lessons had finished. High cut fringe and two sleek plaits, unspeaking, setting her small body close by. Sometimes she would linger at the door to the room where the old German-action piano was as Lottie played. The girl no more than a dark fleck in the corner of Lottie’s eye, vanishing when she stood and turned to face her or to call her and softly invite her to come and place herself closer to the music, as if it were a warmth her bones craved. The last time Lottie had visited the school the girl had simply handed her the sally bag. ‘For me?’ Lottie asked tapping her breastbone with the tips of three fingers. The child just stared back at her and when Pattison Kinley arrived and Lottie turned to ask him if it was a gift the girl had vanished. Lottie valued deeply the visits she made with Clarissa. Clarissa barking orders at the children as if the were unruly livestock in her farmyard but tender too when she thought she could not be seen.
Praying a whole hour for them each time she returned to Mahloh from the Indian School, insisting Elijah join her, the pair on their knees, hand in hand by the little rosewood crucifix in their gloomy parlour.

What Lottie loved most about the Indian School was the sound of the children’s singing. Standing in her own parlour, as she held the sally bag she was trying to remember one of the songs they taught her, but the melodies were hard and the rhythm still after all these weeks unfamiliar and whenever she tried to recall it, it came out wrongly and the sounds she made alone in the house seemed an injustice to what she had heard at the school. She made her way to the window where she decided she would hang the sally bag with its swift rabbit.

As she hung it she felt her breath jump in her chest. There was someone standing at the edge of the woods. The figure became clear then faded back into the leaf-shade, became just another shadow among shadows. She looked harder, sure of it. She felt a tingling in her feet and behind her knees. Lottie walked out onto the porch. There it was again, just the slightest shifting in the shadows. As the figure went weaving in and out between the tree trunk, Lottie called out. ‘Who is it? Who’s out there?’ When no reply came, peering into the woods from the porch for a long time but she could see nothing. Lottie went back inside, slamming the door and the bolt across it. She glanced from the kitchen window a final time, more to reassure herself that it was nothing, that there was no one out there, that it was simply a shadow but when she looked she saw the Barzee boy standing at the edge of the woods, staring straight ahead at the house. Lottie threw open the window.

‘What is it? What do you want?’ Lottie shouted, trying to sound authoritative.

There was dew on the grass that leads to the woods. It is bare and bald in patches where the horse has worn it away. Track marks from the cart rutted deeply in the dirt.
Barzee emerged from the tree line. He stood looking by the iron trough where Quinn always tethered his horses. The boy Barzee was holding his cornet in one hand. He walked toward the house, then paused a few paces from the door. He inspected the dulled metal of the battered and pitted instrument, turning it over in his hands. Lottie watched him depressing the three valves, which made a dry, airy sound as they clicked down. Barzee walked towards Lottie, on the porch, arms folded flat across her chest, her heart beating hard, at thick vein pulsing in her throat.

‘He’s gone.’ Barzee said as if in reply to a question the simplicity of which insulted him

‘What?’

‘I said,’ aggressive now, a little growl in the back of his throat ‘he’s gone.’

Barzee walked the three steps to the porch. He was looking up at Lottie from the top step.

‘Who sent you? What are you doing here?’

Face to face Barzee repeated the words but much more slowly this time. Lottie could feel his breath against her face, the sweetly rotten odour of decayed teeth in diseased gums. His eyes widened as he spoke. Softly, softly, then an elongated rasp:

‘He. Is. Gone.’

As if to emphasise his point Barzee raised the cornet to his lips and played three ascending notes on a chromatic scale. When finished he gave a little nod of satisfaction. A gossamer of spittle hung from the mouthpiece of the cornet. He wiped it away with his cuff.

‘Gone,’ Barzee repeated, this time with a single dry breath, eyes flickering over Lottie’s face, a faint smile on his lips as he turned back and walked away into the woods, the battered cornet hanging from the loop on his belt.
INTRODUCTION

Alan Hollinghurst (b.1954), Adam Foulds (b.1974) and William Boyd (b.1952) are three multi-award-winning British novelists. Each has written historical fiction that engages with the construction of English identities, class and culture, in the colonial and post-colonial world. They have all published novels which present as mainstream contemporary historical fiction, and conform to a number of its conventions, but which also draw attention to the ironies and difficulties inherent in recreating the past or pasts in fiction. Their work is distinguished by a vigorous engagement with previous literatures and movements to reveal the past as a complex and shifting landscape. As a result, as I will show, the work of Hollinghurst and Foulds has a specifically literary self-consciousness: it often explores the manner in which identities are enshrined, captured and transmitted to later generations. Boyd’s writing, however, is distinguished by the manner in which it reflects on representations of life through other media, such as photography and cinema. Although most practitioners of the contemporary literary historical novel are female (Hilary Mantel and Sarah Perry being prominent examples), as a male novelist, I have chosen to look at male precursors and, as someone who began as a poet, I am particularly interested in male literary historical novelists who have made a similar transition.

In this thesis I will argue that, between them, Hollinghurst, Foulds and Boyd offer an approach to historical fiction which can embody the political as well as the personal. To this end I will argue that through paying close attention to the way in which the past is presented through objects, landscapes and spaces, the authors provide a sophisticated and nuanced set of tools and that, furthermore, their
approaches allow and encourage reflection on the complex processes of past and pastness, on the level both of the individual and of society as a whole, providing space for previously marginalized or misinterpreted identities. In addition, through my novel, *The Willow Pattern Bridge*, I have aimed to produce a new work of historical fiction informed by, and in conversation with, the approaches and techniques of the authors examined in the critical section.

William Boyd came to prominence with his debut novel *A Good Man in Africa*, which won the Whitbread Prize for a first novel in 1981 and a Somerset Maugham award in that same year. Boyd went on to publish several more novels and received increased popular cultural prominence in 2013 after the commission from the estate of Ian Fleming to write the latest in a series of new James Bond novels.\(^1\) Perhaps due to its popular appeal, Boyd’s work, while critically acclaimed and best-selling, has received comparatively little academic scrutiny when compared to contemporaries such as Ian McEwan and Martin Amis. Boyd’s more experimental recent work such as *Waiting for Sunrise* has been subject to a mixed critical reception.\(^2\) As I will show, Boyd sits within a tradition of seriocomic novelists traceable back through Anthony Burgess to Evelyn Waugh.

Foulds, the youngest of the three, is a writer who achieved recognition with his debut long-poem *The Broken Word*, a verse novella\(^3\) recounting a young man’s experience in the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya, which won the Costa Book Award for Poetry in 2008. The success of Foulds’ subsequent novel *The Quickening Maze*\(^4\) – concerned with the brief period when Tennyson and John Clare were living in

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\(^2\) Jane Shilling writing in *The Evening Standard* on 2 February 2012, described Boyd’s novel *Waiting For Sunrise* as ‘curiously uninterested in character or emotional authenticity’, while David Grylls in *The Sunday Times* on 19 February 2012 claimed the book ‘skillfully disguises its preposterous plot with deft descriptions of architecture, garments, paintings, furnishings and objets d’art’.

\(^3\) A term coined by Peter Kemp in his review in *The Times*, 20 April, 2008.
proximity to High Beach in Epping Forest – saw Foulds elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature.

In common with Foulds, Hollinghurst began his writing life as a poet, winning the Newdigate Prize at Oxford and an Eric Gregory Award from the Society of Authors in 1979, while early poems were published in a limited edition in *Isherwood at Santa Monica* and in Faber’s *Poetry Introduction 4*. But it was as a novelist that Hollinghurst first came to literary prominence when *The Folding Star* was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 1994; he then became known to a wider audience a decade later, in 2004, when *The Line of Beauty* won the Man Booker Prize. The novel was praised by the chair of the judges that year, Chris Smith, who asserted that ‘the search for love, sex and beauty is rarely this exquisitely done’ (Ezard 7). As I will show, and as other have noted, Hollinghurst’s work is indebted to, and influenced by Henry James and Ronald Firbank.6

There is now a substantial and growing body of critical writing on Hollinghurst. A representative selection is collected in Michelle Mendelssohn and Michael Flannery’s *Alan Hollinghurst: Writing Under the Influence*, which examines a range of concerns, from John McLeod’s essay on Race to Robert L. Caserio’s tracing of what he terms the ‘eccentric genealogies’ (8) which underpin Hollinghurst’s writing. Alongside these investigations sit essays on topics as broad-ranging as queer experience and empire. These, of course, are all notable facets of Hollinghurst’s work. However, the fact that they tend to be the dominant focus of contemporary critical work on Hollinghurst perhaps say more about trends in literary criticism. My own focus, deriving from my practice as a novelist, has, as its specific

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5 1974 for his poem ‘The Death of a Poet’.
reference, the growing field of material culture, which is to say the meaning of objects and the manner in which they function when embedded in the text. This marks a modest opening up of a new territory within the field of Hollinghurst studies, while my work on landscape and dialogue in Hollinghurst’s work provide a new contribution to knowledge in this field.

In comparison to Hollinghurst’s work, the novels of Boyd (as suggested above) suffer from a relative paucity of critical attention. The work of Eve Pattern and Guy Woodward for the British Council’s online Critical Perspective’s series focuses largely on the themes of war and empire in his novels. As with Hollinghurst, my focus on material culture and the use of objects in the work of Boyd, specifically on the phenomenon of the personal and social relevance of smoke and smoking, opens new critical territory. As a result of the universally understood health implications of smoking, with the corresponding reduction in tobacco consumption, what, in the twentieth century was a socially acceptable habit, with an accompanying complex of signifying personal and social customs, is now so thoroughly unacceptable that it is banned by law in all workplaces and public areas. In this context, the practice and semiotics of smoking gains historical significance.

In the case of Foulds, the majority of critical work has focused on aspects of the individual biography and of his presentation of Victorian society. For example, Lena Stevenker in the essay ‘Eminent Victorians and Neo-Victorian Fictional Biography’ groups Foulds alongside Richard Flanagan, author of Wanting, as a neo-realist whose novel, part biographical, part fictionalized, creates a contradictory account of eminent Victorians.

My own work shifts the focus away from biography and society to concentrate on an analysis of the functions of the material in rendering the past. It
also provides an engagement with Foulds’ work from both a critical and creative context, making full use of the range of investigation offered in the Creative/Critical PhD. My novel *The Willow Pattern Bridge*, speaks directly to the devices and concepts used in the work of Foulds and is in conversation with his work, as the work of Boyd, Hollinghurst and Foulds are all implicitly (and at times explicitly) engaged in an ongoing conversation with their own literary forebears.

All three novelists offer *sui generis* historical fictions. Between them they demonstrate the most sustained and inventive versions of what we might, rather cumbersomely, call mainstream, contemporary literary historical fiction. In addition, they have a particular personal appeal to me as a published poet and short-story writer. Our shared hinterlands in poetry (in the case of Hollinghurst and Foulds) and the short story (in the case of Boyd) mark them out, from a rich and varied field of writers of contemporary literary historical fiction, as the three voices that most strongly demand my critical attention.

For example, the work of Costa prize-winning novelist Andrew Miller could have been examined alongside this group. There are significant overlaps in style and approach. However, Foulds, Hollinghurst and Boyd are all in some way pulling against what the historian Raphael Samuel would term ‘myth making’ (Samuel and Thompson), while Miller’s work, although full of arresting visual description and poetic metaphor, does not present the same level of challenge to conventional narrative. In Miller’s novels the storylines either tend toward on the fantastical in the case of *Pure* or the farcical, as seen in *Casanova*. Looking beyond the United Kingdom, the work of Philip Roth, particularly the counter-factual historical novels such as *The Plot Against America*, could also have been considered as texts engaged with history and literature. However, it was not my intention to produce a
counterfactual novel, rather to engage in the more oblique fictional histories represented by the work of my three chosen authors.

Georg Lukács opens *The Historical Novel* with an exploration of modern historical consciousness and its uses (Lukács 20). This he traces back to the work of Enlightenment writers, such as Voltaire, who through their writing were objecting to the absolutism under which they wrote. The central impetus behind this act of writing, Lukács argues, was that through understanding history a more reasonable society might be arrived at. However, in Germany, during the same period, Lukács identifies a trend in writers and philosophers not only looking to history to explain the current state of being but also to feed into an idea of past greatness (22). So, for Lukács, nationalism and historical consciousness were shown as intertwined from the outset. Writing about the past is not a simple or harmless exercise in nostalgia but is freighted with a pressing ethical component.

For Lukács, the historical novel which emerged in this period was not a form of true historical consciousness, but rather a backward-looking projection of the attitudes of the time (19). Perry Anderson, writing in the *London Review of Books*, outlines the five principal claims made by *The Historical Novel*:

The classical form of the historical novel is an epic depicting a transformation of popular life through a set of representative human types whose lives are reshaped by sweeping social forces. Famous historical figures will feature among the *dramatis personae*, but their roles in the tale will be oblique or marginal. Narratives will centre instead on middling characters, of no great distinction, whose function is to offer an individual focus for the dramatic collision of opposing extremes between whom they stand, or more often
waver. What Scott’s novels then stage is a tragic contest between declining and ascending forms of social life, in a vision of the past that honours the losers but upholds the historical necessity of the winners. The classic historical novel, inaugurated by *Waverley*, is an affirmation of human progress, in and through the conflicts that divide societies and the individuals within them. (24)

In the light of this reading of the relationship between historical consciousness and historical fiction, some novels have sought to reflect a more fractured and unstable view of history. For this we can turn to Frederic Jameson’s seminal reading of E. L. Doctorow’s novel *Ragtime* in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. The ‘Ragtime’ era covers the period from 1900 through to 1917, which was a moment of profound change in American life across the sciences, arts and culture. Jameson argues that, while the work of the conventional historical novel is to connect the lives of marginal figures and characters from a wider history, *Ragtime*, with its wide array of narrative strands, characters and story lines (the ‘fictive family’ or the real life Houdini), destabilises those relationships.

Jameson argues that ‘a seemingly realistic novel like *Ragtime* is in reality a nonrepresentational work that combines fantasy signifiers from a variety of ideologies in a kind of hologram’ (23). He continues,

My point, however, is not some hypothesis as to the thematic coherence of this decentered narrative but rather just the opposite, namely, the way in which the kind of reading this novel imposes makes it virtually impossible for
us to reach and thematise those official “subjects” which float above the text but cannot be integrated into our reading of the sentences’ (23).

Jameson goes on to say that, ‘the novel not only resists interpretation, it is organized systematically and formally to short-circuit an older type of social and historical interpretation which it perpetually holds out and withdraws’ (23).

So the historical novel can play a decisive and destabilising role in interrogating notions of the past and the constructs which shape our perceptions of it. Moreover, according to Jameson, historical novels which present as being in the realist mode can in fact act as challenges to older, unexamined, types of historical interpretation. This is underscored by Jameson’s reading of *Ragtime* but I would suggest something similar is taking place across the work of Hollinghurst, Foulds and Boyd. This also chimes with the historian Hayden White’s work on historiography, the study of the writing of history and of written histories, which has been eager to emphasise the artificial, fictive and anti-realist nature of historical narrative. White’s radically original *Metahistory* presents a reconceptualisation of history. The book offers a critique of historical reason; it marks a shift in emphasis away from the traditional focus on scientific logic toward a focus on the linguistic structures as central tenets of the historians work. In *Metahistory*, White offers what he presents as a ‘poetics of history’, a theory of tropes or what might be construed as the deep structural forms of historical thought. White draws on Kantian and Existentialist ideas of the freedoms and responsibilities, where forms of historical representation become decisions about potential futures.
In his later work, *Figural Realism*, White begins to examine the workings of Western Realism and explores further the literary aspects of historiography. This work is expanded in the same author’s *The Content of Form*, which seeks to reconceptualise the interrelations between mythic, historic and fictional narrative and the possible implications for historiographical theory. *The Content of Form* focuses on the relationships which exist between history and narrative as well as the relationships between historical and fictional narrative. These force a reexamination of the traditionally accepted distinctions that exist between the ‘literary’ and the ‘historical’ with White suggesting that the only meaning historical can ultimately have is the one which the a narrative imagination gives to it.

From *Waverly* to *Ragtime*, the representation of the past in historical fiction has undergone a considerable shift. At the same time, as White’s work has shown, the writing of history is a complex and contested sphere. Nineteenth-century historiography is invested in narrative modes and ideas of mimetic realism that have been challenged by twentieth-century fiction writers.

As this suggests, recent critical debate has infinitely broadened and enriched both the novelists’ and the historians’ understanding of the problematics of the writing of the past, while underscoring the similarities in approach and the ethical duties of each. Historical novels are not simply entertainments but come replete with complex layers of meaning, while historians have been forced to acknowledge their kinship with novelists as interpreters of fact and as storytellers themselves.

The key intervention of the critical work is to formulate an understanding of the manner in which the three novelists create, engage with and destabilise ideas of the past, and in so doing provide a model and a set of guiding principals for the construction of *The Willow Pattern Bridge*, which can be conceived of as a response
and a challenge to the work of Hollinghurst, Boyd and Foulds. Accordingly, the critical section of this thesis seeks to present the central building blocks of the novels of the three authors and to argue that objects, places and spoken words (in the form of material culture, landscape and dialogue) are key elements in historical fiction, the elements which most strongly and urgently demand our critical and creative attention.

In parallel to this my own novel seeks to build on these novelists’ innovations but also to interpret their spirit of innovation in a movement away from my previous experience as a poet and writer of short stories into the unstable and contested territory of the contemporary literary historical novelist.

1. **Objects**

From Karl Marx to Walter Benjamin, modern conceptions of the past have been built on its materiality. It is unsurprising then that this becomes the key underlying factor in presentations of the past in contemporary fiction. Literature marks the place in which the materiality of the historical passes into the immateriality of literature, where ‘things’ are made in immaterial words, and the fleeting materiality of the book provides a method of storing the past and preserving a culture. Mixing Marxist theory with Jewish messianic spiritualism, Walter Benjamin in his 1940 essay ‘On the Concept of History’, conceived of this impulse in terms of ‘Erlösung’, a form of transfiguration or redemption derived from humankind’s impulse to engage with the past. When it comes to representations of the past in literature, this is complicated by the fact that such renderings of the past
do not form a direct representation of the past but also involve a version of the moment in which they are written.

In Chapter One I show how, in three works of contemporary historical fiction – Hollinghurst’s *The Strangers Child*, Foulds’ *The Quackening Maze* and Boyd’s *An Ice Cream War*, reconstruction of the past is linked to the material cultures of the period in which each novel is set. Furthermore, I explore how each writer variously uses the contemporary material culture in order to convey complex ideas about the interiority of characters via objects as varied as a suitcase, a clyster and a poster advertising Russian cigarettes. I examine the manner in which material culture is used in combination with focalization and defamiliarization and how it acts as a spur for improvisation around objects and their attendant acts, showing how each author, in his own particular manner, contributes to contemporary literary historical fiction. Materiality, of objects and things, has a role to play in constructing a past in literature and this has a relationship to ideas of realism. Ian Watt, writing on Realism and the Novel Form in *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding*, gives a helpful description of the work of the novelist:

The novel is the form of literature which most fully reflects the individualist and innovating reorientation. Previous literary forms had reflected the general tendency of their cultures to make conformity to traditional practice the major test of truth: the plots of classical and renaissance epic, for example, were based on past history or fable, and the merits of the author’s treatment were judged largely according to a view of literary decorum derived from the accepted models in the genre. This literary traditionalism was first and most fully challenged by the novel, whose primary criterion was the individual
experience – individual experience which is always unique and therefore new. The novel is thus the logical literary vehicle of a culture which, in the last few centuries, has set an unprecedented value on originality, on the novel; and it is therefore well named. (13)

In his close reading of the work of Fielding and Defoe, Watt uses the phrase ‘realistic particularity’ (17) to define an aspect of the early novelists’ style which distinguished their work from the romances which preceded them. Watt suggests that ‘realistic particularity’ itself is not capable of ‘concrete demonstration’ (17) without establishing a relationship with two specific narrative techniques: ‘characterisation and presentation of background’. He goes on to assert that the novel ‘is surely distinguished from other genres and from previous forms of fiction by the amount of attention it habitually accords to both the individualisation of its characters and to the detailed presentation of their environment’ (18). It is in this second category, in particular, involving the detailed representation of the environment, where we find the focus moving onto objects and material culture. Watt goes on to expand this idea, suggesting that, although there is nothing in Defoe or Richardson which might compare to the work of Stendhal or Balzac and the importance they ‘attach to the environment in the total picture of life’ (27), there is no doubt that the pursuit of verisimilitude led Defoe, Richardson and Fielding to initiate the power of ‘putting man wholly in his physical setting’ which constitutes for Allen Tate the ‘distinctive capacity of the novel form’ (27).

Watt goes on to argue that the most important of these novelists’ technical innovations was ‘the adaptation of prose style to give the air of complete
authenticity’ (27) and that this is also ‘closely related to the distinctive methodological emphases of philosophical realism’ (27). Watt links this to a set of arguments we see beginning in Aristotle’s *De Anima*, with his idea of how a perceiver is informed by the object he views, and developing through the work of philosophers such as Descartes and Locke.\(^8\) Watt pays particular attention to a semantic tension between words and the objects they stand for in the work of Locke and, in particular, in the chapters at the end of the third book of his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* where Locke is concerned with these ‘abuses of language’. Watt notes that the figurative language which had featured regularly in the Romances is ‘much rarer in the prose of Defoe and Richardson than in that of any previous writers of fiction’ (28). This is related to Watt’s earlier argument about the parallel between the tradition of realist thought and the formal innovations of early novelists in relation to a focus on the particular individual: ‘both philosophers and novelists paid greater attention to the particular individual than had been common before’ (18).

Watt famously identifies in Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* a particular relationship between material progress and the religious beliefs of the age: ‘It would seem, then, that Defoe’s importance in the history of the novel is directly connected with the way his narrative structure embodied the struggle between Puritanism and the tendency to secularisation which was rooted in material progress’ (83). He then goes on to argue: ‘At the same time it is also apparent that the secular and economic viewpoint is the dominant partner, and that it is this which explains why it is Defoe, rather than Bunyan, who is usually considered to be the first key figure in the rise of the novel’

\(^8\) Locke made a distinction between the primary and secondary qualities possessed by an object. The first category are those qualities which are connected to the perceivers, for example, shape, size or number. The second category are related to the perceiver, for example colour or texture or scent.
(83). As Watt observes, ‘The basis for Robinson Crusoe’s prosperity, of course, is the original stock of tools which he loots from the shipwreck; they comprise we are told, “the biggest magazine of all kinds… that was ever laid up for one man”’ (87). Watt further observes that ‘Defoe’s hero is not really a primitive nor a proletarian but a capitalist. In the island he owns the freehold of a rich though unimproved estate. Its possession combined with the stock from the ship, are the miracles, which fortify the faith of the supporters of the new economic creed’ (87). So, in Watt’s account of Defoe, we have two lines converging, ‘philosophical realism’ (and the argument about how objects represent and form consciousness) and the individualisation promoted by Protestantism and capitalist individualism:

Emile Durkheim derived from the division of labour and its associated changes many of the endless conflicts and complexities of the norms of modern society, the *anomie* which sets the individual on his own and, incidentally, provides the novelist with a rich mine of individual and social problems when he portrays the life of his time. (89)

More recently, the argument about the influence of the global market economy is addressed by Julie Park in *The Self and It: Novel Objects in Eighteenth-Century England*. In this context, Parks emphasises the importance of particular objects in material culture in the construction of individual identity:

As proponents of Enlightenment ideas questioned and discounted the idolatrous religions of other cultures, members of metropolitan English society practiced their own form of idolatry in their unthinking devotion to
the increasingly powerful sway of fashion. These idols of metropolitan life –
manifested in strangely flavoured comestibles, household curios and knick-
knacks, luxurious textiles and the extravagant accessories for fashionable
dress – served not only as decorations for the self, but also as the very
instruments for making it. (3)

Park goes on to argue that this ‘overloading’, which is to say the increased
prevalence and variety of new and the previously unknown articles and objects, had a
direct effect on self-consciousness. Returning to the idea of a new mercantile class
and the importance of ‘novelty’ to them, Park argues that the abundance of material
objects in the eighteenth century was vital to fashioning the modern self and that, as
more exotic objects flooded the market, people living in England at that time found
increased ways for ‘devising novel versions of the self’ (1). Park goes on to relate
these new ways of devising the self to the abundance of objects in novels such as
Oroonoko, Tom Jones, Pamela and Clarissa. Park argues that, ‘In short, the integral
relationship between real and imagined objects in eighteenth-century England…
extends to the related nexus of terms for “self-making” and “world making,”’ (6)
which acquired complex resonance during the era that saw the novel’s rise’. She
further notes that ‘fashion, fiction, and fact’ all derive from ‘fingere, the Latin word
for “making things.”’ (6). Objects play a seminal part in self-making and can be
held up as measures or indexes of this, but they are not the totality; to focus simply
on objects is to discount the impact of the immaterial, of ideas transmitted through
gossip, songs, prayers and every other form of verbal exchange.

This relationship with the material culture as expressed through fiction was
apt to change. Dorothy Van Ghent’s early work, The English Novel draws attention
to the way in which the individual, by the time Dickens was writing in the nineteenth century, had become objectified and the object exalted:

Dickens lived in a time and an environment in which full-scale demolition of traditional values was going on, correlatively with the uprooting and dehumanisation of men, women and children by the millions – a process brought about by industrialisation, colonial imperialism and the exploitation of the human being as a ‘thing’ or an engine or a part of an engine capable of being used for profit. (157)

Van Ghent goes on to describe how,

This was ‘the century of progress’ which ornamented its steam engines with iron arabesques of foliage as elaborate as the antimacassars and aspidistras and crystal or cut glass chandeliers and bead-and-feather portières of its drawing rooms, while the human engines of its welfare grovelled and bred in foxholes described by Marx in *Capital*. (158)

Through an attentive reading of his work, Van Ghent argues that it was Dickens’s perception that people were becoming ‘things’ and ‘things’ were becoming more important than people. Van Ghent here takes ‘things’ to mean ‘the things that money can buy or that are the means for making money or for exalting prestige in the abstract’ (158). She locates this relation between things and money in action in Dickens’s *Great Expectations*, remarking upon the manner in which Dickens’s use of pathetic fallacy, the projection of human attributes and characteristics upon
inanimate objects, might be an ‘incidental stylistic embellishment’ (159) were it not for the fact that people were described by non-human attributes. Van Ghent terms this process as becoming ‘thinged’. In using this term, Van Ghent draws attention to the process whereby a number of Dickens’s characters are described by one part of their appearance which relates to an inanimate object and subsequently the readers apprehension of the character is coloured by that part. Van Ghent furnishes a number of examples from *Great Expectations*: ‘the clockwork apparatus in Magwitch’s throat that clicks as if it were going to strike’ (160) or ‘Wemick’s post office mouth’ (160) being just two examples.

Van Ghent sets these two ideas – that people were being reduced to the status of things and that things were being elevated above people – side-by-side, arguing that they amount to ‘general principles of reciprocal changes by which things have become as it were demonically animated and people have become reduced to thing-like characteristics – as if by a law of conservation of energy, the humanity of which people have become incapable had leaked out into the external environment’ (160). These may then work ‘symbolically in the association of some object with a person so that the object assumes his essence and his “meaning”’ (160). However, Van Ghent also suggests that this ‘principle of reciprocal changes’ has a bearing upon the ‘characteristic lack of complex “inner life” on the part of Dickens’ people – their lack of a personally complex psychology’ (161).

Since the late 1980s there has been an increased scholarly interest in objects in Victorian literature. This can be traced to Asa Briggs’ *Victorian Things* in which he discusses a range of objects, from hats to Staffordshire figures, from cameras to postage stamps, and the manner in which they demonstrate the preoccupations of Victorian society. This book, according to Briggs, had the admirably broad ambition
to reconstruct the intelligible universe ‘or, more properly, universes, for there was more than one – of the Victorians’ (42). Briggs accordingly relates this project to anthropology and semiology as the sciences which underpin any study of material culture. As Briggs writes: ‘After Bloch and Braudel came Barthes and Baudrillard, setting out systematically to uncover ‘signs and meanings in everyday life.’ (46)

In addition, it is important to be mindful in any discussion of object and the material culture of the novels, of the novels themselves as a form of cultural product – in short, as commodities. As Zuroski Jenkins argues in *Commodity/Commodification and Cultural Studies:*

> In modern capitalist societies, cultural products function as commodities that are manufactured and distributed to meet the demands of a consuming public. In literary and cultural criticism, ‘commodification’ and ‘consumer culture’ are terms that direct us to the intimate relationship between large-scale economic systems, particularly market capitalism, and hegemonic cultural ideologies. ‘Commodities’ are objects designed or promoted for purchase; the people who purchase them are ‘consumers,’ a term that indicates the level of desire cultivated in the purchasing public for commoditised things. In a consumer culture, one’s desire for commodities feels like a need and is never fully satisfied. The public’s perpetual acquisition or ‘consumption’ of goods drives an economic system based on the production and circulation of commodities. (3)

This body of criticism is clearly derived from Karl Marx’s theory of ‘commodity fetishism’ in *Capital.* Marx argues that, within a capitalist political economy, the
market endows objects with a ‘mystical character’ that makes them appear to be of value in and of themselves, rather than as products of human labour or by virtue of their use-value.

A more recent development in the study of objects is Thing Theory. The work being done on addressing how the inanimate object world helps to form and transform human beings marks a move away from a conception of objects as understood solely through consumption and commodification. It seeks to address how the material environment shapes us, and aims to talk about the production of value – not just economic value in Marxist terms but also various types of symbolic value. Bill Brown, for example, underscores the importance of questions relating to Thing Theory that probe the ideological and ideational effects of the material world. These questions ‘ask not whether things are but what work they perform—questions in fact, not about things themselves but about the subject-object relation in particular of temporal and spatial contexts’ (7). This approach is undertaken in order to demonstrate the power of objects, ‘to show how they organise our private and public affection’ (7).

Brown’s essay ‘Things’, included in the issue of Critical Enquiry he edited, asks the following questions: ‘Is there something perverse, if not archly insistent, about complicating things with theory? Do we really need anything like thing theory the way we need narrative theory or cultural theory, queer theory or discourse theory? Why not let things alone? Let them rest somewhere else – in the balmy elsewhere beyond theory’ (1). He goes on: ‘From there, they might offer us dry ground above those swirling accounts of the subject, some place of origin unmediated by the sign, some stable alternative to the instabilities and uncertainties, the ambiguities and anxieties, forever fetishized by theory. Something warm, then,
that relieves us from the chill of dogged ideation, something concrete that relieves us from unnecessary abstraction’ (1).

Material Culture in fiction is not an under-considered concept, but it is one to which a growing number of critics of both Victorian and contemporary fiction are drawn. In ‘On Two British Migrant Novels’, for example, Rebecca Mary D’Arcy offers readings of Hanif Kureshi’s The Black Album and Monica Ali’s Brick Lane examining hybrid diasporic identities and the various ways in which material culture and inanimate objects are linked to their emergence and development. Whether one’s critical allegiance leans toward the anthropological or the semiological, objects simply cannot be ignored. And nowhere are they used with more incisive skill than when embedded in the work of Hollinghurst, Boyd and Foulds.

If we turn to the present day, a certain sections of society inhabit an historical moment increasingly aware of material culture. The recent Director of the British Museum, Neil McGregor, in his introduction to the book which accompanied the radio series The History of the World in 100 Objects, writes of the work of the project as:

Deciphering the messages which objects communicate across time – messages about people’s places and environments and interactions, about different moments in history and about our time as we reflect upon it. (3)

There are, of course, questions to be asked about McGregor’s work, particularly surrounding which objects is he prioritizing and what version of history is he tailoring to his audiences. There is a danger of losing site of the provenance and historical actions which contributed to the assembling of these things in one place (at
the heart of the British Empire). McGregor is talking from a position of cultural privilege and giving a story of the past based on objects taken as a function of Empire. McGregor is able to tell the stories he tells only on the back of objects appropriated from other cultures. So while his informed narratives give us a deep sense of the power of objects in creating a past, they also alert us also to the legacies of empire which still inform our present day conflict to which, as I will show, the work of William Boyd speaks directly. In his book *Metahistory*, White argues for ‘acts of imaginative interpretation and appropriation’ (6) which are needed to bring the past to life, and this is exactly where the contemporary historical novelist comes in, as I will demonstrate in my first chapter.

2. **Space**

The Oxford dictionary definition of ‘landscape’ directs us to the predominantly visual concerns of the term: ‘All the visible features of an area of land, often considered in terms of their aesthetic appeal’. Landscape then is the lens through which the more amorphous idea of ‘space’ might be controlled and ordered. Landscapes are seen, observed, analysed; they form part of orders of symbolic representation. In structured and codified societies they can prove forms of aesthetic pleasure or escape while also broadcasting messages about status. They are necessarily fixed, though also obviously subject to seasonal change. Furthermore, landscape carries an artistic connotation: it is not simply a way of seeing but an artistic way of seeing. The landscape may simply be how the artist sees the land, the
confines the artist chooses to place upon the unlimited space.⁹

Space, however, is a more amorphous term. Landscape is the prism through which one aspect of space is understood but it is only a fractional part of its identity. Space encompasses the distance between landscapes, geography and terrain. Space, however, is also not simply limited to terrain: it encompasses sky, sea, air, and everything beyond, spiraling into the infinite and indeed the metaphysical. In its ultimate extension it refers to the universe in its totality. At the other extreme, Space is the contested territory between landscapes imposed, or defined, by the human. Doreen Massey, in her essay ‘On Space and Time’ argues against the idea that Space and Time are in some way separate entities. Here Massey mounts a challenge to Laclau’s view in his ‘New reflections on the Revolution of Our Time’ that space is in some way static and that, accordingly, it is removed from time and therefore by extension removed from politics. For Massey, space is socially contrasted, and society is constructed spatially. As she argues, space is not merely of technical interest but it is ‘one of the axes along which we experience and conceptualize the world’ (143).

Landscape and space have long been of interest to novelists and their critics. In *How Fiction Works*, for example, the critic James Wood focuses on D.H. Lawrence’s description of leaving a Sicilian house at dawn in *Sea and Sardinia*. Woods observes the manner in which Lawrence makes use of repetition, or what Wood more accurately describes as ‘alteration’, to convey the sense of leaving the specific landscape behind:

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⁹ In common parlance, landscape indicates something rectangular, viewed with the longest side horizontal, as opposed to portrait, in which the longest side is vertical.
And meanwhile darkness is changing as the day breaks, which is why Lawrence repeats the word ‘dark’. In fact, every time he repeats the word, the word has changed a little, because each time Lawrence changes what he attaches the word ‘dark’ to: very dark, dark still, dark the, dark garden, the dark big eucalyptus trees. (145)

As well as demonstrating Lawrence’s use and elevation of repetition as a literary device, Woods draws our attention more broadly to the writer’s relationship with the landscape.

Pulitzer-Prize-winning novelist Richard Russo, writing in his essay ‘Location, Location, Location: Depicting Character Through Place’, collected in *The Complete Handbook of Novel Writing*, reflects on the particular importance of landscape and exterior space as opposed to interior or domestic space for novelists:

The relationship between character and exterior setting is more mysterious. We don’t own a landscape, a street, a neighbourhood, or a river in the same sense that we own a cocktail shaker or a claw-footed tub. Nor can they be said to own us, in the way Thoreau meant when he observed in *Walden* that the things we own can own us in return. True, exterior landscapes can ‘run through us,’ in the sense that the river runs through the two brothers in Norman Maclean’s memoir. But because the relationship is more tenuous, less sharply defined, it is more likely to be ignored, either in whole or in part, by apprentice writers. (164)
Russo gives an example of the primacy of space and landscape in a novelist’s work by recounting a conversation he had with an editor at a highly-respected publishing house, who described to him how ‘his most powerful need as a reader ... was to feel oriented’ (165). Russo goes on to argue that, ‘In the end, the only compelling reason to pay more attention to place, to exterior setting, is the belief, the faith that place and its people are intertwined, that place is character and that to know the rhythms, the textures, the feel of a place is to know more deeply and truly its people’ (169).

Russo cites the examples of Annie Proulx’s *The Shipping News*, where the main character returns to Newfoundland from New York to find his physiognomy – in his case a jutting chin – no longer marks him out and thus affords him a greater sense of freedom and naturalness. Russo also cites Danish author Peter Hoeg and his work *Smilla’s Sense of Snow* (published in the United Kingdom as *Miss Smilla’s Feeling for Snow*) commenting on how it is in a literal sense Smilla’s feeling for snow, her ability to navigate and move through both a metaphorical but also an actual blizzard, which ultimately saves her. Russo’s emphasis on place defining or affirming character might be argued to be uniquely North American. However, these examples taken from Canadian and Danish texts suggests its relevance across other cultures.

Russo’s account perhaps misses out on some of the complexities of space in the creation of character and does not fully take into account that a novelist’s handling of landscape is capable of more than just defining character. It can also destabilise character; for example, a character’s perception of landscape can enact tensions or unresolved aspects of their psyche. It is this relationship between landscape, space and character which I explore in Chapter Two, where I focus on
ideas of landscape and the garden. In their prose, Hollinghurst, Boyd and Foulds variously manipulate the idea of the garden and the larger landscape: the ancient woodland of Epping Forest in Foulds, the suburban garden at Two Acres in Hollinghurst’s *The Stranger’s Child* and the formal garden at Stackpole Manor in Boyd’s *An Ice Cream War*. For each, the topography and geography becomes something to be manipulated within their vision and their reconstruction of the past.

Denis Cosgrove, in his introductory essay to *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape*, outlines the debate within cultural geography in which ‘the etymology and meanings of landscape have been intensely re-examined’ (34)\(^\text{10}\). Cosgrove draws on the work of Kenneth Olwig, describing how Olwig, ‘has challenged the argument developed in Social Formation that landscape as a way of seeing, of a social construction, largely replaced landscape as a direct human experience and expression of collective social order within a specific geographical and environmental context’ (xxviii). Cosgrove refers here to *Landscape, Nature, and the Body Politic From Britain’s Renaissance to America’s New World*, where Olwig had argued:

> The apparent unity created by the identification of a political community with the physical bounds of a geographical body and its scenic surface can mask a contested terrain – as in Britain where territorial unity has helped conceal rifts between local, state and regional political cultures.  (xxiv)

\(^{10}\) Olwig offers an argument against the idea that landscape as a symbolic construction replaced landscape as a direct human experience and expression of a social order. In his article ‘Recovering the Substantive Nature of Landscape’, Olwig argues that the full complexity of the ideas of landscape and nature have been largely lost due to a modern tendency to appropriate the meaning of landscape to a concept of nature as scenery. The resulting conflation of meaning, Olwig argues, has not only led to questionable forms of determinism, it has obscured the substantive meaning of landscape, and related concepts, in European and North American culture.
Olwig proposes here that ‘the present-day association between country, body politic and the landscape scenery of a particular natural geographical body cannot be regarded as a given. It must be seen as the outcome of a long historical process spanning continents and centuries’ (xxv), Olwig goes on to outline how:

To understand the full meaning of landscape … it is necessary to take a closer look at the evolving relation between the form of representation and what is being represented. The meaning of landscape is closely tied… to questions concerning representation both artistic and political. These questions have deep roots in the era before our language and culture were walled up by the armies and navvies of the nation state, when cosmopolitan Renaissance men and women introduced the word landscape into Modern English discourse. (xxvi)

It is under these terms, along with the thoughts of geographers such as Doreen Massey, that the use of gardens and landscape in Hollinghurst, Boyd and Foulds are analysed in this chapter.

3. **Speech**

In Chapter Three I interrogate how each writer confronts the problem of writing dialogue in historical fiction. In the section concerned with dialogue in *How Fiction Works*, James Wood discusses a talk given by the novelist Henry Green for the BBC in the 1950s. Wood relates how Green was ‘obsessively concerned with the elimination of those vulgar spoors of presence whereby authors communicate
themselves to readers: he never internalises his characters thoughts, hardly ever explains a character’s motive, and avoids the authorial adverb, which so often helpfully flags a character’s emotion to readers (“She said, grandiloquently”)’ (161). Wood discusses how, for Green, the crucial thing was ‘not to hedge the dialogue with explanation’. Green’s position, as outlined by Wood is, of course, just one in a range of approaches available to novelists in their use of dialogue and, as Wood concedes, ‘Fulsome explainers like George Eliot, Henry James, Proust, Virginia Woolf, Philip Roth and many others would all have to retire themselves in Green’s universe’ (162).

We see another aspect of the problem of dialogue laid out in more simplified terms in the essay ‘Seven Tools for Talk’, also collected in The Complete Handbook of Novel Writing, where James Scott Bell outlines, albeit fairly roughly, the difference between dialogue which is what he terms ‘on the nose’, where each line responds directly to the previous line, and dialogue which sidesteps these obvious responses and is by extension ‘more interesting and suggestive of currents under the surface’ (94). In conjunction with this technique, which Bell terms ‘the sidestep’, he also suggests that a novelist might ‘cultivate silence’, citing Hemingway’s story ‘Hills Like White Elephants’ as an example of where this is done to good effect.

Wood offers a slightly more nuanced version of this in his analysis of Green’s writing as he focuses on the use of hesitation, describing how a character who has responded ambivalently to an invitation to accompany another character for a drink ‘may be in several moods at once’: ‘As a result, the man’s response, “Well, which is it to be?” becomes harder to read, too. Is he irritated, or just mildly resigned? Does he in fact want her to come to the pub at all, or was he just saying it
in the hope she would decline?’ (163). Wood here draws attention to the problem of tone in represented dialogue (as opposed to actual speech). Wood then draws our attention to the role the reader plays in interpreting this type of ambivalence conveyed in the dialogue, arguing that ‘The reader tends to plump for one reading, while being aware that multiple readings are also possible; we sew ourselves into the text, becoming highly invested in our version of events’ (163). This points to a potential in the writing of dialogue which the novelist can exploit.

In *Historical Fiction* Alfred Duggan traces the development of the genre from the eighteenth century onwards but also alerts us to the manner in which certain works ‘make their effect… by assuming that men and women fundamentally like us once conducted their lives under very different conditions’ (6). This raises one of the crucial questions for historical fiction: whether men and women from the past are to be represented as ‘fundamentally like us’ or whether those ‘different conditions’ are such as to render them fundamentally unlike us. Duggan touches on this when he talks about Walter Scott and the differing manner with which he approached his writing about the Civil War where ‘the dialect is correct and so are the details of daily life’ (6), compared to his writings about the Middle Ages where, for him, ‘the idea of a grown man dedicating his life to prayer was so absurd he made no effort to understand’ (7). Lukács in *The Historical Novel* had earlier offered a different evaluation of Scott when he described him as the first author to apply a specific historical sense to the writing of fiction. According to Lukács, in the novels which preceded Scott’s *Waverley* history is ‘treated as mere costumery’; it is ‘only the curiosities and oddities of the milieu that matter, not an artistically faithful image of
a concrete historical epoch’ (15). The difference between treating the past as ‘mere
costumery’ and the attempt to present ‘an historically faithful image’ has obvious
implications for the handling of dialogue.

In addition to the problem of dialogue in historical fiction, there is also the
matter of representing the characters’ consciousness. In Transparent Minds: In
Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction, Dorrit Cohn outlines three
modes of internal monologue, breaking them down into what she terms ‘quoted
monologue’, ‘narrated monologue’ and ‘psycho narration’ – as Cohn writes:

The problem of delimiting the narrated monologue from narration generally
is far more complex, since purely linguistic criteria no longer provide reliable
guidelines. Cloaked in the grammar of narration, a sentence rendering a
character’s opinion can look every bit like a sentence relating to a fictional
fact. In purely grammatical terms “He was late” (our sample sentence) could
be a narrator’s fact, rather than a character’s thoughts. Within a broader
context it might become possible to attribute it to a figural mind; for instance,
if the next sentence belied the idea “He was late”; or if the statement were
embedded in a recognisable thought sequence. (99)

11 Jerome de Groot in The Historical Novel gives an account of how this complex relationship
between historical knowledge and fictional invention functions in Scott’s Waverley novels: ‘On the
one hand the reader is put in the position of the tourist (and indeed the character of Edward Waverley
himself), unknowing and passive, pray the worldly, clever, ironising narrator. At the same time the
reader is presumed to have some historical knowledge and therefore gains a certain power over the
narrative to the extent that the novel cannot shock or challenge events. The notes and extraneous
metanarrative of the novel point to the artificiality of the exercise, encouraging the audience of the
work to acknowledge the multiplicity of history and the subjective version of it being presented by
Scott. The collage effect of authority that Scott creates here is something that points to the generic
mixture of the form as well as the indeterminacy of history, and it is something that infuses almost all
historical novels’ (18).
Cohn is making an important point about the centrality of narrated monologue to the reader’s conception of character. The ‘delimiting’ Cohn refers to is the work the reader must always undertake but which, as Cohn shows, can lead to a number of readings none of which is definitive. So monologue and dialogue take us into murkier more contested areas but, as I will show, much can be made of this.

In Chapter Three I offer readings of the dialogue in the work of Boyd, Hollinghurst and Foulds, interrogating the speech patterns of the characters on a syntactic level and the manner in which the authors choose to represent normal features of conversation via fluency, non-fluency and inference. The focus will be on the communicative efficacy of pauses and disjunctions in dialogue and the manner in which dialogue creates implied meanings. Furthermore, I explore how Hollinghurst, Foulds and Boyd all use speech and versions of internal and external monologue, dialect and idiolect, to convey information about their characters and the historical moment in which they are set.

The practice of novel writing is best conceptualised as the nexus at which notions of pastness are employed to capture and represent aspects of the present: because the past is seen through the prism of the literary zeitgeist (or of the here and now), the past is always a present construct. We think we understand the past through fiction but, of course, this is itself a fiction, a form of illusion as we can never escape the present tense, what Miroslav Holub might deem ‘the dimension of the present moment’. It might even be argued that novel writing, and specifically the writing of historical fiction, tells us only, in the final analysis, the story of our own appetite to reconstruct the past.
Historical fiction is, arguably, only ever a mark of an appetite in the culture, never a measure of something being achieved. Each fiction signals an awareness of the past but, as suggested above, they are actually no more than evocations of desire or a yearning on some level to make the past more present. We are drawn to the past, to the many possible representations of past, but we cannot ever claim to have captured it in a definitive way. The work of historians and novelists often interweaves, and some historians, such as Hayden White, have argued a greater closeness, the essential fictionality of history. But the crucial distinction between the novelist and the historian, even one working in the narrative mode described by White, is that the novelist is unburdened by any perceived debt to the empirical.
CHAPTER ONE: OBJECTS

The type of historical fiction with which I am concerned, both as a practitioner and as a critic, is mainstream literary historical fiction. The tradition in which I write, to which the three chosen novelists belong, operates by and large within the conventions of realism, and as we have seen from Watts’s foundational work on Defoe, this is a tradition in which the use of objects has a particular place. In the following three sections of this chapter, I will outline the anthropological, semiological and the literary background to key objects in the work of Hollinghurst, Boyd and Foulds and in so doing explore this central element in the model of historical fiction from which my own novel The Willow Pattern Bridge is derived. This is a form of historical fiction which privileges mimetic authenticity and the realist mode. I will focus on particular objects in each novel to show how they become the vehicle for subtle and nuanced exploration (or presentation) of character.

I. The Suitcase in The Stranger’s Child

Early on in The Stranger’s Child, Hollinghurst employs a passage of narration focalized,¹² through a fifteen year-old servant boy named Jonah. The boy Jonah has been asked to act as ‘valet’ to the visiting poet, Cecil Valance, during his stay at Two Acres, a household in suburban London where Jonah usually fulfils the role of ‘boy in all the useful senses of the word’ (12), that is to say, ‘chopping wood,  

running errands, going up and down to the station in “Horner’s Van” (12). Cecil Valance is presented to the reader as an aristocratic character, out of place in the affluent but distinctly bourgeois surroundings of Two Acres, a household whose customs and routines have been adapted to cater to what the inhabitants – namely George Sawle, Valance’s friend and lover from Cambridge, and Sawle’s widowed mother – believe their guest expects. Nowhere is the tension between expectation and reality more clearly embodied than in Jonah, who is asked to act out of character, to accommodate the visitor by performing a role for which he has no previous formal experience. He is asked, not simply to perform the duties of the valet, but to play the part of valet, and in so doing, as the reader discovers, he is exposed to objects, which carry resonances, understood by the reader but encoded and hidden from the characters themselves.

The reader first encounters Jonah when he is alone in Valance’s room and has been tasked with unpacking Valance’s suitcase. Jonah’s examination of Valance’s suitcase and its contents is a painstaking, almost forensic exercise, and as Jonah enacts this examination he provides the reader with a subtly eroticised vision of Cecil Valence. At the same time as Jonah goes through the suitcase, we have the customs and rituals of domestic life at Two Acres, implicitly held up against the grander environment, with its more strictly codified behaviours, from which Valance has come. In Jonah’s examination of Valance’s suitcase, the reader is being presented with aspects of Jonah but also with aspects of Valance. We witness the simultaneous presentation of both characters with the materiality of the objects within the suitcase acting as the conduit for this.

The result is that the reader is given a psychological portrait of Valance, established by Jonah and his quasi-erotic response to the items from Valance’s
luggage that he examines and on whose use he ponders. What follows is an anatomised Valance, a taxonomy of the young aristocrat provided for the reader through Jonah’s examination of this expertly packed case with its layers of tissue paper, its dress shirts and box of collars. The suitcase becomes *pars pro toto* for Valance himself whom Jonah is yet to meet. If we were to conceive of this scene in terms of Genette’s triadic topology we might say the reader is given access to information about the psychologies of both Jonah and Valance, but also, in addition to this, despite and because of the focalization through Jonah, the reader is informed in advance of Jonah’s own awareness\(^\text{13}\). The reader is privileged in this respect, understanding aspects of Jonah’s character – namely his interest in and sexual attraction to Valance – which exist only for Jonah as a burgeoning latency.

The suitcase, as Jonah examines it, is at first remarkable for its ‘smooth hard leather’ on which Valance’s initials ‘C.T.V.’ are ‘stamped in faded gold’ (11). If the evocatively named Old Testament Jonah suggests a type of biblical essentialism, then ‘smooth hard leather’ and ‘stamped in faded gold’ are epithets worthy of Homer for the classically aligned Cecil Valance. The description ‘stamped in faded gold’ metrically echoing the fragment of dactylic hexameter ‘rosy-fingered dawn’ gives the description a distinct Homeric resonance. Two contrasting worlds and positions are thus established: Jonah is unknowing and yet intrigued by Valance; Valance, however, is praetorian, learned, classical and, most importantly, entirely unaware that he is the object of his valet’s thoughts.

\(^{13}\) William F. Edmiston usefully summarises Genette’s position in his essay ‘Focalisation and the First-Person Narrator: A Revision of Theory’: ‘Focalisation is defined by Genette as a restriction imposed on the information provided by a narrator about his characters. His well-known triadic topology (zero, internal and external) is based on a diminishing degree of access to the to psychology of the characters’ (738).
As Jonah continues to unpack the case of his temporary master and discovers specialised garments for cricket and swimming in the lower part of the suitcase, Valance is obliquely conceptualised by Jonah as man of action. In themselves, these are by any measure fairly standard, stock activities for a gentleman of the day and do not particularly enrich Jonah’s or the reader’s understanding of Valance’s psychology, or indeed tell us anything particularly meaningful about Jonah. They are, however, complicated by Jonah’s erotised response to the garments, which increases as Jonah searches further into Valance’s belongings: ‘Then there was the body linen, fine as a lady’s, the drawers ivory-coloured, vaguely shiny, catching on the roughness of his thumb before he stroked them flat again’ (13). For the reader there is a double transformation at work here, not simply the explicit association of Valance with the feminine but the movement from (and contrast between) Jonah’s ‘rough thumb’ in the first contact with the drawers to the implicitly feminine ‘stroking flat’ which follows. There is a subtlety to this transmission too; the act of unpacking the suitcase has modified the readers’ perception of the character of Jonah. It is just one in a series of modifications to characters which occur throughout the novel. It is notable, however, that Jonah, to whose inner and outer psychological workings the reader has been exposed, does not reappear in the novel until much later when he is interviewed by Paul Bryant who is researching the life of Valance. And yet Jonah’s work and his psychological position, his consciousness as shown to us by Hollinghurst, is integral to an understanding of the novel as a whole. This is, after all, a book about the way in which identity is communicated, encoded and transmitted. Jonah, in old age, shares his limited reminiscences about Valance. This

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is a novel concerned with disclosure and withholding – both inward and outward$^{15}$ – and through the materiality of the suitcase and its contents, the reader is placed in a position where we understand more about Jonah than he does, or perhaps ever will, about himself. Or at least Hollinghurst’s description of Jonah’s interaction with the case and its contents tempts us to believe we do.

As Jonah continues to ponder the contents of Valance’s suitcase, the character of the gentleman is truly established, as a further layer is revealed: ‘The lid of the case was heavy; it had two wide pockets in it, closed with press-studs, and holding books and paper’ (13). There then follows a description of Valance’s spidery handwriting and the discovery of: ‘Another book rubbed at the corners like the cash-book in the kitchen, had what must be poems in it’ (13). The reference to the cashbook in the kitchen underscores the gulf in social position that exists between the two characters. Hollinghurst constructs a cat’s cradle of complexity in which the reader finds one character imagining a version of a fellow character through looking at that character’s own writing in a notebook which is in turn is compared to a very different type of book, the cash-book in the kitchen, the materiality of the books, regardless of their content and function, looking familiar to Jonah. What is implicit in this comparison is the suggestion that, while Valance’s status affords time for poetic reflection, Jonah’s relatively lowly station not only means that his time is taken up by menial domestic tasks but that these tasks and their attendant objects prescribe the limits of his imagination and perceptions.

Jonah’s work colours his reflection of the world around him. This might be taken a step further to say that the cash book in the kitchen not only reflects the materiality of Valance’s notebook but also, in Jonah’s perception, mirrors the status carried by the object, the implication being that Jonah sought to compare the notebook to an object of similar status which had corresponding resonances. The cashbook in the kitchen was selected by Jonah as indicated to us through the internal focalisation. To Jonah’s perception, at least, both books are of high status, books whose contents are normally off-limits to a person of his station. But it works both ways as the cashbook comparison also reflects on Valance and the act of writing—and the money which buys Valance the time to write. At the same time, the comparison with the cashbook suggests an unexpected linkage between the two characters in terms of work. Jonah, in inadvertently discovering, if not the source of Valance’s creative output then the object which harbours it, observes that this is something that is workaday, habitual, worn down ‘rubbed at the corners’; something that lacks the fineness and care other objects in the suitcase are subject to.

Hollinghurst thus moves the reader from this cat’s cradle into what might be termed a game of cat and mouse as the reader attempts to establish where, precisely, the consciousness of the narrator sits. In Narrative Discourse, Genette labels these changes in points of view which occur in the course of a narrative ‘Alterations’, observing that ‘Narrative always says less than it knows, but often makes known more than it says’ (198).

So in Hollinghurst then we see a very specific use of objects – the suitcase, the notebook, the cash book – in relationship to focalisation. We can trace a precedent for character being established by an observer of commodities, of objects, of made things, and for the act of observation being a vehicle for insight into
character, specifically with reference to social position, in Henry James’s *The Lesson of the Master*. James is a central influence on Hollinghurst: in Hollinghurst’s *The Line of Beauty* which preceded *The Stranger’s Child* it is, after all, a thesis on Henry James, on which Nick Guest is working while living with the socially superior Feddens.

How Mrs St. George is first viewed by Paul Overt in *The Lesson of the Master* is worthy of consideration in this respect. Overt, through whom the narrative is largely focalized, initially sees her as a figure in the distance: ‘the fourth figure showed a crimson dress that told as a “bit of colour” amid the fresh rich green’ (1). Overt later reflects, ‘St. George certainly had every right to a charming wife, but he himself would never have imagined the important little woman in the aggressively Parisian dress the partner for life, the alter ego, of a man of letters’ (4). On a first reading, we see we are being drawn into making certain assumptions about the character. At the outset the dress tempts us to read it on the level of the symbolic: scarlet for danger or perhaps residual religious connotations, the scarlet robes of a cardinal or the blood of Christ. But, as the passage proceeds, the focus shifts under Overt’s guidance to the specific socially-nuanced reflection on the dress itself as ‘aggressively Parisian’ as the narration becomes internally focalized through Overt. The word ‘aggressively’ which significantly modifies Overt’s perception lends the reader a nuanced understanding of Overt’s viewpoint – if the dress is ‘aggressively’ Parisian then a dress of a duller or paler colour (or of a different design) might be ‘non-aggressively Parisian’ or perhaps ‘neutrally Parisian’. It intimates a pre-existing acceptable level of continental influence (or flaunted fashionability) in the mind of Overt, locating, with great specificity, Overt among his opinions, presuppositions and prejudices, which the narrative in its full unfolding will challenge. However, the
choice of the word ‘aggressively’ also suggests a hostility or prejudice towards the wife of the master on Overt’s part, which the narrative will also explore. When Overt later views Henry St. George himself, ‘in his tall black hat and superior frock coat’ (11), a similar prejudiced, judgmental view is implied. St. George’s appearance apparently challenges Overt’s own conceptions of the figure of the artist. The clothing of both Mr and Mrs St. George apparently stands as a challenge to Overt’s romantic conception of what is appropriate for both a writer and a writer’s wife. However, the narrator is also careful to note that Overt ‘forgot for the moment that the head of the profession was not a bit better dressed than himself’ (183). We are given both Overt’s perception and judgment – and also, through the narrator, an indication of his blindness.

Something similar is at work in the specificity of the description James uses when Overt first sees Marian Fancourt:

A tall girl with magnificent red hair, in a dress of pretty grey-green tint and of a limp silken texture, a garment that clearly shirked every modern effect. It had therefore the stamp of the latest thing, so that our beholder quickly took her for nothing if not contemporaneous. (21)

James is at once showing the importance of dress in communicating character but, in Overt’s perception of the garment and its fashionable shirking of modernity, James is again communicating to the reader a specific set of biases Overt possesses – while also offering an ironic comment on the fluctuations in fashion in contemporary society: the dress identifies itself as the ‘latest’ thing by eschewing the latest or modern techniques. We can also discern within this description the effects of Pre-
Raphaelitism on the manner in which women dressed, the move away from restrictive corsets and bodices to loose and flowing garments. This Pre-Raphaelitism is also echoed in the description of Marian Fancourt’s physicality and hair colour which evoke Millais’s Ophelia, Rossetti’s Prosperine or Collier’s Lady Godiva. James could easily have been describing the central figure of each painting.\textsuperscript{16} So Marian’s appearance is fashionable but also connected to several paintings which evoke scenes of classical myth and medieval legend. She is an aesthetic object but also has the status of an aesthetically-aware young woman.

If we analyse the description of Marian further, we see a movement in and out of focalization through Overt and a return to a narratorial perspective, but the precise boundaries between these positions are sometimes difficult to establish. Writing in \textit{Narrative Discourse}, Genette nuances his taxonomic account of focalisation and directs our attention to the fluidity which can exist within the act of focalisation:

\begin{quote}
Any single formula of focalisation does not… always bear on an entire work, but rather on a definite narrative section, which can be very short. Furthermore the distinction between different points of view is not always as clear as the consideration of pure types alone could lead one to believe. (191)
\end{quote}

In the description of Marian, the terms ‘magnificent’ and ‘pretty’ are clearly subjective judgments, but it is often not clear whether they are narratorial or focalised through Overt. The ‘green-grey tint’ and ‘limp silken texture’ relay more impartial analysis, but with the word ‘shirked’ it is as if the focalisation moved from

Overt onto the garment itself – with the suggestion of some kind of agency lying with the garment – before returning to a narratorial voice stripped of focalisation (what Genette would term ‘zero focalisation’ (189) in Narrative Discourse) as the narrator makes explicit reference to ‘our beholder’ and reinstates its own omniscient privilege.

James and Hollinghurst have a subtly differing relationship in the representation of objects. For James, objects are often presented not just as simple material objects, but as what we might call ‘objects of consciousness’, to use Jean-Paul Sartre’s term in his reflections on Edmund Husserl’s phenomenology in The Transcendence of the Ego. James’s The Spoils of Poynton can be analysed in this context. This is a novel ostensibly concerned with a family struggle for possession of certain pieces of furniture and artwork, and yet James, by design, resists furnishing an explicit degree of specificity to the objects. Mary McCarthy, writing in the London Review of Books framed the novel thus:

_The Spoils of Poynton_ is a Balzacian drama done with the merest hints of props and stage setting. James’s strategy was to abstract the general noun, furniture, from the particulars of the individual pieces, also referred to as ‘things’. He gives us a universal which we can upholster according to our own taste and antiquarian knowledge. In short, he gives us an Idea. _The Spoils of Poynton_ is not a novel about material tables and chairs: it is a novel about the possession and enjoyment of an immaterial Idea, which could be _any_ old furniture, _all_ old furniture, beautiful, ugly, or neither – it makes no difference, except that if it is ugly the struggle over it will be more ironic. (3)
In referencing Balzac, McCarthy is zeroing in on a distinction James himself made in the preface to *The Spoils of Poynton* when he reflects:

On the face of it the ‘things’ themselves would form the very centre of such a crisis; these grouped objects, all conscious of their eminence and their price, would enjoy, in any picture of a conflict, the heroic importance. They would have to be presented, they would have to be painted – arduous and desperate thought; something would have to be done for them not too ignobly unlike the great array in which Balzac, say, would have marshaled them: *that* amount of workable interest at least would evidently be ‘in it’. (xi)

The original title, when the novel was serialised in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1896, was ‘The Old Things’. However, James is asking something else of the reader than Balzac: we are not given a detailed catalogue of the ‘spoils’ that would allow us to view the objects as simple social signifiers but rather he gives us the ‘immaterial ideal’ – the furniture exists only as objects of consciousness. As McCarthy suggests, it is the idea of the object and not the object itself which matters; and it matters because it is the idea represented by the objects that causes the characters to behave as they do. Indeed, the predicament James sought to dramatise is neatly encapsulated in the opening of chapter five:

‘I’ll give up the house if they’ll let me take what I require!’ That on the morrow, was what Mrs Gereth’s stifled night had qualified her to say, with a tragic face, at breakfast. Fleda reflected that what she ‘required’ was simply every object that surrounded them. (35)
Again, in *The Golden Bowl* we see James deploying things as objects of consciousness in outlining the manner in which characters conceive and construct one another. We can interrogate the following passage when Maggie Verver, alone, reconstructs her absent husband:

It rosily coloured her vision that – even such as he was, yes – her husband could on occasion sin by excess of candour. He wouldn’t otherwise have given as his reason for going up to Portland Place in the August days that he was arranging books there. He had bought a great many of late, and he had had others, a large number, sent from Rome – wonders of old print in which her father had been interested. But when her imagination tracked him to the dusty town, to the house where drawn blinds and pale shrouds, where a caretaker and a kitchen maid were alone in possession, it wasn’t to see him, in his shirtsleeves, unpacking battered boxes. (549)

The objects as they exist in the imagination of the characters are subject to the same imagining and imaginative construction as one character by another. Where Jonah constructs the absent Valance though the contents of his suitcase, Maggie Verver evokes her husband, the Prince, via his possessions which are recalled or summoned imaginatively. However, this is a different order of object and operating on a different plane of phenomenological enquiry. The objects, in this case the books, provide a pretext in which a constructed version of the Prince is offered to the reader and then denied. James gives us the image of the Prince unpacking the books in his shirtsleeves, but then qualifies it by telling us this is not, in fact, what Maggie
imagined. We are given instead an alternative version of the Prince – this time as a man lost in thought engaged in very little, possessed of a blankness and alone with his ennui:

She saw him, in truth, less easily beguiled – saw him wander, in the closed dusky rooms, from place to place, or else, for long periods, recline on deep sofas and stare before him through the smoke of ceaseless cigarettes. She made him out as liking better than anything in the world just now to be alone with his thoughts. Being herself connected with his thoughts, she continued to believe, more than she had ever been, it was thereby a good deal as if he were alone with her. (549)

There is a sophisticated layering of identity at play here, constructed through reference to objects, but this is not so much a matter of socially-coded objects as objects of consciousness. We are given first the busy Prince and then the pensive Prince. In Hollinghurst’s novel, the object is the portal to an examination of a character in his or her absence; however, in this case, the object itself is also absent. For James, it is through the objects of consciousness that we begin to understand better, not simply the psychology of the characters, but the complex manner in which they relate and conceive of one another.

Maggie’s imagining – an imagining which is, of course, located in the narrator – of her husband alone in the act of unpacking books, echoes the manner by which earlier in the novel she had sought to construct a version of her own identity for the Prince as she described for him the manner in which she and her father habitually travelled:
These, the smaller pieces, are the things we take out and arrange as we can, to make the hotels we stay at and the houses we hire a little less ugly. Of course it’s a danger, and we have to keep watch. But father loves a fine piece, loves, as he says, the good of it, and it’s for the company of some of his things that he’s willing to run his risks. And we’ve had extraordinary luck. (47)

Again, Maggie is using the objects, in this case the smaller pieces of art in her father’s collection with which they travel, to convey to the Prince aspects of their identity, but crucially, as in *The Spoils of Poynton* and in contrast to Hollinghurst’s use of the suitcase, we are not shown the pieces and we do not even know what these pieces are. The Prince’s earlier response to such acts of verbal display provides a richly ambiguous complexity. When earlier Maggie announces she does not know what the Prince ‘costs’ (i.e. his economic value or worth), we learn how he ‘had quite adored, for the moment, her way of saying it. He had felt even, for the moment, vulgar. But he had made the best of that’ (8). The statement frees the pair temporarily from the constraints of the game they are playing, Maggie of course knows or at least intuits the Prince’s ‘cost’, later describing him as ‘an object of beauty an object of price’ (8) and in doing so reduces him to an object and the object to a commodity. In James’s work, objects can be the vehicle through which ideas of class are transmitted and received, but he also consciously deploys a distinct resistance to the materiality of these objects. Rather than objects of material culture, these are objects which, when recalled or summoned in the minds of the characters, become the prism through which both pronounced and fine-grained differences are explored and negotiated both explicitly and unconsciously.
In *A Superficial Reading of Henry James: Preoccupations with the Material World*, Thomas J. Otten argues that James’s ambiguity is a material state, an indeterminate zone where the difference between essence and ornament disappear:

Such objects give the reader a purchase on ‘the Jamesian’; they offer something like a cognitive handle (they are frequently objects that are meant to be grasped) on the highly, sometimes almost forbiddingly nuanced surfaces of the cultures the texts represent. In other words the golden bowl is the most fungible thing a reader can find in the *The Golden Bowl* because its represented material qualities, such as hardness and its definite form, become cognitive ones the reader can keep in mind. (xvi)

So in Otten’s interpretation, the objects are not simply reflecting a culture or set of culturally-specific attitudes or positions, they are an essential mechanism for understanding James’s exploration of the inexpressible. Without the objects to offer this ‘purchase’, the reader would have difficulty understanding the novel. The greater the complexity of the culture, the more socially or intellectually nuanced the age, the deeper the reliance on the material to convey this. Furthermore, the golden bowl, in this reading, becomes remarkable not for its symbolic value, which some critics have viewed as overwrought\(^\text{17}\), but for the specific qualities of its materiality, the hardness and the definite form, so although the bowl may be to some degree indeterminate, the material characteristics are enough for us to hold onto. Otten places too great an emphasis on the fungibility of the golden bowl. Although he gives an account of the

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\(^{17}\) In *Culture and Conduct in the Novels of Henry James*, Alwyn Berland argues that, although the golden bowl as a symbol is superior to, say, the statue of ‘Thirst’ in Roderick Hudson, ‘the overwrought inadequacy of the image is only one measure of the inadequacy of the novel as a whole’ (7).
materiality of the object, Otten does not offer a reading which takes into account the symbolism of the object or indeed the point at which the symbol and material coincide or inform one another.

In *The Stranger’s Child*, when Valance finally appears, Jonah feels ‘intimate with someone who is simultaneously unaware of him’ (15) and goes so far as to avert his eyes. Valance, who was so carefully and painstakingly constructed by Jonah’s examination of his belongings, is suddenly reduced by his presence. Class boundaries are again underscored as Valance moves for Jonah from the realm of the ‘imagined’ to the realm of the ‘real’. These class boundaries can be viewed from the polarised points of view of both protagonists, as Valance (in contrast to Jonah’s hyper-sensitivity) does not give a thought for the intimate exposure involved in the valet’s unpacking of his suitcase. And far from being an act unique to the period, these exposures continue today: one need look no further than the work of an artist such as the French photographer Sophie Calle who, when hired for three weeks as a chambermaid in a Venetian hotel, examined and documented the belongings of the guests in the twelve bedrooms to which she had been assigned, observing through the details of their possessions, lives which remained unknown to her.

In this instance, through both Hollinghurst’s language and the language of Jonah’s thoughts – through the imagined Valance and the fleshed out Valance who appears before Jonah now – Jonah is diminished by his presence though clearly harbouring a degree of attraction to Valance. The scene with Jonah offers an example of the finely-tuned and complex ironies in play as Hollinghurst constructs the past in his prose though the material culture of the age. However, while Hollinghurst is clearly working within realist conventions when constructing the psychology of characters, there are also other influences at work in Hollinghurst’s use of objects.
In the *Paris Review* interview of 2011, Hollinghurst designated Ronald Firbank his ‘tutelary spirit’ (Terzian 30). He had previously examined Firbank’s work at length in his 2006 Lord Northcliffe Lectures at University College, London, and it is Firbank’s novel *Valmouth* which Will Beckwith reads after a trip to the cinema in Hollinghurst’s debut novel *The Swimming Pool Library*. It is interesting to consider Firbank’s sparing use of objects, in contrast to the manner in which James deploys them. We can begin by establishing a few commonalities in the manner in which Hollinghurst and Firbank construct characters through an awareness of objects: we can, for example, recognise Jonah’s particular fascination with Valance’s suitcase and its contents in the observations of the fifteen year-old Mabel Collins in Firbank’s *Inclinations*. This is most evident in the detailed descriptions Mabel furnishes in her letters to her mother or in her observations of the bazaar: “They showed me the smartest set of tea-things,” she said, “that I ever saw, it belonged to Iphigenia – in Tauris. Oh such little tiny cups! Such little teeny spoons! Such a darling of a cream jug… And such a sturdy little tea pot…” (201). Firbank uses Mabel Collins’s youth and attentiveness to the made world around her at the same time as he mocks her naivety. Whatever the objects were that she was shown, it is impossible that they were the things of Iphigenia in Tauris. The objects themselves, we learn, are from an ‘Antiquarian’s on Priam Place’ (201), and there is an anxiety voiced about the final home of the objects – ‘I suppose all destined for America’ (201) as one character reflects. The character’s response to the objects becomes part of the manner in which they project their character and imply their status to the others through their choice of words: thus, with ‘little’, ‘tiny’ and ‘darling’, the objects are personified and the speaker is infantilised. This is the language of the nursery and the doll’s house applied to the artifacts. The impulse that causes the
character to revere these objects also causes her to inadvertently belittle them, to conceive of them in terms which the author and the reader recognise as perhaps comic or improper, depending on their sympathies and inclinations. There is a sense of reverence for the artifacts, for these objects, but also a palpable sense that connoisseurship is a form of social currency, which is of course satirised by the author: whatever the objects are – they are not the things the voice speaking claims them to be. Firbank is also establishing another frame of reference in mentioning ‘Iphigenia in Tauris’, casually placing Euripides’ drama as the backdrop to the chatter of the upper-class women.

In the *Paris Review* interview Hollinghurst conceives of Firbank as a writer for whom ‘style became a vehicle for simultaneous concealment and display’ (7). Interpreting the above exchange under these terms we see the ‘display’ of the social capital and status through the sharing of the supposed provenance of the objects, while at the same time we see the ‘concealment’ both on the level of the objects themselves (we do not see them and they are not described) but also on another level – as the scene itself is complicated by the fact that it can only be inferred that Mabel is the speaker here. There is no authorial intervention into the free-floating voices to confirm this is Mabel speaking.

A relationship between ‘concealment’ and ‘display’ might also be discerned in Hollinghurst’s deployment of objects in *The Stranger’s Child*. The idea of ‘concealment’ recurs throughout the novel, not simply in the suitcase Jonah examines, but later when the tomb of Valance is visited, and again at the end of the book when the strong-room behind its sealed door is explored. Hollinghurst repeatedly has his characters misunderstand the nature of objects: meanings attach to

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18 As Christopher Talyor reflected in his *London Review of Books* review of *A Stranger’s Child*, this is a novel ‘depicting familial and literary memory as hopelessly blurred and manipulable’ (9-10).
objects but then fall away or are misinterpreted. We might consider the scene at Cawley Court, Valance’s former family home, now, in 1967, a boarding school where Peter Rowe, the teacher, is asked to curate a ‘museum’ to which the boys each contribute objects. These objects include an ‘Admiral’s dress sword’ (287), ‘a hand grenade’ (288), ‘a flintlock pistol’ (288) and a ‘Gurkha kuri knife’ (288), all of which are assembled around a desk, ‘part of a jumble of Victorian furniture and household objects, clothes baskets, clothes horses, coal-scuttles, that had been roughly stacked and locked away in an adjacent stable at some unknown date’ (290). Rowe’s role here is to create sense from the array of superficially meaningless objects. These are objects we might assume all have their own narratives, but Rowe’s role is to guide us towards an image of Valance. Where Firbank had Mabel Collins and the upper-class women who surrounded her valuing the objects but projecting onto them facile qualities, which undermined a complex history, here Peter Rowe and the boys at Cawley Court have an abundance of valueless items from the past. However, it is from among these objects that a photograph of Valance is retrieved.

It is interesting to compare where Firbank and Hollinghurst place the reader in relation to material objects. In the scene after the bazaar, Firbank’s reference to ‘Iphigenia in Tauris’ indicated to the reader that tea set was of less value than the women who discuss it believed (to whomever the tea set may have once belonged, we can reasonably assume it did not belong to a mythological princess in a time before tea came to western Europe). The women seek to inflate its social value by ascribing a mythological origin to the tea set but then go on to describe these objects in infantilising terms as one might a child’s toy or a piece of clothing. Firbank is gently mocking the women and their relationship to antiquity and the classical world: they aspire to possess its objects but then discuss them in a language which reduces
their stature – the tea-set is elevated to relic then immediately reduced to simple commodity; the historical becomes the collectable – and then a toy. The actual origin, whatever that may be, is missed entirely.

By contrast, Hollinghurst places another emphasis on objects, which is not to do with misreading the past, but rather with the inherently empty value of any object before a narrative is given to it. The scene forms a direct counterpoint to Jonah’s unpacking of the suitcase, as Rowe examines the photograph of Valance with the same detailed observation that we saw earlier when Jonah unpacked the suitcase. The pretext for this close examination of the photograph is provided by one of the boys asking if Rowe can date the photograph:

There was just the gilt stamp of Elliott and Fry, Baker Street on the blue-grey mount. Little evidence in the clothes – dark striped suit, wing collar, soft silk tie with gemmed tie pin. He was half in profile, looking down to the left. Dark wavy hair oiled back but springing up at the brow in a temperamental crest. (291)

Hollinghurst is here directing our attention to the way both the past is recalled and reconstructed and the centrality of objects to the construction of characters. There is an artfulness to this, as first Jonah then later Rowe look to discover aspects of Valance through their focused consideration of objects which belong or belonged to him. The photograph of Valance is temporarily rescued from this vast detritus of the past. The vestigial memories of Valance which are subject to change, misremembering, reconfiguration are thus evoked over the course of the novel through objects – the suitcase, the tomb, the photograph. As new characters meet
with each, a new version of Valance is reconstructed whose meaning changes depending on how the character is interpreting him.

Thus Hollinghurst shows that there is always more than one story being told in every story. The object is a bridge to this. The air of memory Hollinghurst creates around the shifting versions of Valance produced by the objects is also a hub of other identities. Through the use of focalized narration in relation to the objects, Hollinghurst reminds the reader that, although characters may be forgotten by history or worse misremembered (in the case of Valance), the essential interconnectivity remains and is enshrined in the object which once, however briefly, united them.

II  The Clyster in *The Quickening Maze*

Like the suitcase in Hollinghurst’s *The Stranger’s Child*, the use of the clyster on the patient, Mr Francombe, in *The Quickening Maze* offers Foulds an opportunity to dramatise the relationship between two characters, in this case Matthew Allen and his son Fulton:

‘Fulton if you want to take part’ Allen said in a surprisingly weary voice ‘you might usefully go in now. Go in behind him and get hold of his head. Get hold of his ears’. (37)

The ‘surprisingly’ is central here, and the reader might ask, surprising to whom? Surely not to Saunders or Stockdale, the attendants present. It must therefore be Fulton to whom the tone comes as a surprise and, if it is, that is our cue that the scene is being focalised through Fulton. Fulton fleetingly demurs asking his father ‘really’,
but before he has a chance to revise his position his father steps in. Allen’s subsequent engagement with Mr Francombe, in lieu of his son, sees Francombe’s physicality – and behaviour, as Allen and the stewards attempt to administer the enema – couched in terms of decay and rotting: his ‘greasy hair’ his ‘curdling with rage’ and ‘the slimy gristle of his ears’. Francombe is described in terms usually reserved for rancid meat or other foodstuffs, with the word ‘curdling’ evoking butter or milk gone sour. Likewise the ‘gristle’ evokes the butchering of meat, the remnant or useless off-cut, the matter discarded in the process. These combine to suggest the organic process of the human entering into a stage of decay, moving beyond its usefulness, alerting us to the limited lifespan of the organic and the inescapability of decay, despite the efforts or innovations of a material culture.

If the suitcase and its unpacking in The Stranger’s Child becomes a subtle method of establishing the character through specific use of the objects of the age, the clyster in Foulds’ The Quickening Maze here provides a much more forthright entrance into the lived world of the novel. To achieve this end, Foulds draws on a poetic tradition of associative and highly visual description when engaging with the objects of the historical moment about which he writes in The Quickening Maze. Where Hollinghurst used the narrative technique of focalization in relation to objects, Foulds draws on his experiences as a poet. More specifically, Foulds’ prose style with its abundant use of complex simile and metaphor owes a debt to the Martian School of Poetry, poetry distinguished by a prevalent use of surprising visual metaphors.

Martian poetry was a minor movement in British poetry beginning in the late 1970s and continuing through the early 1980s. In the poems classed as Martian poetry,
everyday objects and human behaviours were described in a strange and alienating ways as if by a visiting Martian who is unable to fully understand them.

The leading figures of the movement were the poets Christopher Reid and Craig Raine, both of whom published collections of poetry in 1979. In both Reid's *Arcadia* and Raine’s *A Martian Sends a Postcard Home* they transform everyday objects, in a playful kind of defamiliarization. Indeed, the term ‘Martian Poetry’ is derived from the title poem of Raine’s book, in which the reader is shown familiar earthly sights through the eyes of a visiting Martian (‘Rain is when the earth is television’). The movement was not limited to Raine and Reid, although they predominated, and similar effects are accomplished by David Sweetman in *Looking Into the Deep End* (1981) and by Oliver Reynolds in *Skevington’s Daughter* (1985). The approach can be linked to the surrealist approaches to the types of imagery pioneered by British Surrealists 1930s, in particular, the work of David Gasgoyne who, in 1935, penned the first English Surrealist Manifesto, influenced by the decadent, surrealist and symbolist French poets Gasycone had encountered in Paris.

It is not surprising to learn then that Raine was one of Foulds’ first publishers at *Arete*¹⁹ where Foulds’ long poem *The Broken Word* first appeared. This suggests a clear genealogy for Foulds’ writing style. In Foulds’ prose, this Martian sensibility and aesthetic position is incorporated, perhaps for the first time, into the context of mainstream literary historical fiction. The process of defamiliarisation that Martian poetics engender is the engine for much of Foulds’ prose. Defamiliarisation as a term was put into circulation by Lennon and Marion in their 1965 Russian Formalist Criticism. The term has its roots in Viktor Shklovsky’s 1917 essay ‘Art As Device’. Here Shklovsky argues the purpose of poetic language is defamiliarisation or

¹⁹ Tri-quarterly journal of fiction, poetry, reportage and reviews published and edited by Raine since in 1999.
estrangement,\textsuperscript{20} which is to say, presenting an action, object or behaviour as if the writer is experiencing that thing for the first time. Shklovsky begins with the premise that ‘perception becomes habitual’ (1) and that the writer works to disrupt this:

And art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. (Rivkin and Ryan 16)

Shklovsky uses the example of Tolstoy in the story ‘Shame’ where he defamiliarises the act of flogging: ‘He describes an object as if he were seeing it for the first time, an event as if it were happening for the first time. In describing something he avoids the accepted names of its parts and instead names corresponding parts of other objects’ (16). So how is this technique related to Foulds’ engagement with the various objects of the Victorian period of which he writes in 

\textit{The Quickening Maze}?

In the first place we see a younger character being used by Foulds to usher the reader into the world the novel inhabits – in this instance it is Fulton Allen, Matthew Allen’s son, who is ‘only just sixteen’ (33). Fulton accompanies his father

\textsuperscript{20} As Benjamin Sher reflects in his translators note to 1990 Dalkey Archive edition: ‘There are, to my knowledge, at least three translations of this key term of Shklovsky. First, let me state the problem: The Russian word ostraniene (noun) or ostranit (verb) is a neologism, a fact in itself of supreme importance in a critic as given to serious wit and punning as Shklovsky is. There is no such word in Russian dictionaries. It is clear that the o prefix (o-straniene), often used to implement an action (though this is only one of its many and even contradictory uses), may be understood to apply to two stems simultaneously, that is, to both stran (strange) as well as storon (side, which becomes stran in such verbs as otstranit)’ (xviii).
to Leopard Hill Lodge, which is ‘full of real madness’ (36) when compared to the forward thinking, relatively benign and sedate inhabitants of High Beach. Leopard Hill Lodge is home to people who are ‘lost to themselves’: ‘They were fierce and unpredictable. They smelled rank… They made sudden noise’ (36). It is more like a zoo than a bedlam as the name Leopard Hill Lodge itself subtly suggests. Already in this description we might discern the influence of the Martian poetics at work as the lodge is transformed into a zoo.

En route to Leopard Hill Lodge, the attendant, William Stockdale, explains how a Mr Francombe ‘hasn’t evacuated for three weeks now’ (34). Mr Francombe appears to be suffering from a delusional condition rendering him unable to evacuate his bowels, and accordingly a clyster is resorted to to inject fluid into the bowel via the rectum. The clyster becomes the object through which the patient is brought back to the reality of the novel, drawn down from their disturbed fantasies. The detail with which the operation is recorded is of interest here: ‘Allen bent and then inserted the nozzle into the dark, crimped entrance of Mr Francombe’s rectum’ (38). The second qualification in the description of the rectum – it is both ‘dark’ and ‘crimped’ – suggests something hand-made. It is fabric, but it also echoes the natural world, the rectum defamiliarised into the texture of an organic substance. We might even venture that, encoded in this description, is a reference to Craig Raine’s famous Martian poem ‘Arsehole’ which describes its subject’s ‘soiled and puckered hem’ (66). There is also the semi-suppressed comic reference to ‘Mr Francombe’s rectum’, the comedy coming from the formality and propriety of the address set against the intimacy and baseness of the body part. This precision and the double qualification is repeated as the procedure takes effect and there appears ‘a tiny hard stool folded like a sea-shell’ (39). By 1840, the year in which The Quickening Maze is set, the clyster
was already becoming a relatively archaic method of delivering an enema. The clyster, also sometimes known as a syringe enema, was a method that had been in use since the 1400s; however, what were known as ‘bulb enemas’ were beginning to be introduced around 1840 (Whorton). This is a scene grounded in the observation of the physical and the patient’s movement between two physical states. It begins with the repressed physicality of the patient, Mr Francombe, refusing to open his bowels and moves ultimately to the unresisted state when the clyster is used: ‘he had the clyster ready, in one hand the pipe in the other the bag of warm salted water’ (39). The object, in this case the clyster, is a bridge between states of physicality and also states of character, of Mr Francombe as delusional and Mr Francombe as temporarily relieved. Fulton’s role here is to view for us the physicality of the procedure and the men who are about to be engaged in delivering the enema.

There follows a slackening in the language from the taut formality of ‘Mr Francombe’s rectum’, to the now almost conversational description of how ‘an astonishing quantity of shit bloomed from him across the table’ (39) as the clyster begins to work. The precise, double qualifications of the earlier descriptions have gone, replaced by the verb ‘bloomed’, which maintains the link to the natural world: the shit spreads as a tight and bursting bud would blossom. So we might characterize Foulds’ prose as possessing an atunement to the material culture of the age but an atunement that is then exposed to Martian poetics. This combination is deployed to take the reader closer to the physicality, to the lived physical experience of the characters in the reconstructed past of The Quickening Maze. At the same time, the element of estrangement serves also to register the historical distance between the reader and the time represented. The language of other registers (in this case nature and the natural world, of sea-life and flowers sea-anemone??) in intensifying the
readers’ experience of the scene, defamiliarises the act in the manner Shklovsky described.

We can observe a similar effect in action on the level of character description: ‘Saunders was short and strong and cheerful’ (35). Here the repetition of ‘and’ again suggests that this is a child’s apprehension, that we are viewing the man as Fulton views him. This is further suggested by the description of the action having taken place ‘with blunt, capable hands that Fulton stared at’ (35). Here the ‘blunt’ marks the start of a passage of description where the tools of the working man and their conditions are appropriated to describe the man himself:

His fingertips were wide, the nails thick and yellow; his thumbs were jointed at two right angles, turning parallel to the palms. His eyes were bright among pleats of aged skin. Beneath one eyebrow hung two small growths, smaller than berries. (35)

The spatial and depth references located in the ‘wide’ and ‘thick’ are augmented by the ‘jointed’ which follows and the subsequent ‘right angles’. This is the language of construction, of making, of craftsmanship – if the ‘nails’ and ‘thumbs’ were to be removed the language which describes them might just as easily be applied to the construction of a house or the building of a room, the ‘jointed’ suggestive of carpentry or joinery, of something manufactured from wood. The ‘nails’ too, while obviously referencing the fingernails, also carry a resonance of builders’ nails, which adds to this overall impression. If we return to Shklovsky, we recognise that Foulds here ‘avoids the accepted names of its parts and instead names corresponding parts of other objects’. The process of defamiliarisation then continues but with a shift in
focus with the ‘pleats of aged skin’ evoking a fabric, since ‘pleats’ is a word commonly associated with curtains or garments. So, in sum, we begin to see Saunders’ physicality overlaid with an abstract wooden and fabric construction, with resonances of something theatrical perhaps, a wooden puppet or a wood frame covered with fabric. A third layer of defamiliarisation is enacted with the description of the ‘growths, smaller than berries’ which both evokes the growths but is also subject to the register of the description which preceded it, so we see, not simply the berry-like growths, but berry-like growths made from wood, growths which share some of the materiality of the objects evoked earlier in the description.

We thus have a layering of the material culture in the description of the man, as the man himself echoes the made objects of the age. Embedded in the description of Saunders are aspects and resonances of the hand-turned carvings made by the patients in the hospital. Furthermore, the perceptions of Saunders focalised though Fulton both engender defamiliarisation in the manner Shklovsky would recognise, but also suggest a mild visual hallucination on the part of Fulton, as he projects characteristics of inanimate objects onto the living Saunders. Fulton is partially conceiving of Saunders in a dehumanized way, as if the man were inanimate. So while the defamiliarisation enriches our perception as readers of the physiological characteristics of Saunders, Fulton’s own psychological condition is also being suggested to us by the method of narration. Saunders as perceived by Fulton in the unfamiliar environment undergoes what might be considered a type of derealization. Alternatively (and here Foulds strategically builds in room for doubt) we might decide that Fulton experiences a disruption to his consciousness, manifested in his perceptions, as he experiences the external reality as stripped of its human resonances and significances. In terms of today’s understanding of the
psychopathology of the scene, Foulds is presenting a disturbed child in the midst of more strongly defined madness around him through an adaptation of the estranging techniques of Martian poetry.

This is a modification of the Martian techniques as they are co-opted into prose. The defamiliarisation no longer simply exists in the primary metaphor or similes (as they might if this description were offered as a poem) but spreads in a broad and more diffuse manner across the body of the prose. The overall effect is to deliver a vivid, richly human character for Saunders, centred in his physicality, which acts as a prelude to Mr Francombe being returned unwillingly to his own corporality.

In Foulds’ work, this Martian technique is combined with a more traditional lyric mode. Paul Giles, in his essay ‘From Myth Into History: The Later Poetry of Thom Gunn and Ted Hughes’, outlines the genealogy of the Martian poets as he traces them down from Thom Gunn and Ted Hughes. Giles observes that the ‘affinity between Hughes and Raine (Hughes’s editor at Faber during the 1980s) was recognized by A.D. Moody, who wrote in 1987 of the poets’ shared interest in translating nature into a realm of analogical “fancy,” a “use of similes to view the world through alien eyes.”’ (156). Giles goes on to suggest that:

During the later 1970s and 1980s, the poetry of both Gunn and Hughes came to exhibit greater self-consciousness about the potential of language. If their early work was characterized by iconoclasm, their mid-period by superstructures of myth, we might begin to talk of the late period of Hughes and Gunn as distinguished by an amalgamation of different styles and influences, between archetypal resonance and ludic play. (154)
We might detect a similar balance of elements in the work of Foulds in his combination of material objects and Martian poetics. Furthermore, the objects in *The Quickening Maze*, by and large, do not do the things the characters think they will. The limitations and failures of the objects to mediate or improve upon the organic state of the human being, across the spectrum of class and social position, is represented in *The Quickening Maze* from the pragmatic, ideologue Allen with his writing desk and its ‘phrenological bust’ (22) – an interesting material symbol both of his search for knowledge and of the intellectual climate of the age which embraced the pseudoscience of phrenology – the introverted Tennyson with his stoop and ‘screwed in monocle’ (22), the dreamy Allen daughter, Hannah, at her piano, the reticent Allen son, the disturbed Francombe, to the wandering John Clare. For each of these characters, the material objects delivered by society’s commodification does not free them but embeds them more deeply in their attendant conditions. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the image of Tennyson walking in his ice skates:

Tennyson teetering over the girl, who wondered why he didn’t think to unstrap his skates and walk comfortably in his boots, but said nothing. She walked beside him proudly at his careful slow pace, as though in a procession and was only slightly distracted by the sweet-sharp human odour that came from his clothes. At the door he finally did remove his skates, bending down so that she could see the top of his head. Thick hair, actually thick hairs – a wide diameter to each hair – flowed from the crown in strong waves. (76)
The ice skates which, if used in their proper context might have temporarily lent the poet an uncommon movement and grace, instead actively inhibit him and draw his companion’s attention to the all-too-human aspects: his smell and the nature of his hair. Once again, objects fail to do the things they might have done and instead we are returned to the human and the natural. In both cases, however, as the passage above suggests, we see a poet’s awareness of ‘the potential of language’ in the representing of objects and the sensual presence of the human.

In Foulds’ work, we see a prioritizing of the natural world over the man-made world.\textsuperscript{21} Thus, in Clare’s return to nature, his sleeping in the woods, his lack of reliance on the material culture, he is posited as perhaps the least deluded, the least deceived, of all the characters presented in the novel. This becomes clear if we compare the language used to describe Francombe, the language of nature debased by industrial process, to the care and exactitude with which the gypsies living in the woods beyond the asylum are observed by Clare as they ‘dismantle’ the stolen deer with which they have returned to the camp. The verb choice (‘dismantle’) enacts the initial defamiliarisation – it is not the ‘dismember’ which the reader might expect in the context of a body; the word ‘dismantle’ carries with it both the making strange, a mechanical resonance rather than an organic one, but is also suggestive of a care and reverence, the body taken apart rather than imposed upon. It also implies that the thing itself (in this case, the deer) has been put together at some point prior to its dismantling:

\textsuperscript{21} In his New Yorker review of \textit{The Quickening Maze}, the critic James Wood observes the precision with which Foulds verbally recreates the natural world, observing the book to be ‘remarkable for the precision and vitality of its perceptions and for the successful intricacy of its prose’. Wood, James. \textit{Asylum A novel about the poet John Clare}, 28 June, 2011 pp. 23
He watched with great pleasure the skill of the men, their knives quick as fish. They said nothing, only the work made noises, knockings on joints, wet peelings, the twisting crunch of a part disconnected. First, a trench was dug to receive and hide the blood and the deer was hung from a branch upside down above it. With sharpened knives they slit it quickly down the middle and found the first stomach. Very carefully one man cut either side of it, and knotted the slipper tubes to keep the gut acid from the meat. This made something like a straw-stuffed cushion, filled with undigested herbage. (48)

This is the language of human expertise, a process undertaken ‘quickly’ and ‘carefully’. Foulds is here connecting the reader to an older material culture. This is a pre-industrialised process; it is both ancient and expert, and portrayed as such. We have the early association of the knife and the fish, which reinforces the naturalness of the act, while the ‘straw-stuffed cushion’ lends an air of the domestic to the whole undertaking. Here Foulds’ language and image choices seek to naturalise and normalise the process of dismembering the deer. This is precise and descriptive language but it is by no means sensational. Those ‘wet peelings’ and that ‘twisting crunch’ keep the reader vividly present in the scene because they capture exactly the process rather than seek to exaggerate it or estrange it in any manner. Foulds then uses the object, in this instance the knife and its uses in butchering the deer, to ground the reader in the lived experience of his characters by combining it at points with Martian poetics and at others with simple observation, producing both the recognitions and defamiliarisations engendered by both.
Foulds himself identifies and articulates something similar in the work of John Clare and the poet’s own relationship to objects. Writing on Clare in *The Guardian*, Foulds suggested: ‘His poems reveal a subtle kind of alertness, an elastic intelligence finding its way through the world, finding objects that gather and contain complexes of thought and feeling’ (“Everywhere in Exile”). Foulds goes on to describe how, a passionate egg collector as a boy, Clare wrote a number of poems about birds’ nests. Overtly they are descriptive, notational, often sounding like entries in a naturalist’s notebook but in Foulds’ own opinion ‘the observations seem… to be charged and illuminated by what was most alive and unresolved in Clare’s psyche’. For Foulds’ this unresolved element in Clare’s psyche has to do with seeking a home. Thus Foulds remarks that ‘Homeless as he was, each nest offered a compelling image of a centre’, going on to suggest that what the reader hears in the lines of Clare’s birds’ nest poems is ‘the poet’s fascination that a structure so seemingly fragile can withstand the world’ (17). We can start to establish a sense of Foulds’ own relationship to objects and materiality through this statement on Clare’s work. In Foulds’ prose, objects and characters’ perception of objects become a method for transmitting views or opinions but also for communicating what is ‘alive and unresolved’ in the psyche of his characters. Objects and the way in which they are perceived (as relayed through focalised description) allow the reader to understand better defined aspects of his characters – such as Clare’s attachment to nature, but also the complex nature of Foulds’ characters’ worries and fears. Through

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22 Poems such as ‘The Nightingales Nest’ and ‘The Yellowhammer’s Nest’. The placement and selection of these poems is discussed by Mina Gorji in *John Clare and the Poetry of Place*. Gorji, Mina. *John Clare and the Poetry of Place*. Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2008.

23 This idea is echoed in Jonathan Bate’s biography of Clare where he describes how: ‘As both a boy and a man, Clare used his imagination to turn humble objects into grander things. Like a bird building a nest, he collected fragments and made them into wholes, into homes’ (31).
objects we learn about the things they know about themselves as well as the parts of
themselves and their inner lives, which remain in conflict.

There is also an ethical component to this that requires consideration. Foulds
is playing a double game fictionalising the lives of historical figures who have not
appeared in literature before (the doctor and his boy), while at the same time
fictionalising the lives of literary figures about whom much more is known and
documented. Foulds’ work opens up the question of historical legitimacy and the
ethics of giving voice to the dead. The novelist Guy Gavriel Kay in The Guardian,
referred to: ‘a general erosion of the ethical value of privacy and a parallel
emergence of a widespread sense of entitlement to look at – or to make use of – the
lives of others.’ (17) Kay’s comments came in response to earlier comments from A.
S. Byatt, who was reported in a Guardian interview with the organizers of The
Booker Prize as saying ‘I really don’t like the idea of ‘basing’ a character on
someone, and these days I don’t like the idea of going into the mind of the real
unknown dead’ (22). That same year, in a different context (relating to the use of his
great-great grandmother in a Kate Pullinger novel The Mistress of Nothing), Anthony
Beevor protested that ‘The blurring of fact and fiction has great commercial
potential, which is bound to be corrupting in historical terms’ (7). Beevor here is
betraying a belief in history, which implicitly posits a ‘pure’ form of the past rather
than one which is continually constructed and reconstructed by historians and
writers. While at the same time his comments, importantly, bring into play the
question of the degree to which novelists are responsible to the past, exactly how far
their license extends. And of course the comments of Kay, Byatt and Beevor return
us to the fact that this is continually contested and negotiated sphere, how far a
novelist can go, what liberties they can take with the past are never fixed. Indeed the
existence of the debate itself can be held up as evidence of the health (literary and economic) of the genre.

III Cigarettes in *An Ice Cream War and Elsewhere*

William Boyd’s novel *The New Confession* raises other questions about the use of objects in literary historical fiction. In this case, we are not looking at a poet making the transition from poetry to fiction, and retaining some of the techniques and experiences of writing poetry, but at a novelist who uses objects in his fiction with an understanding of their cultural significance. In this case, Boyd uses an object with an awareness of the history of its representation in another medium: the cinema. Accordingly, *The New Confession* contains an essayistic passage on the uses of the cigarette and what we might see as the birth of the cigarette’s visual grammar in a cinematic context. Director John James Todd recalls filming Rousseau’s *Julie* in Germany in the 1920s:

It is late one evening. An albescent moon shines on Baron Wolmar’s chateau. On the terrace Saint-Preux wrestles with his conscience as he smokes a cigarette (remember, it has all been updated) Moths flutter round the lights (thank you, Georg). Then further up the long terrace Julie steps out through the French windows of her boudoir. She is wearing luxuriant flimsy negligee which billows occasionally in the night breezes. She advances towards Saint-Preux, their eyes fast upon one another. She stops eighteen inches from him. Caption: ‘I love this time of evening. May I have a cigarette?’ With one movement Saint-Preux slides his silver cigarette case from his pocket. Close up of Julie’s finger as she selects one – her lacquered nails on the slim white
cylinder. Saint-Preux – cigarette in mouth – goes for his lighter in another pocket, but a slight hesitation on Julie’s part halts him. She puts the cigarette in her mouth (close-up: those wide red lips, that white paper). She sways towards him. Tip of cigarette meets tip of cigarette. Ignition, burn, smoke wreaths. They move apart, gazing at each other. They draw on their cigarettes, exhale. Smoke, backlit by the moon, coils and swoops thickly about them. (152)

Boyd offers a sequence of images and interactions which are now enshrined in the culture as cinematic clichés but are here re-energised by the pretence that what the reader is witnessing is their first expression. The implicit terms of the interaction between author and reader require the reader to suspend their disbelief and to allow themselves to imagine this is the first time such a series of acts have played out on camera. In so doing Boyd is asking the reader to re-examine these images, to see them anew, to inhabit an historical moment, to be present at the birth of a cliché, the birth of a visual language formed by the cigarette and its attendant gestures. It is this knowingness, and this desire to reconstruct cliché and to reinvigorate it, that characterises Boyd’s engagement with material culture.

At the same time, Boyd is also recording and memorialising the manner in which western culture came to invent the praxis and grammar, the conventions of the visual language which accompanies these scenes, how the figure of the cigarette and its varied intimate positions and postures came to mean what they are taken to mean – scenes that would become as ubiquitous across cinema and literature as the

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24 As this passage suggests, it is difficult in the context of cinematic practices to separate the object, the cigarette or pipe, from the attendant activities of smoking.
cigarettes that enable them. While the film itself portrays the act of smoking as an act central to the cultural experience, as Rousseau’s novel is translated to the cinema in Weimar Germany, so what might be read initially as superficially playful satire is in fact making a serious point about the transmission of ideas in western culture, about the formation of sets of conventions, both cinematic and literary, across forms and with specific reference to objects and their attendant processes. On the reader’s part, this is a knowing form of pleasure which is manipulated by the author; the reader is implicitly aware of the conventions and further pleasure is derived from anticipating how Boyd will structure his characters’ relationships to them; how he will deploy the clichés the objects offer but how he will also overcome or comment on these clichés. At this point, with this self-consciousness, Boyd pushes the boundaries of realism by making the reader aware of conventions of representation. Thus, like the novels by Hollingsworth and Foulds, Boyd’s writing creates a space in which the object is used as a shorthand or prop for swiftly establishing character and verisimilitude, but what distinguishes and elevates his work is that he builds in scenes which also offer implicit comment upon this process, as we see in the John James Todd’s reflection on Rousseau’s Julie.

Boyd distinguishes himself by seeing the potential to improvise upon an aspect of material culture to reveal aspects of his characters and in doing so afford them a broader and potentially more modern set of sexual, cultural or political mores. Boyd signals and negotiates the gap between the historical time of the events represented and the present situation of writer and reader through this literary self-consciousness. Whereas Foulds’ prose pulls the reader back toward a preindustrial

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25 A discussion of this subject can be found in Richard Kleins, Cigarettes Are Sublime. Duke UP, 1994.
26 Or indeed in the essayistic reflection on smoking given by Logan Mountstuart towards the conclusion of Any Human Heart.
past which the writing implicitly seems to privilege for its unmediated connection with nature, Boyd overlays contemporary sexuality and desire onto an historic fictional setting. For example, consider a scene early on in Boyd’s *An Ice-Cream War*, where shortly after his arrival back at the family home we are presented with Felix Cobb in his bedroom, smoking a cigarette:

He lay on his bed and smoked a cigarette, watching the blue braided fumes curl and disintegrate. (56)

The poetic language employed in the description alerts the reader to a potential link to the aesthetic concerns of both Hollinghurst and Foulds.27 Boyd is employing a mode of description which lends the act a visually poetic tenor (that extended focus on the smoke and its disintegration) and also describes it in a fittingly musical manner: the shift in register from the clipped, flowing prose that preceded it to that poetic, lyrical ‘blue braided fumes’ with its internal rhyme and the repetition of the plosives ‘bl’ and ‘br’, then the ‘um’ and ‘ur’ before the Latinate ‘disintegrate’. The reader is encouraged through the lyrical nature of the language to experience an aural pleasure equivalent to and representative of the act of smoking. A quotient of beauty is assigned to the act by Boyd; the description is verbally pleasurable, visually arresting, after the manner of poetic writing, but furthermore, it not only triggers these experiences in the reader but alerts us to the feelings Felix clearly wishes to feel himself. The act is aesthetically rich for both the reader and for Felix, while it also communicates and designates a set of culturally encoded feelings and responses to which Felix aspires. Felix is performing the act of smoking, with Boyd casting

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27 In his review of *The Quickening Maze*, published in the *Guardian* on 2 May 2009, Andrew Motion was the first to make this link between Foulds and Hollinghurst when he observed: ‘The key to this success is the concentration of Foulds’s writing, which manages to seem both simultaneously poised and flowing in its urgency. Alan Hollinghurst is one of the few other contemporary novelists to catch this blend of something essentially poetic and something essentially to do with prose’.
Felix as the aspiring decadent. The reader is given privileged information – as with Hollinghurst through the device of focalised narration – about how Felix wishes to view himself, how Felix wishes to construct his sense of self, through the act of smoking and through this focus on the object, the cigarette and its smoke. Once again, made things have moved the reader closer to the mind of the man. However, Boyd does not rest there but rather builds in a more detailed level of complexity when engaging with this aspect of the material culture of the age as he begins to allow himself to improvise and to augment the material with a self-conscious awareness of representational codes.

The passage segues into a disquisition on the erotic potential inspired by an image on a poster which has been acquired by Felix after sending off used cigarette packets as proof of purchase in return for the object:

He took out some books and a cardboard cylinder. From this he removed a coloured poster. It was an offer from de Reske cigarettes… one of the brands he smoked. On receipt of six empty packets the poster was sent free of charge. It portrayed a young couple sitting at table. A slim young man in evening dress leant forward, cupping his chin in one hand his other hand behind him, languidly resting on the seat back, a smoking cigarette held between two fingers. He gazed dreamily into the eyes of an equally slim woman, who leant forward also, thereby causing her considerable bosom to press against the low-cut bodice of her silk gown. (57)

In this ekphrastic passage, we are presented with a representation of the sensual pleasure of smoking alongside self-representation through objects. This is Felix as
the informed consumer, whose character is established through the implied broadness of his taste and aspirant connoisseurship: this is after all not simply the ‘brand’ he smoked but ‘one of the brands’. The image on the poster is said to have ‘fascinated and stimulated’: it leads to an abortive attempt at masturbation for which the poster was the usual and usually successful stimulus. What is of note here is the manner in which Boyd makes reference to the historical commercialisation of the tobacco industry\textsuperscript{28} while making use of the dramatic potential the scene presents. Again the material culture of the age is integral to the drama. The object – in this case the poster – provides a portal for a greater understanding of the inner life of the protagonist. It is interesting to trace the modifications and improvisations that have been made here: De Reske (without the letter ‘z’ as Boyd spells it) is obviously a reference to ‘De Reszke’ the brand of cigarette named after the Polish opera singer Jean De Reszke and produced by J Millhoff, a Russian cigarette maker based on Piccadilly in London. Millhoff was perhaps more notable for their cigarette cards than their poster advertising. Their cards included a dancing couple illustrated by Rillette as well as pictures of antique pottery, historic English buildings and famous test cricketers (Vankin). A series of advertisements with the dancing couple ran on the back cover of various magazines such as Graphic as well as in The Sphere (\textit{Selling in Wartime}), but in May 1914 at least, these were somewhat tamer and less sexually suggestive than the image Boyd describes. Boyd’s elaboration and sexualisation acts as a way of dramatizing Felix’s burgeoning and frustrated sexuality while at the same time referencing the mass production of the era and the

\textsuperscript{28} In \textit{Sacred Gifts, Profane Pleasures: A History of Tobacco and Chocolate in the Atlantic World}, Macy Norton maps the way in which tobacco was initially regarded as a sign of ‘Indian diabolism’ but becomes the largest source of state revenue for Spain.
growing influence of brands and commodities as ways of forging – in both senses of the word – self in the process of finding pleasure.

Once the original cultural climate is considered, it is perhaps unlikely that an image quite as risqué as the one Boyd describes would have appeared in the marketing materials for cigarettes. It is worth considering the climate across Europe two years earlier when, at the Stockholm Olympic Games, the bill-posters’ censorship body ordered modifications to the depiction of nude athletes on the poster, designed by celebrated artist Olle Hjortzberg. The posters were sent to over six hundred cities across thirty countries worldwide but the nudity of the figures (despite the addition of a ribbon to disguise their genitalia) caused shock among the public.29 Boyd’s inflation and elaboration of the original pair of male and female characters appearing on the ‘De Reszke’ cigarette cards and their transposition onto the ‘De Reske’ poster reveals an area in which contemporary recognitions of sexuality might be found with the modern reader. This invention or amplification on Boyd’s part is central to the understanding of Felix’s psychological makeup. Felix’s sensibility combines aspects of modern sexuality interlayered with the historical moment. From an historical perspective, this could be argued to be a flaw in the writing, but, from the perspective of historical fiction, this can be seen as an interesting innovation. As I felt when writing my own novel, a degree of alloying the present to the past is important for the success of an historical novel, in order for it to achieve an emotional resonance with its readership. Every book about the past is to some degree unavoidably also about the moment in which it is written. Boyd negotiates this through attention to the representational codes of the period presented through an ekphrastic model informed by modern understandings.

There is an historical basis for Boyd’s focus on the advert. G. W. Goodall of the London School of Economics estimated, in his 1914 publication *Advertising: A Modern Business Power*, that ‘as much as a hundred million sterling is annually spent in the United Kingdom’ (1). As well as the nuance of character, sexual appetite and aspiration to identity, Boyd’s novel also uses this object to track the global changes in the rapidly industrialised world, the increased visibility of advertising and how these commodities might measure status. He also shows how things can be used to tell us what people think about the world and how they interpret their place within it. The global reach of the tobacco industry and the significance of smoking is neatly captured in the exchange between Felix Cobb and Cyril, the gardener, who Felix is sent out to find when the generator fails during supper:

‘How are you then Felix, looking forward to this wedding, then, are you?’

‘Well, I suppose so. I haven’t met my future sister-in-law yet. She’s not long back from India. Cigarette?’

‘Thanks. Don’t mind if I do.’ Cyril wiped his hands on his trouser seat before accepting one. He looked at it. ‘Turkish?’

‘Egyptian.’ Felix lit both their cigarettes

‘Not bad’ Cyril exhaled ‘Think I’ll stick to Woodbine all the same.’ (71)

The easy, informal rhythm of the exchange between Cyril the gardener and the sympathetically class-conscious Felix (whom we first meet in the opening chapter at Ashurst station having been reading ‘Kropotkin’s *Social Anarchy*’ on the train to Kent) has the quality and seeming inevitability of a joke about it. Cyril inadvertently

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30 Peter Kropotkin (b.1844 – d.1921) A key figure in Anarchist Communism who believed that under communism workers would self-organize to produce the goods needed for the functioning of society.
reveals that he possesses enough connoisseurship to know the tobacco is unusual but not enough to place its origin correctly. The exchange shows how class divisions are marked by commodities. The exchange also reinforces the globalised world in which the characters exist – even those such as Cyril, who are not able to access the wider world beyond their locality where their employment keeps them, are able, albeit tangentially, to access the fruits of the globalised world, in this case the tobacco. In play we have Felix’s longed-for cosmopolitanism and Cyril’s relative lack of worldliness: he is able to identify the fact there is a difference between these cigarettes offered by Felix and the brand he usually smokes, but guesses incorrectly that what he is being offered must be a Turkish cigarette, and this leads to the assertion at the end of the exchange, ‘I’ll stick to Woodbine’ – which acts as a punch line – Woodbine of course being the brand most closely associated with soldiers and those serving in the armed forces in both the first and second world wars. The reference to ‘Woodbine’ acts as both a stock prop to anchor us to the age and increase the verisimilitude of the scene but is also made poignant for the modern reader by the fact that neither Felix nor Cyril is aware yet of the coming World War in which Woodbines would acquire a particular emotional resonance. The joke, with its oddly flat punch line, is really no joke at all, as the reader is necessarily aware of the fate that awaits the generation represented by these characters. Nonetheless, through the objects and their attendant processes, a great deal of complex information about each man and his interrelation to the other has been revealed.

Boyd’s establishment background might not immediately place him among post-colonial writers, but he is offering a critique which is both informed by a class consciousness and an ironised gaze at the colonial world. We can class Boyd’s work

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31 Boyd was educated at the Scottish public school Gordonstoun, alma mater of Prince Charles, and afterwards at the universities of Glasgow and Oxford.
then in the genre of the ‘skeptical historical novel’ to borrow the term used by Margaret Scalan in *Traces of Another Time: History and Politics in Postwar British Fiction*. In Boyd’s work, we see the embodiment of an historical fiction moving towards the margins of Empire, not to the capitals but the hinterlands, and of history experienced by characters who would perhaps rather be doing something else than taking part in the seismic and epoch-altering events they find themselves caught up in. This speaks to the history to which Franco Moretti draws attention when he proposes a ‘history of literature as history of norms’. He writes:

> But this is exactly what most of life is like, and instead of redeeming literature from its prosaic features we should learn to recognize them and understand what they mean... A flatter, more boring literature. But then, are we so sure that boredom is boring? Once we learn to confront it, the flatness of literary conventions will appear for the genuine enigma it is. (150)

Boyd’s work acts in some ways as direct engagement with this. It is a movement towards the margins and to marginal lives, which reluctantly become involved in major events. It is a movement that chimes with the Walter Benjamin pronouncement in ‘On the Concept of History’ that ‘the chronicler, who recounts events without distinguishing between the great and the small thereby accounts for the truth, that nothing which has ever happened is to be given as lost to history’ (3).

In this context, we should register how mass-produced ubiquitous props are used throughout the work of Boyd to convey information about the relationships between characters. And the significance of this is not lost on Boyd, who even builds a comment on this into *Any Human Heart* as, imprisoned in solitary confinement in
Switzerland, Logan Mountstuart reflects (in a journal, fittingly written on cigarette papers):

> It’s most peculiar possessing so little in the world. You could say that the clothes I wear, my bed and its bedding, my table and chair, my chamber pot (and its rag for wiping my arse). My tin of tobacco and my thin sheaf of cigarette papers and my safety pin…. (270)

In addition to the sophisticated improvisations with cigarettes in *An Ice Cream War*, Boyd has shown, across his novels, a repeated interest in, and engagement with, the culture of smoking. Consider Boyd’s 2003 novel *Any Human Heart*, where all the most significant moments in the life of Mountstuart are in some manner linked to, or indexed by, the act of smoking. For example, Gloria Nesmith, the adulterous second wife of Peter Scabius, is first encountered ‘sitting at the bar with a gin and tonic in front of her smoking a cigarette in a holder’ (288). Again it is a cigarette that leads to Mountstuart’s meeting with the Prince of Wales while stationed in the Caribbean. Finally at the end of Mountstuart’s life in Saint-Sabine, his friend Gabrielle is described as having ‘smoked a cigarette in a careful way that suggested this was a rare illicit pleasure’ (459). The potential of the relationship between Gabrielle and Mountstuart is performed in the description of Gabrielle’s smoking of the cigarette. Gabrielle herself, for Mountstuart, is after all a type of illicit pleasure, even if she represents a pleasure he will not have: a love affair that remains firmly stalled in the platonic state. Furthermore, smoking is at the centre of Mountstuart’s final sustained reflection, his pre-penultimate entry into the journal before his death, which focuses on a group of young people, ‘four boys, four girls’, the girls ‘all smoking’ (482) at
the beach at Milau-Plage. His reflection zeroes in on one particular girl who had, a few moments earlier, asked him the time:

The girl who asked me the time lights yet another cigarette. I’m sure it’s not so much the pleasure of the nicotine that makes these girls smoke so much – they hardly puff at their cigarettes – it’s having the thing in their hand to complete the pose. They all smoke with practiced ease and naturalism, yet this girl has the gestures off more perfectly than most. How to define it some equation of extended fingers and wrist bend, lip-pout and head tilted exhalation. She smokes with great sexual grace: her body is brown and lean and she’s pretty with long milk-chocolate brown hair. And somehow she knows that her perfect manipulation of that perfect white cylinder of packed tobacco sends a subliminal signal to the boys – all their eyes are flickering like lizards’ – they are ready. (483)

Smoking and its attendant forms of display are a bridge back to sensual pleasure for the elderly Mountstuart – both the pleasure of watching the young women smoke and the remembered pleasure of the nicotine itself combined with the pleasure of remembering his own youth. Smoking has a privileged position; it can be symbolic as seen in the display of the girl at the beach in Any Human Heart but also sensual – the cigarette is an object which is a pathway to pleasure. There is also the way the object embeds itself in gesture: as Mountstuart puts it ‘her perfect manipulation of that perfect white cylinder’ where the word ‘perfect’ carries within it an echo of Plato’s ‘ideal forms’. The observation of the smoking young woman is also the cue to reflect for a final time upon his own life. Indeed, the paragraph preceding the
observations of the girl begins ‘And for some reason this makes me contemplate my own life’ (483). So the cigarette as an object is a source of sensual pleasure, a symbol to be manipulated and an object to observe when it is being manipulated by others. In addition, the cigarette in Boyd’s fiction acts as the famous Madeline does in Proust’s *Swann’s Way* introducing the concept of involuntary memory. This is the cigarette as a trigger for remembering (as in Mountstuart’s final contemplation of his own life), as a way of connecting and re-entering disparate parts of time, which is precisely its usefulness for the historical novelist.33

Thus Boyd is adept both at manipulating the imagery around cigarettes to convey interior experience and also in employing them as objects in a more pervasive, less sophisticated, way throughout *Any Human Heart*. The cigarette (and the various attendant paraphernalia and processes) is a shortcut to quickly establishing character and type but it is also cleverly manipulated to offer comment on class and social position. An object capable of carrying many types of emphasis and meaning, the cigarette’s ubiquity offers Boyd an opportunity to comment on the complexity and interconnectivity of the world, as in *An Ice Cream War*, and on the boundaries that exist between the stages and phases of life as in *Any Human Heart*.

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32 As John Mace notes in *Involuntary Memory*: ‘It is unfair to base the Proustian view of involuntary memory on this one example … the reader can refer to a quick succession of involuntary memories Proust describes in the final volume of his novel *Time Regained*’ Mace lists among these the an unevenly placed flagstone, a servant knocking a spoon against a plate and the narrator wiping his mouth with a heavily scented napkin. Mace, John *Involuntary Memory*. Blackwell, 2007 pp.117.

33 We see the same technique in Boyd’s earlier novel *Brazzaville Beach* in which Hope Clearwater recounts how ‘As I walked I took out a cigarette. It was a Tusker, a local brand, strong and sweet. As I lit it and drew in the smoke I thought of my ex-husband, John Clearwater. This was the most obvious legacy of our short marriage – a bad habit. There were others, of course, other legacies, but they were not visible to the naked eye’ (96).
Tobacco in Hollinghurst and Foulds

Both Foulds and Hollinghurst also make use of smoking (and the ubiquity of it as a cultural act) in reconstructing the past in their fiction. Foulds is notable for the manner in which he employs objects and processes – in this case pipes and pipe smoking – to reach back to deep-rooted traditions. We can consider Tennyson’s arrival in *The Quickening Maze*, throughout which he is continually aligned with or involved in the act of smoking. Matthew Allen, on meeting Tennyson, observes him in the act of smoking: ‘He felt excitable at the literary young man’s presence in his study… He watched Tennyson relight his pipe. Hollowing the clean-shaven cheeks as he plucked the flame upside down into the bowl of scorched tobacco’ (23). The act of smoking (or, more precisely, the act of lighting a pipe) provides a means of capturing the character’s physicality, and again we might recognize the elements of the Martian poetics in the description, in the words ‘clean’, ‘plucked’ and ‘scorched’ as if Tennyson himself is a fowl prepared for the oven perhaps suggesting the vulnerability of his psychological state. Meanwhile Allen’s daughter, Hannah, when visiting Tennyson, observes ‘the short-stemmed pipes that roosted on nests of ash and spent spills on ledges all around the room’ (96). Those short-stemmed clay pipes emphasise another older England, the Elizabethan England of the woods and their current inhabitants in the form of Tennyson and Matthew Allen. Tennyson’s smoking is one of many links to this older England that Foulds establishes throughout the novel.34 It is also worth considering that strangely inexact metaphor

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34 We might detect here – in the interplay of native landscape, tobacco and material culture – the influence of Ford Maddox Ford on Foulds. Ford Maddox Ford who gives the following description of Tietjen’s preparing and lighting his pipe in *Parades End*: ‘Tietjen lit a pipe beside the stile, having first meticulously cleaned out the bowl and the stem with a surgical needle, in his experience the best of all pipe-cleaners, since made of German silver, it was flexible, won’t corrode and is indestructible.'
‘nests of ash’ used to describe one of the by-products of this process: it is a nest in the sense that the proceeding ‘roosting’ suggests a woven or gathered object made from twigs and sticks, an interlocking thing; but ash on the other hand piles and builds, is made largely of indistinct, monocultural material. The inexactitude of the metaphor is, perhaps, a suggestion that the imaginatively excitable Hannah has given herself over to a fit of whimsy, that her own imagination is engaged when faced with the poet.

After Hannah’s visit we learn ‘Tennyson sat and smoked on in the darkening room after the girl left’ (106). Later in the year, when she plays the piano for him, he deems it ‘very eloquent’, an opinion emphasised by his nodding and exhaling smoke from his nostrils’ (146). Tennyson’s smoke is a miasma, a fog, a physical distillation of the space between the thinking man, the cerebral poet mourning his lost friend Hallam, and the girl who, we are led to believe, may be in love with him. The smoke emphasises the difference between them but also physically animates the space, underscoring the physical distance. The image of the smoke-wreathed Tennyson contains within it visual echoes, suggestive of a druidic Tennyson, in the ancient forest; we might even refine this and say this is the Tennyson as informed by the archetype of Merlin. Foulds, in his portrayal of Tennyson and his attachment to him of aspects of the druidical portrayal of Tennyson as a ‘priest of nature’, is keenly alive to this connection. The sexless, frisson-less exchange which occurs between Hannah and Tennyson is not the conduct of lover and suitor; this is more a quasi-mystical rite, a quasi-intellectual exchange. More broadly, in the woodland and forest context, we witness being enacted a dramatic trope with a long history. The act of

He wiped off methodically with a great dock-leaf, the glutinous brown products of burnt tobacco, the young woman, as he was aware, watching him behind his back’ (111).

smoking becomes the central symbolic act in this exchange. Thus Foulds, through the short-stemmed pipes and their attendant clouds of smoke gives us a composite Tennyson, one made up of various cultural resonances enacted and encoded within his relationship to tobacco, its practices and its apparatuses.

In Hollinghurst’s *The Stranger’s Child* the focus is not on cigarettes or pipes, but rather on cigars. In addition, the smoking is entirely more full-blooded and, rather than acting as a mechanism for establishing distance between characters, it acts to complicate their positions, allowing them to occupy richly ambiguous and undefined positions well beyond the social constraints of the day. It affords the characters a way of talking about desire, and its fluidity, even when they are not aware of it themselves. Thus, in an after-supper recital at Two Acres, Cecil and George retire outside to smoke a cigar: ‘Cecil, apparently not wanting to pollute the house, had seized the moment to open the French windows and take his cigar outside’ (28). This behaviour on the part of the aristocratic house guest contrasts with that of Hubert, the eldest son of the house, ‘standing on the hearth rug… fiddling with a cigarette case, tapping a cigarette on the lid, and flexing his face as if about to complain, or make a joke, or anyhow say something, which never came’ (38). Focalizing the narration for a moment, not through Hubert but through his disdainful mother, suggesting some impatience on her part with her son’s behaviour, lends an added piquancy to the irony here, as Hubert has already been shown to be emotionally, although not physically, intimate with another man, the affluent bachelor neighbour Harry Hewitt from whom Hubert has received gifts and has exchanged notes. In contrast, Cecil’s confidence in ‘seizing the moment’ sets him apart from the conventions and social mores, the understanding of which his hosts are eager to demonstrate to him.
Daphne, on pursuing the smokers, is drawn to the ‘gentlemanly whiff’ (33) of Valance’s cigar. Again, habit informs appearance, and as Matthew Allen observed the poet Tennyson in the act of lighting his pipe so Daphne36 observes the poet Cecil Valance in the act of drawing on that gentlemanly cigar of his:

She looked up and saw the scarlet burn of its tip and beyond it, for three seconds, the shadowed gleam of his face... the same glow from the hot cigar a few moments later cast Cecil Valance’s face in a faint devilish light. (34)

There are several references to the phallus enacted through the text at this point. Hollinghurst invokes the phallus in the ‘hot cigar’, but then a complicated interlayering takes place in relation to aspects of the female genitalia: the labial ‘scarlet’, the ‘gleam’ suggestive of wetness, are projected onto the cigar and the act of smoking it, as the narration is focalised through Daphne. The sexual characteristics are atomised and then appropriated by Cecil, who now embodies a panoply of male and female sexual characteristics. This impressionistic intermingling and its comment on the instability of sexual and gender identity adds another layer of richness to Hollinghurst’s writing. ‘I know girls aren’t meant to have them’, Daphne’s response to her drawing on the cigar leads to a premonition of death: ‘the bitter smoke was horrible but so was the unexpected feel of the thing, dry to the fingers but wet and decomposing on the lips and the tongue’ (42).

It is a fitting allusion as the novel carries Daphne from girlhood into old age. As well as foreshadowing the death – Daphne will go on to marry Cecil’s brother,

36 It is perhaps also interesting, given the context and dynamics of the scene, to note the classical resonance of the name ‘Daphne’. Associated with water or fountains, Daphne was the nymph who was chased by the Olympian god Apollo.
who dies – smoking as a right of passage, as a form of initiation, returns us to the central concern of the novel that protagonists are not aware of what it is that they are being inducted into. And objects and their processes are the conduit through which time and time again this is played out. The scene operates on several levels: the simple social comedy, the ingénue meeting with a new experience, itself a species of social comedy; the adult knowledge; but beyond that, the act of smoking has become the slippage that takes place, in the complicating of the gender roles and sexual identity. Smoking allows Hollinghurst to guide the reader through the known and received stations of the characters’ lives but it also proves the object and the attendant act through which he is able to comment on the ironies and the complexities (and indeed instabilities) this character-forming act carries with it: the reader, in effect, sees the characters as they are but also as they might wish to be before that desire is necessarily known to themselves.
CHAPTER TWO: SPACE

In this chapter I want to explore space in contemporary historical literary fiction through attention to the same three authors. I will argue that their sophisticated engagement with space – in the form of frontiers and borders, gardens and woodland – allows each of them, in varying ways, to write fiction, which acts to counter ideas of grand narratives or over-arching narratives. This was central to my work in The Willow Pattern Bridge which explored both the curtailing and the continuation of narratives across space and time: initially in internal domestic space of the house and garden in Manchester, then the frontier space of Oregon and then in the traveling though spaces (American and European) by Wallace in the third part. The Willow Pattern Bridge set out to explore what happened to the narrative, the story of the family, when it was subjected to these shifts in geographical space, but at the same time sought to understand the family by tracking the characters as they moved through and navigated these spaces. I will begin with the motif of the garden that recurs, in various forms, in the work of all three authors.

I. Gardens and Beyond in Boyd’s An Ice Cream War

In 1900, George Moore, writing in The North American Review on ‘Some Characteristics of English Fiction’, noted: ‘There are too many rectory gardens in Tennyson for the delight of any age except the Victorian Age’(11). In this essay, Moore alerts us to the ubiquity of the image of the garden in Victorian literature and to the changing tastes regarding its deployment in the Edwardian critical conception
of literature. Although the garden may have faded from prominence and preponderance in literature over the last hundred years, it remains a key image and the nexus at which various representations of power, status and selfhood arrive and are symbolically represented. The idea of the garden, and by extension what lies beyond the garden, is subject to various deployments and manifestations in the work of Hollinghurst, Foulds and Boyd for whom cottage gardens, private gardens, hospital gardens and the woodland beyond are central to the architecture and structure of their work.

Writing in the ‘Spatial Stories’ section of *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau discusses the role of stories in the delimitation of space, arguing that ‘one can see the primary function is to authorize the establishment, displacement or transcendence of limits’ (123). We can read the manner in which Boyd deploys the various landscapes in *An Ice Cream War* in the light of this. As de Certeau argues, ‘Places are fragmentary and inward turning histories, pasts that others are not allowed to read, accumulated times that can be unfolded but like stories held in reserve, remaining in an enigmatic state’ (108). For de Certeau, then, the place itself contains already both a story and a history, irrespective of whether that story is actively told or not. Discussing stories and space, de Certeau proposes what he calls a ‘dynamic contradiction’ (126). He proposes that ‘the story tirelessly marks out frontiers. It multiplies them but in terms of interactions among the characters – things, animals, human beings’ (124). Thus, in these spaces, the points of differentiation become the points of commonality. De Certeau also discusses what he terms ‘the theoretical and practical problem of the frontier: to whom does it belong’ (127). The idea of the frontier or the contested space can be located in the work of each of the three novelists. For Boyd it exists as played out in the portion of East
Africa where the reader is literally taken to the heart of the contested area. For Hollinghurst the spaces are marked by other forms of border and boundary – in the garden at Two Acres or perhaps most notably in the social movements needed to gain access to the private West London garden in *The Line of Beauty*. In Foulds we see the woodland itself become a frontier between sanity and madness but one which functions in the way de Certeau identifies, which is to say, not simply to mark a space between one thing and another but one in which the two states cannot help but interact and inform one another.

For each author, the spaces themselves might be interpreted as manifestations of ideas: the borders and boundaries in *An Ice Cream War* are, after all, arbitrary lines on a map based on colonial ambition and desire, though these lines have impact on the lives of those who inhabit them, as the novel shows, especially if (like the American farmer Temple Smith) your property happens to be on the wrong side of the boundaries at the outset of war. The similarities between Temple Smith and his half-English, half-German neighbour, Von Bishop might be read as embodying the very ‘dynamic contradiction’ de Certeau outlines; after all, there is as much if not more linking Temple Smith and Von Bishop as there is dividing them; your closest neighbour remains your closest neighbour even if they are on the other side of a border. So in *An Ice Cream War* Boyd invites us to occupy these border spaces, to enter them during conflict and to see them not as discrete and distinctly organised spaces but as spaces whose identity is in flux and unformed. These are spaces in which desires and agendas, stories and histories collide and, of course, nowhere is this more apparent than on a frontier in war time.

So at one extreme we have the complex and contested frontier space where both the identity of the characters inhabiting it and the place itself are all unstable.
and susceptible to radical change, but in An Ice Cream War Boyd also makes use of 
a more formal space: the garden at Stackpole Manor.

In Landscape, Nature and the Body Politic, Kenneth Olwig argues that the 
history of the formal British garden and the growing popularity of the country seat 
are intimately connected to the landscape as what he terms a ‘scene of power’ (102). 
Olwig locates the emergence of the garden as a locus of power and identity in the 
years that followed the Glorious Revolution. As Olwig notes:

What the powerful Whig oligarchy needed was a means of preserving the 
image of legitimacy identified with the English country idea while 
transcending the country ways of life, regulated by custom, that hindered 
aricultural ‘improvements’ and commerce. This sense of country would be 
English in aspect, but British in its ability to embrace a world imperium ruled 
from a countryseat in a united Britain. If this new image was to be effective, 
the aura of country legitimacy would have to be transferred from the England 
of custom to the Britain of Empire. (102)

While over the generations the number of these great seats diminished, the 
iconography has remained powerful and continues into the present. Olwig locates 
several issues here, which can be seen being enacted in the uses of the garden in 
Boyd’s An Ice Cream War in which aspects of the garden unambiguously align the 
characters to a ruling elite, act as a source of income generation and prosperity, and 
become a symbol of imperial ambition. For instance, if we consider this description 
of Felix shortly after his return home to Stackpole Manor at the opening of the novel 
we begin to see the way in which space and selfhood are interwoven:
Felix gazed out of his bedroom window at the south lawn and the fishponds. He saw Cyril, the gardener, trudge across it from the orchard, a heavy bucket in his hand, on the way to feed the carp… the brilliant day had suddenly clouded over, as it can in a English summer, and had become cool. The fishponds, before a deep and placid blue, were now mouse-grey and crinkled by a breeze. (51)

Boyd is deploying some key terms and images of the cultural geography of the country house. To begin with there is the reference to the ‘south lawn’, which implicitly suggests there must be multiple lawns at Stackpole Manor. In the same way, the use of the plural ‘fishponds’ acts as a form of amplification without which the description would be depleted of the necessary sense of grandeur and scale required of a manor. If Felix simply looked out across the lawn (singular) toward the fishpond (singular), this would have instantly located him in a middle-class or a lower-middle-class environment; the amplification of the plural is both key to the description of the garden and to alerting the reader to the garden as a marker of the Cobbs’ position – or aspiration towards a position – within the British power elite of the time.37

The ‘carp’ too, play a role, as a quintessential icon of a manor house. A table-fish that began life as an aristocratic privilege, then becoming a symbol of aspiration, carp were introduced to Britain in 1450 and 1500, brought over from the east via Cyprus. The keeping of fish as a marker of status can be seen in The Franklin in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* who is characterized by how, ‘According to

37 The presence of a gardener points to a more up-market garden.
the season of the year / He changed his diet and his means of cheer / Full many a
fattened partridge did he mew / And many a bream and pike in the fish pond too’ (6).
The fish at Stackpole Manner embody, in a limited way, the aspirations of the Cobbs
and link them to a longer line of elites. By comparison, the ‘trudge’ that describes the
gardener’s movement suggests an inherent resistance to the work of feeding these
now merely ornamental fish. It establishes the tensions between the work needed for
the good running of the garden and work that is merely superficial or artificial, ‘the
transcending of the country ways of life’ (102) which Olwig identifies.

It is important also that this is Stackpole Manor, that both the house and the
gardens taken as a whole receive this specific designation – it is not ‘Stackpole
Lodge’ or ‘Stackpole House’ or ‘Stackpole Hall’. The title of the building, along
with the stock elements of its garden, connote and designate ancestral power; they
secure the Cobbs within the landscape as its rulers. This is, of course, being used to
ironic effect by Boyd as we learn earlier in the novel that ‘Stackpole Manor had been
bought by his late uncle, Gerald Cobb, who had astutely invested the eager Cobb
inheritance in the electroplating industry’ (47). Boyd is satirising the traditional
divide between inherited wealth and wealth earned through industry, providing a
premise for why the Cobbs might seek to display these signifiers of inherited power
and status.

Before the disclosure about how the Cobbs came to inherit the house, the
manor itself is described with its clumsy, ad-hoc mix of architectural styles: the
‘three storey Georgian brick façade’, the ‘squat turret’ and ‘half-timbered study’, the
‘enlarged servants’ wing’ and ‘Neo Gothic Loggia’ (47). In lampooning the
pretentiousness of the characters who possess the house, Boyd is offering an ironic
commentary on the vicissitudes that elevate one family in status above another and
the manner in which they attempt to embed and control the objects which pronounce this status to the wider world. But while the edifice itself proves a focus for Boyd’s satire, the garden is, in contrast, a much more carefully constructed and mediated space, as we see in the description:

From the back of the house a long lawn sloped gently down about fifty yards to three large ornamental fishponds, planted round with bushes and stocked with fat, slow carp. On the right was an ornamental rose garden separated from the lawn by a neat briar hedge. Carefully aligned screens carried a riotous freight of ramblers. A path avenued with pleached lime trees led through the screen and flowerbed to a dark yew bower, decorated with spanking new classical busts. Neglected for a few years, everything now evinced the most careful cultivation. Ornamental gardens, Mrs Cobb intuited, would be back in favour soon. On the left of the lawn was an orchard with wooden beehives scattered about it. Beyond the orchard a beech and oak wood grew. (48)

The description offers the reader a version of the English garden of the period containing all of what we might consider the classical components: the rose garden, the yew bower, the beech and oak wood. It is, as the satirical manner requires, too perfect a replica; everything that could be present is present. It is, in many ways, the quintessence of an English country garden. But this works against the sense of verisimilitude in the text as it is deployed as a symbol, or rather set of symbols, for
the idealism of the period.38 This is, after all, a novel which repeatedly, and in unexpected ways, returns the reader to the theme of how expectations are perpetually confounded; how the reality is often gravely worse than the expected outcome.39 Also, running through the passage are references to briar hedges and screens which organize the space. As the ordered world moves towards the catastrophe of the impending war, in which class division and the decisions of officers being promoted purely because of their class will have dire consequences for those serving under them.40

Boyd shows the first signs of something negative within the outwardly prosperous world of the Cobbs embedded in the garden itself – in the screen carrying the ramblers (keeping the wider world from looking in but also from being seen) but also in the ‘slow, fat carp’, the kept and artificially fattened fish not only a motif of lazy or excessive privilege but also, it is perhaps tempting to suggest, emblematic of the calcified class system as a whole. Boyd, however, avoids explicit social comment, and this novel (and his oeuvre as a whole) is always more concerned with the randomness of events and the random manner in which their consequences go on to shape his characters’ lives.41 With this as the energizing force for Boyd’s writing and the plotting of his novels, the garden becomes the perfect locus in which to

39 Michael Gorra picks up on this idea in describing how the novel ‘fulfills the ambition of the historical novel at its best: to comprehend the past, not as the colorful backdrop to a costume drama, but as the controlling force in the lives of its characters’ where the characters are ‘mercilessly knocked about by the force of historical circumstance’. Gorra, Michael ‘The Edges of the Great War’, New York Times, 1987
40 Set against this is the pragmatism of Temple Smith who is not forced to function under the same social code.
41 Rachel Darling discusses how Logan Mountstuart’s use of a diary transmutes daily experiences into potential fiction, mirrors the process by which the novelist makes art out of the seemingly mundane day-to-day life. Darling, Rachel ‘I Write This Sitting in the Kitchen Sink’: The Novelist as Observer and Journal-Keeper in Dodie Smith’s I Capture the Castle and William Boyd’s Any Human Heart” Kings College Post Graduate English Journal, no.29 2014, pp2-20
create the illusion of a controlled and controllable world before the utter randomness – intensified and focused through forging warfare – has its effect on the lives of the characters.

We see this sense of the wider world, and the working man suffering to accommodate the wishes of the Cobbs, extended even further in the cottage garden belonging to the stone cottage in which Gabriel and Charis plan to live where ‘the lawn had been freshly mown and the flower beds hoed and newly replanted’ (48), a symbol of innocent folly but also sharp-elbowed aspiration as it transpires that Cyril the gardener has been moved out of the cottage to accommodate the young couple in their bucolic fantasy. Karen Sayer, in her essay ‘The Labourer’s Welcome: Border Crossings in the English Country Garden’ reflects on this scene of play and playing at country life which the cottage garden has traditionally embodied:

Quintessentially English, evocative of embeddedness, of rootedness and community, the cottage garden in particular was synonymous with Nature tamed. Always already old-fashioned and representative of earthy vitality cottage gardens with their resident flowers, cultivated or self-seeded, vegetables and livestock, conjured up powerful and nostalgic associations of dwelling in a time of heightened colonial territorialism, as the import and export of goods and capital connected people world-wide. As a component of the idealised country cottage, the cottage garden was encompassed by the domestic sphere, and, like the cottage itself was therefore seen as a private space or retreat from capital, not as a place of visible work, or of wider social relations. (35)
Sayer locates the cottage garden as belonging to ‘a wider landscape, a palimpsest of power relations, the special morality of which constituted a set of historically specific identities’ (36). Boyd has given us the garden as icon, and now in the stone cottage we have the theatre of the garden, the space in which a fantasized or imagined life is to be played out by Gabriel and Charis. However, this is an imagined life which will not be realised due to the intervention of the impending war. The characters in the novel seek to define themselves through the landscape at Stackpole Manor – through manor house garden and cottage garden. They even seek to perpetuate themselves within its landscape, as seen in Gabriel and Charis’s dream of setting up home there. The garden becomes, not only a place to display power and status, but a place in which the young couple’s dreams (underscored by the social position) are to be played out. The fragility of their fantasy life is at once comic (as they will simply be pretending to live in a certain way) but also tragic as the landscape (the garden, the cottage) is central to preserving their innocence, an innocence which will swiftly be taken away from them by the war.

The innocence of Gabriel and Charis is, of course, a luxury Cyril the gardener does not have access to. As Felix observes him, the gardener’s movement from the orchard to the pond marks the sort of progress which animates the ‘palimpsest of power relations’ described by Sayer. It is a movement between two fixed points in the domestic landscape’s iconography. The landscape is not peopled, tended or populated by those who possess it, by those who derive and reinforce their status from its features, namely the Cobbs, but by Cyril the gardener. It is a culture of ornamental display in which the orchard and the fishponds reflect the status to which Stackpole Manor residents aspire and seek to maintain. As Sayers reflects,
The ‘Historical Matrix’ of power relations, it should be noted is both experiential and textual. This is to say that it is not enough to undertake a reading of the (or a) cottage garden as material space; it is also necessary to consider the conflicts around the space, the struggle for meaning. (36)

Sayers argues that the cottage garden is a construct created through art and literature. So where do we locate the sources for this literary construct for Boyd? It is a vision of England we find in P.G. Wodehouse’s *The Man Upstairs* (published in December 1911 in *London Magazine* and in 1914, collected as part of *The Man Upstairs*, the year in which *An Ice Cream War* is set). In Wodehouse’s novel, George the writer tells Peggy the Broadway actress:

Way over in England, Peggy, there’s a county called Worcestershire. And somewhere near the edge of that there’s a grey house with gables, and there’s a lawn and a meadow and a shrubbery, and an orchard and a rose-garden, and a big cedar on the terrace before you get to the rose-garden. And if you climb to the top of that cedar, you can see the river through the apple trees in the orchard. And in the distance there are hills. (389)

It is an evocation of an English idyll we also recognise from G.K. Chesterton’s first novel *The Flying Inn*, published in 1914:

On an evening when the sky was clear and only its fringes embroidered with the purple arabesques of the sunset, Joan Brett was walking on the upper
lawn of the terraced garden at Ivywood, where the peacocks trail themselves about. (302)

Clearly, Boyd’s text is recreating the iconography of the English garden, as described by his forbears in works contemporary with the action of his novel. In so doing, as we have seen, Boyd is also destabilising the idea through the reconstruction of its elements in such clarity that he draws attention to its artificiality as a construct. Several versions of Englishness are culminating as Boyd describes the garden at Stackpole Manor. We may, for example, look further back to another vision of English rectitude, to discern something of Christopher Clutterbuck, in Edward Bulwer Lytton’s ‘Pelham Or the Adventures of an English Gentleman’, visiting an old university friend in the melancholy surroundings of the ‘reverend recluse’s habitation’ where ‘a small formal lawn… adorned with a square fish-pond bricked round, and covered with the green weepings of four willows’ (244).

The orchard image, which is often associated with that of the grounds of the manor house, also persists well in twentieth-century fiction, albeit exposed now to the exigencies of modernity. For example, the orchard is the central image in the prologue to that classic country-house novel, *Brideshead Revisited*:

The camp stood where, until quite lately, had been pasture and ploughland; the farm-house still stood in a fold of the hill and had served us for battalion offices; ivy still supported part of what had once been the walls of a fruit garden; half an acre of mutilated old trees behind the wash-houses survived of an orchard. The place had been marked for
destruction before the army came to it. Had there been another year of peace, there would have been no farmhouse, no wall, no apple trees. (1)

Like Waugh, Boyd deploys the familiar images of the English country landscape, the resting places of the English ruling elite, in part to set up the contrasting and ironic effect of the following chapters with their picture of the chaos and carnage of war. Much of this bucolic apparatus, the idealised English landscape, its stock forms, shapes and material, is being established as a powerful counterpoint to the horror of the chapters that follow. Boyd is both recreating a fictitonalised and idealised vision of England recognisable in the work of Waugh, Chesterton and Wodehouse but generating an ironic juxtaposition with the landscapes Felix will go on to experience. 42 This is Boyd as the ironist and the inventor, a facet of his style often hidden behind the seemingly accessible nature of the writing. It is a comic mode in the classic English style. 43

Stackpole Manor plays an important role structurally as the house and gardens act as both a symbol of what is lost when Felix travels abroad to war but also as an illustration of the confusion upon which the beliefs of that ruling class were built. The light comedy of the ramshackle Stackpole Manor finds its counterpart in the arresting and horrific image when the expatriate American farm owner, Temple Smith, returns to his farmstead where German soldiers have been billeted.

He stirred himself into action and scampered from his sheltering tree into a small grove of dead banana trees nearer the house. He noticed that the tops of

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42 My focus has been on specific works by Wodehouse and Chesterton contemporaneous with the time of the events of the novel. There is not space to deal with the topic of gardens and landscapes in these two authors more generally.

43 Boyd is a Scottish writer though his predominant influences are from the English canon.
the trees had been neatly cut off to prevent them bearing any further fruit.

(212)

Whereas the gardens at Stackpole was a centre of ornament and display, the fruit-bearing trees of Temple Smith form an essential part of his livelihood. The precision with which the trees have been prevented from bearing fruit provides a sinister echo of the war, offering a counterpoint to the horror narrated in the scenes of conflict earlier.

When Temple Smith eventually reaches the house, the timbre of the prose moves swiftly from the blank annihilation embodied in the banana tree, the horror of nature stunted, to a contrasting form of horror – the horror of nature untamed and overwhelming: ‘The house smelt like a giant’s shit hole. It was humming with flies too. Millions of flies, the air seemed solid with them’(212). The narration navigates both extremes in the aftermath of the conflict: the trees that can no longer bear fruit and the superabundance of the flies with their attendant Mephistophelian and diabolical resonances. This is a vision Hieronymus Bosch might have painted:

Every surface – shelves, table chairs, cooking trough – was decorated with coils of human faeces, as was the floor. The air danced with black sated flies.

Streaming plumes of them escaped though the newly opened windows. (213)

The horror of the image is not simply the despoiled house but that the human act of defecation has transformed the house from a domestic space into a space occupied by nature. Despite the set-pieces of graphic violence which propel the novel, it is in the domestic landscape that Boyd shows the ravages of war at their most powerful and
destructive. The reader is steered to this apprehension through the specific details – the manner in which the tops of the banana trees were ‘neatly’ cut off to prevent them bearing fruit implying a coldly premeditated approach to the systematic destruction and despoiling of the landscape.

It is interesting to compare the manner in which Boyd locates Gabriel and Felix in their native landscape to the manner in which he locates Temple Smith, the immigrant American farmer in the East African landscape. Temple’s existence in East Africa and his relationship to the landscape is more tenuous, living as he does on the edge of a contested space, on the border with German East Africa near Mount Kilimanjaro. Whereas Gabriel and Felix, are shown as inheritors of privileges signified by and enacted though the native landscape, Temple, formerly ‘the manager of a small iron foundry in Sturgis, New Jersey’ (17), is attempting to construct an identity by imposing his will upon a non-native landscape, through his work on the sisal plantation he owns.

Temple’s own predicament is mirrored in that of his neighbour across the border in German East Africa, Eric Von Bishop. The colonial space becomes one upon which the characteristics of each nationality are tested and examined. We might consider Temple Smith’s perception of Taveta, the small township he passes through an hour before his own farm: ‘The place reminded Temple strongly of a small western township he had seen in Wyoming, which he visited once as a young man in the 1890s’ (36). Boyd is both enriching the reader’s sense of Temple as a character with a unique history but also using a landscape with which his readers might be more familiar (if only from Western films), that of the American West, to more accurately and economically construct East Africa. Thus the reader’s perception of the East Africa constructed by Boyd will have within it the American West to which
it has been compared, communicating both the visual similarity in terms of the nature of the landscape but also alerting the reader to the fact that this is a zone in which identity is unstable, in which character is being created and identity won from the land by its inhabitants. Of course, it also implies their willingness to overlook the land’s native inhabitants. It is both a visual short-cut and also a short-cut in terms of the resonances contained within the landscape itself.

When Temple, returning home before the war has been declared, first views the house, we learn how ‘His house was built on a small hill; or rather it was being built. The two storey wooden frame house had been incomplete now for over two years’ (38). This is a zone in which identity is contested and hard won. Through Temple Smith, Boyd is challenging the conventions of post-colonial literature by representing the settler experience, not simply as one in which land and landscape are occupied by the settler as a fait accompli, but rather as one in which ownership and possession are continually contested and unstable. Through the manner in which he locates Temple Smith in the landscape, Boyd is complicating the modern reader’s sense of colonial experience. This is particularly evident in his description of the landscape around the farm in Smithville:

From the house the land sloped gently away towards the small patch of water – some two miles distant – that was Lake Jipe. Across the border in German East (which ran beyond the lake) rose the Pare Hills, along whose other side Temple had travelled that morning in the train from Bangui to Moshi. (38)

Here we have the lake and the hills with their anglicized spellings of indigenous names, we also have the railway, crucial for crossing and connecting the terrain. This
is reminiscent of the earlier description of Stackpole Manor: the occupier’s gaze that constructs an orderly, organized landscape. The later description, however, complicates this sense of assured possession:

At the moment Temple’s farm was divided into plots of sisal, with their great spiky leaves like hugely enlarged pineapple crowns, and fields of linseed plants. At the foot of the hill on which the house stood was the ‘factory’. This was the large, corrugated iron shed which contained Temple’s pride and joy: the Finnegan and Zabriskie sisal ‘Decorticator’, a towering massive threshing machine that pulverized the stiff sisal leaves into limp bundles of fibrous hemp. A small shed beside it contained smaller, more domestic-sized crushers for processing linseed berries. Grouped around this central nub of the ‘factory’ were other shaky lean-tos, relics of failed enterprises of the past.

In the same way the ‘fishponds’ and ‘lawns’ of Stackpole Manor construct identity for the Cobbs, the inverted commas around the ‘factory’ alert us to the irony of the dilapidated building, the text exposing both the reality of this working landscape but also the characters’ hopes and desires about the manner in which they will impose themselves upon the landscape and the landscape’s record of failures.

It is also perhaps worth considering the importance of the dissonance created by the naming of the objects in this landscape – ‘the Finnegan and Zabriskie sisal Decorticator’ is a phrase which those without a background in pre-war farming methods in East Africa will meet with a degree of pleasure at the linguistic energy of the phrase but with perhaps also a degree of apprehension regarding its exact
meaning. Indeed the ‘Decorticator’, and Temple Smith’s quest to regain the machine once it has been confiscated, is central to the arc of his narrative. The Decorticator embodies both the desire to apply industrialised processes to the landscape but also functions as a symbol of the ambition and folly which the colonial enterprise became. We might even be tempted to suggest that work of the Decorticator ‘pulverizing’ the sisal leaves offers an analogy for the imposition of colonial rule upon the indigenous population. Boyd establishes a hierarchy of machinery, which includes the over-reaching, mock-heroic sounding Decorticator which seeks to apply large-scale industrial processes, and the more ‘domestic-sized’ crushers for the linseed berries. The names of the manufacturers ‘Finnegan and Zabriskie’ point to other histories of colonization and settlement: the Irish settlement of America in the face of English colonization of Ireland or Polish settlement of America in response to Russian autocratic control. The manufacturers’ names also contain nested within them other resonances which further link Smith to his native America. ‘Zabriskie’ invokes the cult 1970 film, Michelangelo Antonioni’s ‘Zabriskie Point’, which, in turn, took its name from the area of Death Valley in the United States, an ancient, arid dessert landscape named after Christian Brevoort Zabriskie of the Pacific Coast Borax Company. The landscape around Smithville thus attests to the zeal of colonial ambition, but also the hardship experienced when attempting to impose that ambition upon the landscape.

By contrast, the domestic landscape in An Ice Cream War becomes a vehicle through which Boyd introduces ideas of futurity, maturity and continuance. Consider the scene where Felix and his brother Gabriel decide to swim in the river:
They had reached the river. It ran turbidly between wheat fields, before some subterranean impediment caused it to take an unusually sharp bend. At this point five mature weeping willows grew over a large pool formed by the swerve in the river’s progress. The gentle current eddied and swirled, slowly cutting into the facing bank. On one side of the pool was a mud and pebble beach. On the other the overhanging bank shadowed a wide channel some six to eight feet deep. It was possible to climb the willow trees and drop into the cool green waters from a considerable height. (4)

This is the text moving into an other mode, not the satire we saw in the description of the garden at Stackpole Manor with its stock objects and icons, but instead offering a mode of nature writing elevated by the manner in which it observes how complication in the natural realm forms the ‘subterranean impediment’ which alters the course of the river and shapes the landscape. The narration is arguably directing the reader to take this scene more seriously than the others – this shift in styles and registers across the course of the novel is central to its function, as tone moves from simple satire, farce, dark comedy to passages and scenes of tenderly and acutely observed action, intimately linked to landscape. The narration is implicitly reminding the reader that, although the vicissitudes and fate may be grotesquely random, darkly comic and brutal, the characters to which these events occur are not merely ciphers but are to be understood to have complex interior lives. The mood of the novel is not a single sustained note but relies on these subtle shifts in register and tone. The proximity or juxtaposition of the one serving to amplify the other.

Gabriel and Felix are shown to have a relationship to the land which is radically different from that of their parents. The brothers engage with and use the
semi-domesticated landscape in a way which reveals aspects of their character and their healthy relationship with the landscape. Not simply the manner in which it links the two young men to their native countryside and more richly embeds in them a sense of home but also in the manner in which Felix’s perceptions of his brother begin to mirror aspects of this very landscape:

Felix stared for a moment at his brother’s powerful naked body, dappled with the knife-like shadows of the willow leaves. He had a broad slab of a chest covered in a sprinkling of fine blond hairs. His abdomen was flat and muscled and the line of his pelvis was clearly marked. His ruddy, pink cock and balls, tensed from the cold water, were compact in their nest of gingery brown hairs that spread across his groin over his heavy thighs. Water runnelled off this chest and stomach and dripped in a stream from his stubby cock. His scrotum, big as a fist, was wrinkled and firm. (50)

Gabriel is being perceived in the same structured manner in which the landscape was earlier described, as if he himself were some form of geological formation. ‘broad slab’, the ‘line of his pelvis’ but also in the ‘nest of gingery brown hairs’ describing his pubic hair as if his sexual organs we some riverine animal. Gabriel is also, of course, literally covered in an element of the landscape, the ‘knife-like shadows of the willow leaves’ linking the characters with the land, the land taking possession of him in the form of the shadows which cover his body. At the same time, in their description as ‘knife-like’, these shadows rehearse and foretell the wound which awaits Gabriel at the end of a bayonet when fighting in East Africa.
The rural landscape provides occasion in the novel for this otherwise unusual display of nakedness and Felix’s perception of it, while bringing the reader close to Gabriel’s physicality in advance of his own wounding. For that to be fully effective it is important for the reader to have seen Gabriel naked but also to have seen him naked in this particular landscape with its particular and distinct set of resonances. We can conceive of this scene as the centre, or in poetic terms, the turning point, of the novel, a point from which the later decisions and actions radiate; this is Gabriel in his element and secure in the landscape, which is to say in his proper place. The tenor of the description of Gabriel’s physique, the effect of the cold water on his body, is neither flattering nor unflattering; it is simply truthful, and this element of realism is central to the novel. As this shows, the landscape provides Boyd not only with a manner of satirising his characters but also an avenue to embedding them and imbuing them with complex inner lives. Seeing Gabriel naked and so recognisably human, so realistically rendered, means we cannot simply interpret the action of the following chapters as comic, or even darkly comic. There is a deeper connection established, and therefore a much more powerful and disturbing set of responses are called for from the reader. Once Gabriel has been shown in this way, as the object of this sympathetic fraternal gaze, he cannot be laughed away. The reader is, from this scene onwards, complicit in his plight. No matter how extreme his suffering becomes, we have seen the man in nature, in the landscape, and are now connected to him in a way we would not have been were this scene removed from the book. It can be seen, from this, that the landscape of Boyd’s graphic description is a sophisticated and sophisticating element of the novel.

The movement between landscapes also forms a distinct part of the novel’s structure. There is a specific delineation of time-frame and geographical space. The
text is asking the reader continually to consider these differing geographical realities side by side. They are intimately and implicitly connected. The actions in one place have specific ramifications in another. In this way, the text is offering a de facto critique on the workings of empire, by means of the webs of interconnectivity it creates by precisely curating the reader’s movement through these time-frames and spaces. Doreen Massey, writing on ‘Travelling Imaginations’ in *For Space* argues:

> Unlike Time, it seems, you can see space spread out around you. Time is either past or to come or so minutely instantaneously *now* that it is impossible to grasp. Space on the other hand, is *there*. (117)

Massey argues that the relations in space that exist between humans, landscapes and their work in them is central to understanding both power and politics:

> One immediate and evident effect of this is that space comes to seem so very much more *material* than time. Temporality seems easy to imagine in the abstract, as a dimension, as the dimension of change. Space, in contrast, has been equated with ‘extension’, and through that with the material. It is a distinction that resonates too… with that understanding of time as interior, a product of (human) experience, in contrast to space as material, as in *opposition to* time’s incorporeality: it is the landscape outside the window, the surface of the earth, a given. (117)

Lukács argues in *The Historical Novel* that what matters is not simply the detailing and outlining of historical events as they happen, but what he terms the ‘poetic
awakening’ of the characters to whom the historical events occur. Through his use of place, Boyd offers a series of historical selves with a range of mood and motifs from the socially ambitious Cobb mother at Stackpole in Kent, altering the landscape in the belief it may become fashionable and by extension maintain a place within a social order, to Temple Smith in East Africa seeking to reinvent and industrialise the uses of the land and in so doing, define and sustain himself and his family.

Boyd is cataloguing and deploying these tropes, these fixed positions of character which are understood and signalled through their interaction with the landscape. As I have suggested, this technique is inherited through forebears such as Waugh and Wodehouse, and Chesterton, but in placing characters such as Temple Smith on the periphery, the edge of the landscape, the furthermost point at which the culture, ideas and beliefs represented at Stackpole Manor extend, he is asking the reader to examine what becomes of characters in the attempt to achieve this domination of land. Through these means, I would argue, the characters are being asked to achieve their poetic awakening, or to confront what Lukács calls the ‘hic et nunc’ - the here and now of their inner motives and behaviour’ (60).

Temple Smith as an American is doubly peripheral, an outsider on the edge of empire. The text is at once memorialising a version of English identity inherited by Temple Smith while also exploring and expanding the texture of colonial experience. This drive towards both memorialisation and expansion is mutually sustaining. The map Boyd draws through his prose demonstrates that what happens in Kent, in terms of the beliefs and wishes of the culture, has ramifications in East Africa. The text offers archetypes in Gabriel but also ultra-specific sui generis – characters in the form of Temple Smith or Eric Von Bishop, his half-English, half-German neighbour across the border. These two poles find their expression in the
landscape. Temple Smith allows for an enriched understanding of the absurdities of colonial experience, while the archetypes being sent out into the conflict-ridden colonial zone underscore the comic impulse in the novel. The landscape mediates the play between the comic and the horrific elements in the novel. Thus Stackpole Manor is both the seat of simple comedy but also of genuine and profound connection to native ecology and environment. Likewise, Tavena in East Africa is both the seat of Temple Smith’s serious ambition, the site of bureaucratic absurdities manifest in Wheech-Browning, but also the place of abject horror. It is the text’s attunement to the landscape which allows for this sophisticated interleaving of moods generated by place. Raymond Williams, writing in The Country and City, describes the reconfiguration of landscape, challenging the ideas propagated in the standard accounts of the development of the English landscape and drawing his reader’s attention to what he calls ‘the real history’:

But the real history is very much more complicated. It was the application, in special social and economic circumstances, of ideas which were in themselves very far from new. Yet as always, in such cases, the particular application, in a real social context, had new and particular effects. (120)

It is the invention and exploration of this particularity which animates Boyd’s prose, prose which enshrines and memorialises historical configurations of the landscape but also examines the legacy of the ideas attached to these landscapes when applied abroad. Felix Cobb and Temple Smith inhabit two positions on a continuum, one at the heart of the empire in a landscape symbolically rich and referencing the power structures of the society, and the other at the outer edge, the sophisticated limit to
which the rules of that society might be applied, in a landscape which seems to allow the chance to define character and self but ultimately denies it due to a war between two colonial nations thousands of miles away. Bridging these two points we see the figure of the destined to be wounded Gabriel Cobb, a character lent his ‘poetic awaking’ by his native landscape as seen in the swimming scene, but destined to be brutally wounded in the foreign landscape over which the jurisdiction of his native land is contested.

II. Woodland in Foulds’ The Quickening Maze

In The Quickening Maze, rather than the formalised construct of the English country garden, the ancient woodland of Epping Forest provides the all-encompassing *mise en scène*. This is a landscape which comes with a deeper set of historical contexts but also a space where less formal control has been applied to the landscape, a space in which a wider range of human impulses and instincts might be explored and played out. It is a space in which aspects of human nature which destabilise identity are manifest. Epping Forest is also the site of John Clare’s walk home from the asylum. John Barrell has written on Clare’s engagement with the natural world and his response to the enclosure movement of the eighteenth century, and, more recently, Simon Kovesi has situated Clare’s response to landscape politically. In the eighteenth and nineteenth century the Romantics ‘graded’ areas of natural beauty according to their effect on the senses and imagination in terms of the beautiful, the picturesque, and the sublime (Shaw). It is interesting to consider William Wordsworth as a counterpoint to Clare. Wordsworth’s *Guide to the Lakes*
makes use of the idea of woods, and how they transport us to a place free from human contact or trace, a place pre-human in its composition:

He may see or hear in fancy the winds sweeping over the lakes, or piping with a loud noise among the mountain peaks; and lastly may think of the primeval woods shedding and renewing their leaves with no human eye to notice, or human heart to regret or welcome the change. (38)

Elsewhere though, Wordsworth makes a more direct connection with the human presence in the woods and the traces this presence has left. At first, his description of human habitation, the ‘mountain cottage’, effectively merges the dwelling with its natural surrounding:

These dwellings, as has been said, are built of rough unhewn stone; and they are roofed with slates which were rudely taken from the quarry, before the present art of splitting them was understood, and the slates are therefore rough and uneven in their surfaces. Both the coverings and sides of the houses have furnished places of rest for the seeds of lichens, mosses, fern, and flowers.

Hence buildings, which in their very form call to mind the processes of nature, do thus, by this vegetable garb with which they are clothed, appear to be received into the bosom of the living principle of things, as it acts and exists among the woods and fields.... (56)

However, once his thought turns to ‘the humble-minded inhabitants’ of such dwellings, he conjures up the garden as a scene of labour and human activity:

Add the little garden with its shed for bee-hives, its small beds of pot-herbs, and its border and patches of flowers for Sunday posies, with sometimes a choice few too much prized to be plucked; an orchard of proportioned size; a cheese-press often supported by some tree near the door… (65)

So Wordsworth in his analysis gives the reader a sense of the woods which have multiple and interchanging identities, sometimes free of human interaction, sometimes integral to it.45

In The Quickening Maze, the woods are a space expansive enough to harbour the various versions of humanity from the gypsies, to the lost souls of the Leopard Hill Lodge to the reforming Matthew Allen. Whereas the formal gardens seek to project a singular identity, the shielding and enclosing woods lean towards multiplicity, or to couch this in the terms Doreen Massey discusses in For Space, the woods are a product of interrelations, what we might think of as an interconnected nexus of ongoing processes. Massey’s conceptualisation of space is relational and therefore fundamentally open. Moreover, space is, in Massey’s terms, ‘constituted through interactions from the immensity of the global to the intimately tiny’ (9). For Massey, distinct trajectories co-exist in space – she terms this ‘coexisting

45 A reconsideration of Wordsworth’s views on human integration with nature as evinced in his poetry can be found in Jonathan Bate’s Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition.
heterogeneity’ (9) – and while these trajectories co-exist, space is constantly in the process of being constructed. Therefore space can never be closed or finished or, as Massey puts it, ‘multiplicity and space are co-constitutive… Perhaps we could imagine space as a simultaneity of stories so far’ (7).

It is tempting to apply this conception of space to the Epping Forest described in *The Quickening Maze*. Epping Forest covers in excess of two thousand five hundred acres of ancient woodland, rich with historical associations to Elizabeth I, Shakespeare’s Arden or the myriad manifestations of the forest at the heart of the English imagination. So the action of the novel occurs in a space deep with historical resonances but also a space in which the ‘multiple trajectories’ Massey would recognize are narrated by the text. Indeed, John Clare’s wanderings in the woods and the scene where he meets the gypsies might be connected directly with Massey’s conception of space as Clare, in the gypsies, finds though entering the space of the woods a way of constituting, albeit temporarily, a new form of identity for himself. As Massey writes:

> Understanding space as a product of interrelations chimes well with the emergence over recent years of a politics which attempts a commitment to anti-essentialism … this politics takes the constitution of the identities themselves and the relationships through which they are constructed to be one of the central stakes of the political. ‘Relations’ here, then, are understood as embedded practices. Rather than accepting and working with

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46 *Landscape and Literature* by Stephen Siddall provides a summary of the various ways landscape has been interpreted from traditional, idealistic, through to materialist and Marxist.
already-constituted entities/identities, this politics lays its stress upon the relational constructedness of things. (10)

It is these very interrelations *The Quickening Maze* examines in the space of Epping Forest. Thus Hannah seeks to understand her identity as a young woman in talking with Tennyson; Tennyson seeks to better understand his brother Septimus or at least define his own condition through the differences pronounced through his proximity to his brother; Fulton Allen enters in the space of Leopard Hill Lodge with his father Matthew Allen and while there is induced by his father to take on a different identity – that of a forthright helper, which he resists. Repeatedly, the book sees these identities reconceptualised in ‘relational terms’, to use Massey’s phrase. John Clare, a patient from the asylum, meets the gypsies to find his identity temporarily changed and enriched; Hannah, the Allen daughter, meets with Tennyson and discovers aspects of her own personality and identity revealed to herself; Tennyson converses with Matthew Allen and both men have their senses of self subtly challenged; patients, family members, gypsies, porters, a range of different identities are continually brought into contact in the space of the forest.

In *The Quickening Maze* the woods provide a space in which identities are continually brought into contact but they also prove a source from which character is drawn, most evidently in the form of the woodwose or wild man, an ancient wood dwelling figure, aspects of which we might be tempted to see as manifesting themselves in the descriptions of Clare and Tennyson. Paul Thompson traces the history of the figure of the ‘woodwose’ in his essay ‘The English, The Trees, The Wild and The Green: Two Millennia of Mythological Metamorphoses’:
The Oxford Dictionary describes the woodwose as a term going back to the
eleventh century, ‘a wild man of the woods; a savage; a satyr; a faun’ …
Satyrs and fauns, however, are not synonyms, even though they shared the
wild man’s lusty sexuality; they are figures from Greek and Roman
mythology, not especially associated with the woods, and only partly human,
with goats or horses ears, tails and sometimes legs; satyrs were also
associated with bacchanalia drunkenness. (28)

Aspects of the ‘woodwose’ are to be found embedded across the representations of
both Tennyson and John Clare. We thus witness in the text a reimagining of
historical figures from the literary past but a reimagining that is imbued with aspects
of more ancient characters, such as the woodwose, who have long inhabited what we
might term the woodland imagination. With Clare wandering off into the woods to
brawl and spend time with the gypsies, and Tennyson appearing wreathed in smoke,
we might be tempted to think that the qualities of the ‘woodwose’ have been split
between the two characters. The fictionalised lives of two canonical poets are thus
reinterpreted and represented through mythological tropes and archetypes. There is
an awareness of the literary history of the woodlands embedded into the text. For
instance, when Hannah goes to visit Tennyson in his cottage, their conversation turns
to Copt Hall: ‘I understand it is where A Midsummer Night’s Dream was first
performed, for a wedding’ (97), to which Tennyson eventually responds: ‘So they
were all here, were they? Hermia and Lysander and the other were all lost in these
woods. Puck appearing on a branch. Oh, I am pleased you told me that’ (97). So
there is also to be discovered a historical literary woodland (that of Shakespeare)
over layering the woodland of the novel, and an implied degree of self consciousness
(for Tennyson at least) for this new crop of poets who find themselves ‘lost in the woods’.

III The Garden as a Locus Amoenus in Hollinghurst

Hollinghurst, too, makes use of traditional tropes in his fiction – in his case, tropes of place. The *locus amoenus* or ‘pleasant place’ is an early convention of the pastoral mode of poetry. David Mikic in *A New Handbook of Literary Terms* helpfully defines the term and give several examples from literature:

The description of the garden in Alcinous in Homer’s Odyssey (Bk.7) is an early, and influential example of the locus amoenus… Edmund Spencer, with his Bower of Bliss in Bk 2 of The Faerie Queene (1590-96), draws a picture of a deceptive locus amoenus, ready to seduce an unwary knight into languorous, soul-killing illusion. (171)

In *The Stranger’s Child* the garden at Two Acres is clearly an example of the *locus amoenus*. It becomes the place for which Cecil Valance is best known, ‘best remembered for his ode to the suburban garden’ (108). It is Valance who conceives of the suburban garden at Two Acres, in the tradition of the *locus amoenus*, as an ‘airy chambered garden’ (a fragment of dactylic hexameter aligning the suburban garden to a set of classical design). But when, years later, Paul Rowe visits Two Acres, he finds it changed almost beyond recognition:
But he saw already that the ‘airy-chambered garden’ had gone; and even the house itself, which Paul had no doubt was the house, seemed resistant to being looked at. (316)

However, despite coming up against the reality of the garden in its current state, the association of the garden with the poetic in the mind of Rowe is hard to shake. For instance, when Paul meets Daphne he conceives of her in the garden:

To Paul her natural habitat was the English garden not a dusty defile off the Tottenham Court Road. Poems had been written for her and set to music. She remembered intimacies that were now legendary. (316)

Hollinghurst gently mocks the distance between the actual and the imagined, as what happens in the garden and what the garden comes to represent become detached over time. The Two Acres we learn about in snippets from Valance’s famous poem, as it is gradually revealed to us over the course of the novel, is not quite the garden we experience in the novel itself. So Hollinghurst shows a distance between the Romanticised ideal promoted by Valance and the lived experience from the outset. The garden when converted into verse by Valance is, we know, misremembered (the secrets the garden are more intimate than the gentle melancholy romance of Valance’s poem) just as the novel is about the way in which a poet (famous for writing about that said garden) is himself misremembered. Hollinghurst is mapping what exists beneath this idealised location as commemorated and captured in art (in this case Valance’s poem). The reality (that the garden at Two Acres is no longer – and, as we the reader know, never quite was – that described in
Valance’s poem) is subsumed by the tropes and shapes which already exist. Its status is elevated by the existence of the poem itself. In the same way, Paul perceives Daphne as having had great poetry written about her, but the truth we know is more tangled and complex. Time causes stories to decay into clichés and even those inclined to move closer to the truth – Paul is, after all, one of only a handful of people with an active interest in Valance – will misunderstand the past, will misinterpret events.

Again, in *The Line of Beauty* this idea of the *locus amoenus* might be detected in the private garden of the Feddens, but this time as a trope used by Hollinghurst rather than by one of his creations. The garden represents respectability and status but is then destabilised by what takes place within it. In the case of the Fedden’s garden, it is where Nick goes to have sex with his new boyfriend Leo. It becomes (supplementary to its initial identity) an amorous and erotically-charged location:

‘Oh just over here…’ – Nick giggled because he did not know if Leo’s grumpiness was real. He went ahead a bit, anxiously responsible. As his eyes adjusted to the semi-darkness nowhere seemed private enough – there was more show through from the street lights, voices on the pavement were unnervingly close. And of course on a summer night there were key holders still at large, picnickers charmed into long later reminiscence, walkers of white dogs. (33)

As the narration, focalised through Nick, populates the garden with potential exposers of their sex act, the territory itself becomes re-appropriated. The phrase ‘at large’ used to describe the key-holders reflects back a degree of criminality onto
them, while the ‘charmed’ picnickers lend the scene a Shakespearean resonance (with its connotations of enchantment such as they played out by the characters in A Midsummer Night’s Dream), which reflects Nick’s own sensibility. And yet the space is in the process of becoming re-purposed, no longer belonging – in Nick’s consciousness at least, as the narrator invites us to share – to its lingering inhabitants but the two young men who occupy the space. Several layers of myth and narrative all collide here in the garden. Hollinghurst is inviting the reader to at once acknowledge the literary and common mythological antecedent of the garden but also to become implicit in the acts of trespass and of congress which they witness taking place:

He stooped under the copper beach, but the branches were rough and confusing and the mast crackled underfoot. He backed out again, bashing into Leo and gripping his waist for moment to steady himself. ‘Sorry…’ The feel of his warm hard body under the silky shirt was almost worryingly beautiful, a promise too lavish to believe in. (34)

Hollinghurst thus allows his characters to both inhabit and subvert an idealised space, whether it is the pastoral trope applied by Valance to Two Acres or the private garden in The Line of Beauty. These spaces and their legacies are important but literature does not give a full account of their uses or of the types of beauty which inhabit them, and Hollinghurst’s work stands as a subtle and playful corrective to this.
CHAPTER THREE: SPEECH

In addition to the use of objects for verisimilitude (and other effects) and the necessary navigation of different spaces and places, another essential component of fiction is the representation of speech. Speech and dialogue in fiction raise a number of issues, and I will explore some of these in this chapter. My particular focus is on stylistic elements such as dialogue and monologue, punctuation and ellipsis rather than, for example, the presentation of difference through attention to regional or class-based ‘special forms’ of speech.

I. Dialogue and Ellipsis

In his study *Forms of Speech in Victorian Fiction*, Raymond Chapman outlines one of the fundamental problems that surround any author’s attempt at conveying speech in fiction along with some of the solutions and adaptations employed:

Even in the most realistic fiction, dialogue has an artificial quality; trying to read a novel which accurately reproduced real conversations would soon be wearisome. The novelist selects and economises, excluding the many features which are accepted in reality but would become intolerable if they were reproduced on the printed page. Speech is full of hesitations, repetitions, anacolutha and non-semantic noises. (1)
Chapman elaborates on the difference between actual speech and fictional speech by contrasting what he describes as the ‘ear-code of speech’ with the ‘eye-code of writing’ (2), remarking that ‘there can be no perfect visual recreation of the auditory experience without the use of a phonetic alphabet inaccessible to most readers and writers’ (2). Instead, Chapman suggests the best that can be done is to develop what he terms ‘a visual convention that will suggest the deviations and idiosyncrasies of speech’ (2). For Chapman, these visual conventions range from quotation marks, which signal the narrative has changed to dialogue, to ‘deviant spellings’ used to convey Cockney, Scots or other ‘special forms’ of speech. Chapman also lists punctuation, exclamation, and incomplete sentences among the devices which are used to denote intonation or provide a richer source of information about the words being spoken and how the author intends the reader to interpret them. However, he goes on to argue:

The prosodic features of speech, stress and intonation can only imperfectly be suggested by the resources normally available. Written dialogue may be naturalistic and idiomatic in its choice of words and syntax, well marked by punctuation, but it can never give a full impression of what we hear in life. (2)

The absence of the voice is another factor in fiction’s inability to ‘give a full impression of what we hear in life’:

The individual qualities of voice are many, in terms of natural pitch, smoothness or harshness and so on. Qualities may be affected by physical
changes, as the slurred speech of intoxication or the huskiness of a cold; or situationally by whispering or shouting. In all these things the novelist must use the equivalent of stage directions, indicating by verbal commentary how the character is to be heard by the reader. (3)

Chapman suggests some of the devices a novelist can use to give the impression of real speech, but even realistic novels do not attempt to reproduce ‘what we hear in life’. The novelist is always dealing with conventions of representation, and the novelist’s selection and economy is based on these conventions.

In this context we might look at the Authors Note which accompanied the New York edition of Henry James’s *The Awkward Age*, a novel consisting almost entirely of dialogue. In this Note, James addresses the issue of what he calls ‘really constructive dialogue’ (14). James had earlier explained:

One had seen good solid slices of fiction, well endued, one might surely have thought, with this easiest of lubrications, deplored by editor and publisher as positively not, for the general gullet as known to THEM, made adequately ‘slick.’ “Dialogue,” always “dialogue”! I had seemed from far back to hear them mostly cry: ‘We can’t have too much of it, we can’t have enough of it, and no excess of it, in the form of no matter what savourless dilution, or what boneless dispersion, ever began to injure a book so much as even the very scantest claim put in for form and substance.’ (13)
In effect, James is arguing that speech cannot be imported wholesale from life without the novel suffering from ‘savourless dilution’ or ‘boneless dispersion’. In contrast to this artless importation of speech, James asserts the ‘claim’ for ‘form and substance’:

…in any artistic attempt the basis and groundwork of which are conscious of a particular firmness. On that hard fine floor the element of execution feels it may more or less confidently dance; in which case puzzling questions, sharp obstacles, dangers of detail, may come up for it by the dozen without breaking its heart or shaking its nerve. It is the difficulty produced by the loose foundation or the vague scheme that breaks the heart--when a luckless fatuity has over-persuaded an author of the ‘saving’ virtue of treatment. (14)

This strict attention to form, he asserts, is the basis on which he builds his own novel, *The Awkward Age*, with its narration presented entirely through dialogue.

Another novelist who relies completely upon dialogue to present narrative – not only in a single work but across an entire *oeuvre* – is Ivy Compton Burnett. Jonathan Bolton, writing of Compton-Burnett, describes her development of dialogue in the novel as her ‘major technical achievement’ (90) reflecting on how, although the novels contain ‘minimal description’ (90), limited usually to a character’s dress or physical description, nevertheless the plot is advanced and character revealed almost entirely through conversation’ (90). Bolton draws our attention to the distinction first made by French novelist and critic Nathalie Sarraute that one must not take Compton-Burnett’s dialogue as ‘realistic presentation’ but instead understand that it functions on two separate planes ‘the conversation level,
which includes ordinary small talk, platitudes, and observations on the weather, and “sub-conversations,” which constitute a verbalisation or open articulation of what is thought, felt, and perceived but rarely spoken’ (90). Bolton also reflects that Sarraute includes as ‘sub-conversations’ passages of dialogue using ‘long stilted sentences… that do not recall any conversation ever had’ (90). Here we have come a long way from Chapman’s concern with ‘a full impression of what we hear in life’ to a full embrace of the artifice of literary dialogue.

The line of influence from Compton-Burnett to Hollinghurst was suggested by Hollinghurst himself in the *Telegraph* in a piece he wrote on Penelope Fitzgerald:

> The forebears of Fitzgerald’s fictional children can perhaps be found in the articulate nurseries and schoolrooms of Ivy Compton-Burnett, though to a friend who found them ‘precious’ Fitzgerald replied, ‘I don’t agree… They’re exactly like my own children, who always noticed everything.’

We can detect both influence of James and Compton-Burnett at play in the scene in the Two Acres section of *The Stranger’s Child* where Hubert encourages his mother, Freda Sawle, to recount for their guest Cecil Valance the story of her meeting with Alfred Lord Tennyson on the ferry to the Isle of Wight. Cecil Valance has disclosed to the group that he and Daphne have devised a game where each member of the party will read a favourite poem of Tennyson’s aloud. There then follows a polyvocal exchange between as series of characters beginning with Freda Sawle’s statement to the group:
She said, ‘Well, then – after dinner..!’ And then, ‘You know we met him, of course..?’

‘Now this will interest you, Cecil,’ said Hubert

‘Met whom, my dear?’ said Elspeth

‘Oh, Lord Tennyson. Yes, indeed,’ she said warmly, laying hand for a minute on Cecil’s sleeve. (54)

On the one hand, as in *The Awkward Age* and Compton Burnett’s novels, the reader has to negotiate presented dialogue with minimal additional guidance. On the other hand, as in standard realist fiction, the choice of register or phrasing gives us clues to the characteristic of the speakers. Consider the statement, ‘Now this will interest you Cecil’ spoken by Hubert. Hubert, here, is arguably adopting the voice and turn of phrase of his missing father, that is to say, the voice of knowing authority, the voice of experience, despite the relative closeness in age to Valance, his intended interlocutor, and despite Hubert’s own lack of worldliness and experience when compared to Valance. While Valance is engaged in a sexual relationship with Hubert’s brother, Hubert himself is engaged in a correspondence with their neighbour, the homo-erotic undertones of which Hubert seems not to be fully aware. From this we might also infer a tension arising, the eldest son Hubert employing language which might more properly belong to his father, especially toward a person with social status, the aristocratic Valance. In this context, it is tempting to read Elspeth’s informal ‘my dear’ as further outlining the social and power relations that exist among the group of speakers. Freda Sawle then continues:
‘It was on our honeymoon,’ she repeated, to steady herself; she let her eyes rest speculatively on Harry, as that intriguing word glowed in the candlelight. She did think he’d heard the story before, but she wasn’t completely sure. ‘We went over to the Isle of Wight – Frank said he wanted to take me over the water!’ (55)

Here Hollinghurst moves the reader between Freda’s thoughts and her spoken words, providing the reader with privileged information about Freda’s, mildly intoxicated, state of mind. As a result of the narrator ‘going behind’ in this way, we learn not only what she said but also her worry that she may have told the story before. We also see another register being employed as Freda relays the desire stated by her late husband Frank that he wanted to take her ‘over the water’. This is a joke about the literal fulfillment of the promise but the disappointed expectation of a somewhat longer voyage, but the image is also symbolic of their crossing over into married life.

The conversation continues:

‘Very typical of him,’ said Hubert, with a fond shake of the head.

‘You know you go over on the ferry, from… Lynmouth, isn’t it?’

‘Lymington, I believe…’ said Harry

‘Why do I always get that wrong?’

‘You can get across from Portsmouth too, of course,’ said George; ‘but it’s a little further.’

‘Do let Mother tell the story,’ said Daphne, sounding frustrated equally with the story and the interruptions. (56)
In their study *Style in Fiction*, Geoffrey Leach and Michael Short outline what they describe as ‘features of normal non-fluency’ – these are the aspects of speech that are classed as non-fluent in that they fall short of an ‘ideal’ delivery, and ‘normal’ in that ‘habitually occur in speech’ (129). The first they term ‘hesitation pauses’ which are ‘filled pauses’ that are ‘plugged by stopgap noises such as *er* and *erm*’. The second are ‘False Starts’ according to Leech and Short: ‘These can take the form either of a needless repetition of words or of a reformulation of what has been said’ (129), with the result being an ‘ungrammatical sequence of words’. The final group are what they term ‘Syntactic anomalies’: these are ‘anomalous constructions which, while not entirely ungrammatical, would nevertheless be regarded as awkward and unacceptable in written composition’ (129). Hollinghurst makes use of hesitation pauses signified by the ellipses which appears in the passage above; however, the use of the ellipsis in Hollinghurst’s characters’ dialogue is arguably subject to multiple meanings. In the case of Freda’s utterance cited earlier, for example, it signifies a pause or a hesitation in her speech as she seeks to locate in her memory the port of departure for the Isle of Wight; however, in the statement of clarification from Harry which follows, the ellipsis arguably plays a different role: it could suggest the elapsing of time before Freda re-enters the conversation or it might be used to encourage the reader to interpret Harry as speaking the words more softly or perhaps abandoning or thinking better of making a longer and more complete statement on the matter. In not specifying which, Hollinghurst is both structuring the flow of the conversation and also creating in the reader a sense of not quite knowing what Harry’s statement was meant to mean exactly, much as they would if they were witnessing a conversation in real life rather than reading a written account of a fictional conversation. And as we see in the earlier quoted passage from the same
scene the ellipses are also used in conjunction with exclamation marks and question marks to place a subtly different set of emphases on the characters’ speech.

In her study *Ellipsis in English Literature: Signs of Omission*, Anne Toner reflects on the use of ellipsis in dialogue:

In contrast to written language’s propensity to high levels of preplanning and editing, speech is usually produced in a more provisional and contingent way. It is usually interactive and strongly context dependent, and it relies on prosodic or suprasegmental features. In other words, meaning is converted by elements other than word-choice and grammar, such as intonation, volume, tempo, gesture and pausing. Speech is also subject to what in one sense may be understood as lapses in performance. These include false starts, sudden changes of mind, errors and attempts at repair, hesitation, inaudibility and interruption. (4)

Toner offers a somewhat fuller account of the various functions of ellipsis than that found in the work of Leech and Short. Toner also draws attention to the areas where fictional dialogue, in order to convey a sense of verisimilitude and complexity, begins to rely upon direction and narratorial description. Toner suggests that ellipses ‘intimate rather than delineate the paralinguistic’ (5) and that ‘many attempts have been made to refine their accuracy’ (5). Hollinghurst’s use of the ellipsis in conjunction with exclamation marks and questions marks may be seen to represent one such attempt. Toner also draws our attention to the aspect of intimation, which is central to their use. Accordingly, despite his efforts to append his ellipsis with
exclamation or question marks to guide the reader, Hollinghurst’s ellipses will always require a degree of interpretation and imaginative invention from the reader.

Toner also draws our attention the idea of error in dialogue, something Hollinghurst exploits in the previously quoted passages. When Freda, Harry and the others are involved in a conversation about the sighting of Tennyson, it is the error in the placing of the port that lends the dialogue an air of verisimilitude. Through this error we also witness aspects of George’s character, his desire to salve the situation and his potential embarrassment for his mother. He re-assures her: ‘of course you can get across from there too’ when she mistakenly names Lynmouth not Lymington as the port of crossing. The ellipses which accompany Harry’s correction are perhaps the most intriguing. They are the hardest to define and require the greatest degree of interpretation by the reader. They might variously represent a pause in the conversation, a brief passage of time in which the conversation moves along before we re-enter it, or some slight hesitation on Harry’s part in sharing the information. They might even in some way subtly reflect the tone or volume with which Harry chooses to share the information with the group. As Toner notes, they invite interpretation and resist a definitive reading.

One aspect of Hollinghurst’s use of dialogue, as seen in the quoted extract, is the way in which he manipulates various aspects of natural dialogue – for instance, engineering error and subsequent hesitation in order to convey character – while also inviting interpretation on the part of the reader to decide for themselves exactly what the ellipsis represents. It is notable, for example, that he chooses not to gloss Harry’s statement with ‘Harry said softly’ or ‘Said Harry quietly,’ instead allowing the ellipsis to invite interpretation from the reader. This further deepens the sense by requiring the reader to decide the precise nuance of Harry’s tone as she or he might if
listening to a conversation in real life. Here he has clearly learned from the example of Compton Burnett.

II.  **Monologue and Interiority**

As Toner notes: ‘Every punctuation mark, however has the capacity to be a carrier of feeling. Feeling can be conveyed in the vocal instructions a punctuation mark transmits, in the semantic nuances it creates and in its potential for metaphoric transformations’ (12). Toner distinguishes between the types of punctuation and the effect they might have on ellipsis; arguing that ‘some marks are more intrinsically signs of feeling than others and an exclamation mark is more transparently a marker of passion than a full stop’ (12). She concludes from this that ‘Ellipsis marks are strongly associated with the affective’ (12). Toner develops her argument into a consideration of the role ellipses play in relation to the interiority of the characters, arguing that ‘From a sign of interruption, ellipsis marks evolve into tokens of passion, interiority and complexity’ (13). Toner locates as crucial to this ‘their absorption into a novel where they present difficulties in speech, but also obscurities in the characters’ thoughts, as well as irresolution in narrative explanation’ (13). This is the very irresolution we have already noted in Harry’s potentially multi-faceted interjection on the correct port for the ferry to the Isle of Wight.

The question of interiority moves us from the representation of dialogue to monologue and self-address. In *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction*47, Dorrit Cohn discusses what she terms ‘the special style that comes into being with the modern monologue’ arguing that ‘we must consider a

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number of distinctive features that differentiate monologue from dialogue generally’

(92). Cohn continues:

The most important of these is a frequently noted semantic pattern peculiar to
self-address: the free alternation of first and second person pronouns in
reference to the same subject. Collapsing the normal dichotomy of speech, in
which ‘you’ always refers to the person spoken to, ‘I’ to the person speaking.

(92)

Cohn argues that:

The effect of quoted monologues in third-person novels depends very largely
on the context in which they are lodged. In authorial narrative situations,
especially where they are accompanied by explicit quotation signals,
monologues tend to increase the distance that separates a narrator from his
character, to induce ironic remove by dramatizing figural fallacies. (76)

Cohn then qualifies this by adding:

In figural narrative situations monologues are most effective when special
devices are brought into play to insure the smooth blending of the narrating
and the figural voices: omission or discreet use of inquit signals, espousal of
the character’s vantage point on the surrounding scene. Omission of psycho-
narration, syntactic ambiguity, or coloration of the narrator’s language by a
character’s idiolect. (76)
Discussing the psychological implications of this, Cohn argues that:

Within the medium of third person narration, monologues take on the meaning of mimetic reproductions of figural language, with the narrator lending the quotation of his character’s silent thoughts the same authority he lends to the quotation of words they speak to others. (76)

We can observe a number of the characteristics Cohn outlines in presentation of the character of Margaret, the anorexic, who is preserving her body for Christ, in *The Quickening Maze*. Her monologue alone in the woods, as Cohn would have it, increases the distance that separates a narrator from his character. However, an extra level of complication is added to this monologue as Margaret believes her own internal monologue to contain messages sent directly from God:

She liked the pinch of absence, the hollow air, reminiscent of the real absence. She wanted to stay out there, to hang on her branch in the world until the cold had burned down to her bones. She could leave her whitened bones scattered on the snow and depart like light. Whitened bones. *A whited sepulchre*. The phrase came to her. Was it aimed at her? Is that why she’d thought of it? Habitually, she tested every bit of scripture that came to her for significance. (57)

In this passage, after the initial third-person introduction of the character, we see precisely the omission of inquit signals and the espousal of the character’s vantage
point that Cohn describes. However, as I have suggested, we also have the internal dialogism produced by the Biblical citations that are part of the character’s vantage point.

Cohn refers to the ‘character’s idiolect’. One particular case of that is when the character uses non-standard speech. Raymond Chapman, in *Forms of Speech in Victorian Fiction*, draws our attention to representations of non-standard speech in the novel. Chapman traces the influence of the 1870 Education Act on the implementation of standardized speech, i.e. Received Pronunciation popularized in British Public Schools of the time. Chapman argues that the 1870 Education Act was ‘responsible for an irruption of prescriptive teaching into classes where it had not penetrated before. The new standard passed from universities through training colleges to teachers who regarded it as part of their mission to secure ‘correct speech’ (15). As a result,

Double standards and a clash between school and home often developed, and for the first time widespread diglossia appeared in England. Even earlier in the century the notion of correctness was descending from above and causing concern among serious or upwardly mobile speakers of other dialects, a fact which novelists were quick to notice. (15)

The corollary of this for novelists was that they were now faced with the task of representing forms of speech which were now seen as non-standard:

the effect of such deep and frequently controversial concern about correct speech was a gift to novelists. In particular it enhanced the effect of deviant
spelling to indicate dialect of other non-standard speech, and it opened ever-widening possibilities for showing social relationships with the minimum of authorial comment through the speech of the characters. (17)

Hardy registers this in his presentation of the bi-dialectal Tess Durbeyfield in *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, who speaks one dialect at school and another at home. However, the use of deviant spelling to indicate dialect is at least as old as the regional novels of Maria Edgeworth and Sir Walter Scott.

The question of ‘character’s idiolect’, however, takes us in a different direction in the work of my chosen novelists. Its use apparent if the following scene from Boyd’s *An Ice Cream War* which takes place in The Domino Room of London’s Café Royal on 29 March, 1915, is analysed:

‘I can’t think where Enid is,’ Holland said. ‘Look,’ he pointed out a tall man with a bushy beard and a crumpled suit. ‘That’s the artist chappie who’s painting her.’ He shrugged. ‘Maybe she’ll turn up at Amory’s.’

‘This is an extraordinary place,’ Felix said.’ Who are these women?’

‘Oh, art students,’ Holland said nonchalantly. ‘Models, quelques putains’.

(216)

Holland’s idiolect is distinguished by his noun choices: ‘chappie’ freighted with a slight condescension but also the language of his particular social strata and class. This is enhanced by his casual use of French at the end of his description with its taxonomic movement from Art Students to Models to *Putains*. The list as Holland
articulates it reveals his view of the habitués of the Café Royal – the gender biases, the easy elision of art student with model with prostitute. His use of French, in this context, serves to heighten his sense of distance and disdain. There is also that ‘polite’ use of foreign languages for risqué material that children or servants should not understand in his recourse to French to describe the final category of women.

The dialogue in the novel seems to contain within it an awareness of the various slippages of language and, in particular, the role played by foreign languages in augmenting or obscuring meaning. Consider the following passage as Rutke is taking leave of Gabriel:

‘Don’t worry,’ Rutke shouted. Then he spoke some phrases too quickly for Gabriel to translate. ‘November,’ Rutke then said. ‘Wait until November. We have Das chinesische Geschäft. He asked Liesl for a translation. ‘What would you say? “The Chinese Exhibition”? Perhaps. “The China Show”? It’s curious. What is it?’ ‘I don’t know,’ Gabriel said. ‘I heard the men saying it in the ward.’ Liesl shrugged. They left it at that. Gabriel wondered if it was important.

(325)

As well as using an ambiguously German phrase with multiple possible meanings and, by extension, multiple resonances, the narration is also deliberately withholding aspects of the speech which were made ‘too quickly for Gabriel to translate’. Here, Boyd draws attention to the complexities of multilingual dialogue, but he also remains within the character’s vantage point. The dialogue is explicitly filtered through the linguistic limitations of the character.
By way of comparison, Oswald’s arrival at the home of the Allens’ in Adam Foulds’ *The Quickening Maze*, is an exchange worthy of consideration for the interplay of narratorial guidance and reported speech.

Eliza Allen opened the door to someone whose face was familiar but unplaceable. The face had evidently been out in the cold for some time, the skin grey and granular. The man blew a fog of warm breath around his hands. He smiled.

‘Do you not recognise me, Eliza?’

With the voice, the accent she did. ‘Of course I do. It’s Oswald. Come in, come in. I had no idea you were in the area. Matthew hadn’t mentioned it to me…’

‘Because he doesn’t know. I thought I’d surprise you.’

‘And you have. Come in. Do.’ (58)

The scene is set with judicious and sparing use of description which is ambiguously situated as narratorial or focalized through Eliza, furnishing simply the context of the exchange and the prominent physical characteristics of the visitor. The exchange begins with the question from Oswald ‘Do you not recognise me, Eliza?’ the articulation of the interlocutor’s name doing away with any need for further narratorial intervention. There is a then a brief narratorial intervention which further enriches our understanding: we are given a sense of Oswald and his ‘accent’, though the specifics are withheld. The ‘accent’, however, is perhaps suggested in the syntax, lexis and formality of Oswald’s initial question, ‘Do you not recognise me, Eliza?’ (rather than the more colloquial and direct ‘Don’t you recognise me, Eliza?’). This
form of dialect, and we might also infer accent, clearly identifies him as a member (or aspiring member) of the educated or upper classes.

Later on in the same chapter we see Oswald engaged in another conversation, this time his brother with Matthew Allen. Here Foulds opts for a more supple form of narratorial intervention. The conversation between the two men acts to narrate retrospectively Oswald’s journey from the station. To use Sarraute’s distinction about dialogue in Compton-Burnett, we might class this as a ‘sub-conversation’ designed to convey information but also to dramatise, through the focalised passage of narration which follows, Matthew Allen’s own intellectual and social anxieties. These are highlighted by Oswald referring to his brother as ‘Horatio’. The scene runs as follows:

Eliza returned with a tray of tea things just as her husband had launched himself into the room.

‘Oswald, I had no idea,’

‘I didn’t give you any idea,’ his brother smiled. ‘And I’m delighted to see you too.’

Matthew blended a smile and a frown to indicate fondly that the implication was foolish. ‘I’m pleased to see you, too, of course. Your journey was comfortable?’

‘Perfectly agreeable, at least so far as these things are. And I rounded it off with a pleasant walk from Woodford.’

‘You walked up? Carrying your bag? You could have hired a cab, you know. Mr Mason is known around the station to take people.’

‘Oh, no. Thrift, Horatio, thrift.’ (59)
Foulds reflects aspects of normal speech with the shortened, staccato sentences in which meaning is partially withheld though implicitly communicated, much as it is in normal conversation: ‘Oswald I had no idea’ and ‘Your journey was comfortable’. Another aspect of natural speech is heard in Matthew Allen’s response to his brother revealing that he walked up from Woodford. Matthew Allen replies, in echo of his brother, ‘You walked up’, again adding to the sense of realistic dialogue which Foulds is attempting to create. The archaic phrasing ‘known around the station’ again signals to the reader the period in which the scene is taking place but also subtly suggests Matthew Allen’s own social position and standing, what we might read as an implied superiority over Mr Mason as ‘to be known’ is after all implying an act for which someone might acquire a reputation, and Allen is placing himself in the class who might comment upon those who possess such a reputation and make themselves available for such work. The Shakespearean allusion which follows from Oswald again acts to place the brothers in a specific social class but also complicates the mood between the two, leading Matthew Allen to anxiously reflect:

Horatio that meant Hamlet, Oswald was reminding Matthew of the cultured company he kept in York, that not only in London was there literary conversation to be had. Typical of him to arrive stealthily like this, unannounced, and full of messages about himself, all his little flags flying.

(59)

Oswald being ‘full of messages about himself, all his little flags flying’ is focalized through Matthew, but it also suggests a further hypertextual level of authorial
reflection on the scene – Foulds presents Matthew Allen reflecting on his brother’s arrival, but the manner in which he reflects – and particularly the metaphors he uses – injects a layer of literary self-awareness into the scene.
CONCLUSION

It is perhaps too simplistic to argue that the work of this thesis extends from an accident of birth; however, being born in post-industrial Manchester in the early 1980s placed me in a generation that was given a unique, and perhaps uniquely poignant, sense of Manchester’s past. This was a city that had lost in excess of two hundred thousand manufacturing jobs (Taylor et al.) in the preceding decade and which had yet to achieve the economic reconstruction and cultural fluorescence which followed the IRA bomb in 1996. Regularly, at both primary and secondary school, we were taken on trips to nearby mills and country houses built on industrial wealth and it was at one of these, Quarry Bank Mill in Styal, Cheshire, that I was given an early experience of historical re-enactment in the form of the fairly prosaic, but to my child’s eye almost hallucinatory, image of a pair of women volunteers dressed in aprons and caps crossing the rain-slicked cobbles of the mill’s courtyard. I was given for the first time a palpable sense of the past existing alongside the present in its buildings, its spaces and its objects, but also in the manner in which it is remade and commemorated by those living now. It had a lasting impression.

Over the course of these visits my sense of both the power and energy of the city in its industrial pomp was reinforced, but I also became unavoidably aware of the savage realities and inequalities that underwrote industrial Manchester and its connectedness to the wider world. This was further embedded on visits with my father, an historian by training, who then lectured at a Trade Union College in Manchester, to various sites of historical interest around the city. So from very early on, mapping the past and inhabiting its spaces (both common-place locations and
sites of historical significance) was a source of pleasure and fascination, and so, by extension, inhabiting them over the course of a novel felt the natural outcome of this fascination.

Kate Mitchell in ‘History and Cultural Memory in Neo-Victorian Fiction: Victorian Afterimages’ examines the ways in which neo-Victorian fiction enacts and celebrates cultural memory, positioning novels as dynamic participants in the contemporary historical imaginary. Mitchell tracks the idea of ‘Victoriana’ from Ezra Pound’s pejorative use of the term, content as he claimed to be to leave the past where they had found it, to what Mitchell terms Pound’s ‘confident marginalisation’ (1) to the growing popularity over the decades that followed. As she rightly notes, ‘the literature and culture of the Victorian period have been courted, sought and summoned across many facets of contemporary culture,’ (1) and she shows how an interest in Victorian culture has spread across subgenres such as the detective fiction of Anne Perry and the science fiction of William Gibson and Bruce Sterling. Meanwhile, the Victorian era has been popular in a wide range of recent literary historical fiction from Kate Williams’s The Pleasures of Men (2012) through to Sarah Perry’s The Essex Serpent (2016).

As the title of my novel might suggest, my own path to the novel has its roots in material objects. In my case, these objects were a letter and a dress. The opening image of The Willow Pattern Bridge, the girl on fire on a staircase, comes from a letter written by my great-great grandfather who, as young man, was sent abroad by his parents, wool merchants in Huddersfield, in what was clearly a form of punishment for seriously misbehaving, first to Australia and then to the United States
of America. On the first part of the journey he witnessed a young woman’s dress catch light as she descended the stairs for supper at a sheep ranch. He had written to his mother to report the event. After my parents came across a copy of the letter and shared it with me, I lived with the image of the girl on fire for a number of years with both the image of the girl and the letter itself becoming objects of consciousness. During my time as Poet in Residence at the Wordsworth Trust in 2008, I first tried to begin writing the story but after several abortive attempts it became clear I would need to learn from scratch how to write a novel.

The detailed analysis of the three authors examined in this critical study went a long way toward equipping me with the tools needed to reconstruct versions of the past in my novel The Willow Pattern Bridge. I had selected Hollinghurst and Foulds because both had started out as poets, and I was interested to see how poetic techniques and writing practices might be transferred to fiction writing. This was also why I began with close attention to the representation of objects. The representation of objects was an obvious common ground between poetry and fiction, and I was interested to see how Martian techniques and, more generally, a poet’s conscious engagement with language could be used in fiction. I was also interested in exploring the use of narrative focalization in relation to objects as a more clearly novelistic technique. From objects I moved to space, and from space to speech, as essential components of fiction writing. Working with the novels of these three authors expanded my sense of what was possible in contemporary literary historical fiction as well as affording me a deeper understanding of the traditions and innovations in response to which the three were working.

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48 My great-great grandfather, like Charles, would later go to live briefly in Oregon before returning to England, as Charles did, without his wife and young child. Though here is where the similarities end.
For example, through my exploration of objects and focalization in the works of Hollinghurst, Foulds and Boyd, I began to understand how I might evoke the historical periods about which I wrote through reference to specific period objects, while at the same time conveying information about the interior lives of my characters. It became clear that the manner in which my characters evoked or thought about objects could communicate and deepen the reader’s sense of the characters interiority, of their desires and inner lives. In terms of the use of space in fiction, the work of de Certeau and Massey expanded and informed my sense of what the term, in their profoundest sense, might mean, but I also, in my reading of the work of Boyd in particular, how different spaces might be deployed across the novel and become more than simply settings for action. While my research into the uses of dialogue and speech in reconstructing the past enriched my sense of the challenges faced but also the opportunities granted through dialogue and the subtleties of emphasis available in the manipulation of syntax, grammar and punctuation.

I began writing *The Willow Pattern Bridge* on my return to Manchester in 2011 after a decade living away from the city. As a city it is a space in which the past is abundantly present, not simply in the architecture but in the dialect and conversation of the people (Brook-Chorlton). It is also a place in which the past is kept vibrantly alive in institutions such as The People’s History Museum and the Working Class Movement Library in neighbouring Salford. Part way through writing the novel, it was bought by Bloomsbury in the UK and W.W. Norton & Company in the USA. However, I was determined not to write a book to order, or one that simply adhered to the perceived conventions of the genre, but to continue to explore the range of which I believe the contemporary historical novel is capable. It was important to both produce a work I hoped was of literary merit but also to remain
ambitious about the range the work might achieve, the historical periods it could conceivably cover and the interconnected stories it could tell, as well as the stories it could tell about interconnectedness.

**Objects in *The Willow Pattern Bridge***

In *The Willow Pattern Bridge* the material objects of the age play a central role in the structure of the novel. The object alluded to in the title, the plate bearing the painted image of the willow pattern bridge, the Chinese Willow Pattern being a desirable, fashionable feature of the time, is gifted by Charles to Lottie while she is recovering in hospital and becomes a recurring element in the novel. We see its initial gifting, its observation by Lorenzo Quinn when he calls at the house in Mahloh, and its re-appearance again at the end of the novel when it is returned to a house in Manchester to the figure who may or may not be Wallace’s father. It is initially considered valuable by Charles who locates it in his father’s attic; next it is placed alongside other valueless objects in Lottie’s hospital room. When we see the object again it has been transported to America with the young couple and is commented upon by Lorenzo Quinn. At this moment in the novel the plate with the willow pattern bridge becomes the prompt for Quinn to tell the story of visiting the camp of the Chinese miner and the violence visited upon him and his family. The plate with the willow pattern bridge stimulates the retelling of the story and through so doing, reveals to the reader the nature of Quinn’s character and the threat he poses to the young family. The final time we meet the plate is when it is packed by Wallace to take with him to England and is finally returned to the man who we are given to suspect may be his father. It was important that the object was one upon which
multiple meanings could be placed over time. For Charles it was valuable; for Lottie unsightly and sentimental; for Wallace a relic and symbol of his lost mother. The meanings placed on the object changed over time and included the sinister resonances the object evoked for Quinn. It functioned both to propel the narrative and to allow insight into characters.

In late Victorian and early Edwardian times it was fashionable to decorate one’s home with all things ‘Oriental’. All manner of items culled from all parts of the Empire were deemed collectable. See, for example the John Soane Museum, Soane’s own house, which is packed with such ‘curiosities’. In any middle-class home could be found ‘Chinoiserie’, lacquering, painting or embroideries in the Chinese style, if not actually imported from China. Plates, or ‘plaques’ – plates which were hung on a wall by means of special hooks or hung from ‘picture rails’ – were common household features. The Willow Pattern plate was ubiquitous (Van Buskirk). My title (and my central object) refers to a typical Victorian object.49

In a more pervasive sense, the material culture of Manchester the 1890s sits at the heart of the first part of the novel as it is through the things of the time that I intended to conjure and create the city. In terms of research methodology, the analysis of the literature covered in this critical study was helpful, and some understanding of Victorian commodity culture, but I also discovered things such as auction catalogues were a valuable source from which to work.50 They provided a source of images but also contained within them linguistically rich descriptions of the objects themselves. In working through early drafts there was a tendency to over specify, to co-opt language in the description of simple things which, although

49 The history of engagement with China and the colonial politics involved were not part of my novel and, accordingly, have been excluded from consideration in this thesis for reasons of space and time.
perhaps interesting or beautiful, pulled against the flow of the narrative itself and therefore needed to be cut. An understanding of how Hollinghurst and Foulds used objects became invaluable for revisioning my own work. One result of this process of analysis and revision was the way the characters too were established and explored through their objects: Quinn’s knife, the apple bag Charles packs before leaving for Corvallis, the sally bag gifted to Lottie by a child at Pattison Kinley’s Indian school, the dented cornet carried by Barzée, all added to the creation of the characters and were designed to enrich the reader’s sense of each.

Furthermore at various points in the novel, I attempted to make judicious use of defamiliarisation as a narrative device, for instance, in the opening scene when Lottie is descending the staircase and sees the fans of the women in the room rise ‘like the wings of roosting birds’ or when Charles compares the badly healed harelip of the servant to a cat’s anus. Defamiliarisation is deployed in the scene in the drawing room where Charles feels his limbs to be ‘overly long, like pair of wooden spoons’ (53) and he fails to comprehend the passage he is attempting to read from his mother’s edition of Waverley. Waverley felt the correct book choice, in part because of Scott’s popularity in the nineteenth century, but also because of Scott’s prominence as a founder of the historical novel. This was my intertextual acknowledgement of his importance for the genre within which I was writing. The materiality of the book also takes on a symbolic significance when it is returned to Charles by Tabitha before his departure to America. The degraded nature of the badly repaired object was intended to convey the pathos characterising the relationship between Charles and his sister.

The second part of the novel provided several opportunities to put to use my research into focalisation. It brought a greater freedom to the narrative and allowed
the narratorial voice to temporarily inhabit characters who, until this point, had been marginal. The brief page-long scene focalised through Sonny’s perceptions of the mine was intended to add a broadness of viewpoint to the novel as well as affording the reader a chance to see Charles as perceived by a character outside of his immediate sphere. Similarly, the scene focalised through the perceptions of an infant Wallace as he observes Priddy and his men in the act of petitioning his father, further broadened the scope of the novel as well as introducing a character who would take centre stage in the final part of the novel.

Space in *The Willow Pattern Bridge*

*The Garden*

In the first part of the novel the garden at the house in Manchester becomes a space in which the nascent romance and sexual liaison between Charles and Lottie is first explored and seeded. The garden operates on a symbolic level informed by my research into the *locus amoenus*. The garden also acts to play into and confirm certain romantic fantasies Charles holds; it is a space in which the character of Lottie is misperceived. The garden is also used to present the reader with a distinguishable border which Lottie is invited to cross with Charles as they move from the well-maintained and regulated space of the garden in to the ‘wild garden’, which foreshadows their later movements. If we return to de Certeau’s distinction between ‘place’ and ‘space’, the ‘place’ provided by the garden sets up an opposition to the ‘space’ of the American west into which Charles and Lottie will move in an attempt to establish themselves and their own life.

The formal elements of the garden, the flowerbeds, the planting, the lawn, at Charles parents’ house in Manchester provided an ‘indication of stability’ (De Certeu
The complicated nature of reimagining Victorian Manchester has been a concern present in my work since my collection of poems, *In the Flesh* was published in 2010. The opening poem, ‘Manchester’, problematises the act of imaginatively recreating the Victorian city ‘Queen of the Cotton cities/ Nightly I piece you back into existence’. The ambition of *The Willow Pattern Bridge* was to offer an expanded response to the problem outlined in that poem, to contribute to the manner in which we re-create and memorialise the historical city in fiction. To this end, the idea of movement became key to attempting to realise this. As de Certeau observes in the *Walking the City*:

> It is as though the practices organizing a bustling city were characterized by their blindness; the networks of these moving intersecting writings composed a manifold story that has neither author nor spectator, shaped out of fragments of trajectories and alterations of spaces: in relation to representation, it remains daily and indefinitely other. (93)

De Certeau’s writing proved influential in approaching this problem of reconstructing an historical Manchester. The scene in the hansom *en route* to the infirmary was one of those ‘fragments of trajectories’. It became an opportunity to reconstruct the city as seen by Charles as he passes through it. Furthermore, it allowed, in parallel to this, the city to be reconstructed imaginatively by Charles as he imagines the ‘ragged pageant’ and all of the ‘labour in the city’s wards’. In the
scene in the hansom we have both the city as experience but also the city as an object of consciousness, as reconstructed imaginatively by Charles. These are two markedly different cities: the city Charles observes from the window of the hansom shows the hardships and realities of urban living during the period, and the city he creates in his imagination, the city he conjures in the litany of tradesmen and their work, speaks to an idealised city. At the same time, this scene, by extension, communicates his own anxieties about his place within the city. This goes some way to foreshadowing the difficulties he encounters during his time at the orchards in Mahloh. The tensions between these two cities, the city as observed in narration focalised through Charles and the city of his consciousness, signal for the reader the tensions which exist within his character.

*The Frontier*

For Charles and Lottie, the journey to Mahloh represents a passing through a space, a negotiation of the physical terrain. When it came to narrating this journey I thought it was important to begin from a position of relative stability. Accordingly, we have the scene of Lottie by the river from which the journey from Florida is recounted. I also thought it was important to have Charles elect to join the wagon train. The decision again showing a precedent established in his frustration on Mayhew’s estates in Florida. On one of my research trips to the Oregon Historical Society, I became aware that, although by the 1890s the use of the route was decreasing, it was still in use.

I thought it was psychologically important to show Charles engaging in unnecessarily risky behaviour as a prelude to the events which would occur in Mahloh. My research initially identified a number of towns along the Willamette
Valley which might have been the setting for Charles and Lottie’s stay in Oregon. However, in the end, I opted to create the fictional Mahloh. It was important for this to be a place whose identity was unformed. Mahloh presents a stark contrast with Manchester in terms of scale, size and location, and in terms of its geography and topography. However, there were also echoes and resonances between the two places, the fictitious version of Manchester and the completely fictional Mahloh. Both were locations where identity was unstable, the newly rich and the newly arrived. Charles’ anxiety about his clothing in the garden scene with Lottie in Manchester, or the Condor Hotel’s anodyne efforts to construct a civilised meal, both suggest these places as crucibles of this instability. My field research also underscored for me the impact industrialisation was having on Oregon. I hoped to dramatize this in Charles’s trip to Corvallis. Albeit on a smaller scale, places such as Corvallis were in the grip of a form of industrialization: the same processes that had built industrial Manchester were discoverable thousands of miles away. As such, Corvallis and Manchester formed counterpoints in the novel’s mapping of the reach of the industrialised world, an arc reaching from the birthplace to the sophisticated limit. Even in the relative wilderness of Oregon these processes were already embedded and evolving.

In addition to this, I wanted in a smaller, more localised way, to dramatise Lottie’s own engagement with space, to relay the tensions between the boundaries of the domestic space which she inhabited and the wider, wilderness beyond. Her own small scale wanderings into the wood beyond their homestead in many senses represents a deeper form of bravery than Charles’s misguided wanderings.
Speech in *The Willow Pattern Bridge*

When it came to creating a sense of historical verisimilitude in *The Willow Pattern Bridge* there were several issues to analyze in regard to the use of dialogue. To begin with there were specific dialogue types to establish and within each group several subtypes: the affluent middle-class family in Manchester; the rural, poor but educated voice of Lottie; the local accents of the servants; the language constructions of Charles’s younger sisters; the language of his friends. Consider, for example, the conversation between Charles and his sister Tabitha, where I was seeking to create an authentic set of tensions between the two characters in the context of unspoken events:

He watched it for a moment, lengthening by an inch or two, then receding again.

‘Hallo Tabitha’

‘Hallo Frater’ Tabitha said stepping into the space her shadow occupied, hands behind her back. She must have been outside as there was snow in her hair, a single flake held and slowly melting on the upper lashes of her right eye.

‘Mama tells me you are going away’

‘Yes, for a little while,’

‘She said it wouldn’t do to mention it to anyone.’

As Tabitha breathed there was a soft whistling around her nostrils.

‘It’s not our fault is it?’

‘Why, not at all,’
‘Oh good,’

Tabitha gave the wide, closed-lipped smile of the habitually lauded. Tilting her head a little as if to cushion the inferred compliment as she received it.

(91)

Charles attempts to downplay the significance of their forthcoming departure, but the scene is designed to demonstrate a tenderness between the siblings. The two characters talk around the subject without addressing it directly or in any detail. The scene begins with Tabitha’s intellectual precociousness and closes with her artlessly revealing her lack of understanding and the dominance of their mother in the lives of both siblings. A similar set of problems presented themselves in Chapter 14, in seeking to create a believable conversation between Tabitha and their sister Eloise. The chapter begins with the exchange between the two sisters:

‘And you are certain it will reach him?’
‘Dolly says so’
‘How does Dolly know?’
‘Oh Tab. She just knows’
‘What if she gives it to Mama?’ (109)

There is information withheld from the reader at this point. It is a short chapter and one which acts a pivot between phases of action in the novel. After the initial exchange there follows a section of artless narration in which Eloise recounts a conversation with the cook:
‘I shouldn’t think so,’ Eloise said enjoying for once being the better-informed sister.

‘When the post arrived I asked if there was any news from our brother and Dolly said no and then I said we should like to write him a letter and asked if she knew where we could reach him and Dolly said of course we do, Cook and I are in regular contact, your brother writes near daily, give the letter to us and we shall get it to him in no time at all, shan’t we Cook? And Cook, who was folding napkins at the table, nodded. And then Dolly said mind it shall cost you I’m afraid, then she looked over at Cook and Cook gave a sort of smile and Dolly said a shilling and then Cook sort of pinched her lips and looked a little crossly as though Dolly were being unkind and said no, no, no, an ha’penny. And Dolly said Yes, I mean an ha’penny. Then before I could say anything Mama walked in carrying that horrid new dog, fur on its belly all wet, little pink feet scratching away and asked what on earth I was doing in the kitchen. And when I turned around Dolly had vanished and Cook was on her way to the cold store. That’s when I came up here to the nursery to find you’ (109)

The authorial intention behind this was to place the reader in a position of privilege – they know more than the girls whose conversation they are reading. There is also an element of narrative economy at play, seeking to convey an earlier scene in the context of the current one and in parallel show two sets of characters, the Cook and Dolly and two sisters in their respective private domains. Dialogue here provided an opportunity to do that in this scene-within-a-scene. If the action of either scene were narrated in the simple past it would have lost some of its narrative energy.
In contrast to the intimacy and artlessness of the sisters’ conversations, I had aimed at a collision of worlds and languages in the conversation, which opens the preceding chapter.

‘And I’m told by my husband that work is the purpose of your journey?’
‘Yes, I intend to take up a position in the employ of a cousin’
‘And what, may I enquire, is his trade?’
‘He is in fruit’
‘Why, that makes it sound rather like the man himself is flowering’
The dining room rose sharply, hung suspended for a moment then righted itself to the sound of crockery colliding and the muttering of blue suited stewards. (93)

The chapter places the reader between two sets of opposing ideas as Mrs Davenport seeks to torment Charles and Lottie. Working in the Portico Library in Manchester, I came across the 1872 edition of *Picturesque America* (Bryant) with illustrations by R. Swain Gifford, which I used as the basis for the conversation between the characters on the boat over to America. Here I was attempting to use dialogue to a different end. Mrs Davenport intuitions the reason for their leaving for America and in the conversation that follows attempts to manoeuvre Charles into revealing it, while her husband and Mr Hunicutt look on unaware of the game that is being played.

Historical material provided the basis for other pieces of dialogue. In Mayhew’s story of travelling with Captain Trench Townsend, for example, I worked Mayhew’s character into the story as told by Trench Townsend in *Wild Life in Florida with A Visit to Cuba*. This invention of a fictional character and his insertion
into a published narrative aimed for a double effect – to enrich the scene in which Charles comes to Mayhew and to create an opportunity to give the reader insight into Mayhew’s back story which I felt was perhaps conspicuous by its absences up until this point. Further research into the life of the books dedicatee Edmund A. Mansfield Esq., lent the imaginative impetus to create the story of the Cuban bloodhounds. Mayhew’s dialogue with Charles and his reminiscence aimed both to enrich the reader’s sense of Mayhew by tying him explicitly to historical events but also to dramatize his rivalries with other local fruit growers.

Elsewhere, in Lottie’s conversation with Martha Anderson at the dance, we see more dialogue derived from a found source. When seated beside Lottie, Martha asks ‘Let me see what I can recall from my Sherwood’(118). This is a reference to Mary Elizabeth Wilson Sherwood’s popular book on etiquette, *Manners and Social Usages*, in which Chapter LVIII deals explicitly with ‘How to Treat English People’. Rather than simply import the descriptions, I thought it was more effective to have the ideas of the book relayed by Martha Anderson through dialogue, the intention being to lend an element of playfulness and quickly established intimacy between the two women at the dance, while also questioning the pronouncements of any such books when held up to the reality of the situation.

This bookish connection is extended in the book Miss Anderson’s father was said to have co-authored, a textbook on hydraulic cements. Again the historical text fuels the dialogue in an attempt to bolster and embed a sense of historical verisimilitude while also bringing an element of play, an intertextuality, to the construction of the past in the novel.

Hollinghurst, Boyd and Foulds have all written historical figures into their novels or placed their characters alongside figures of historical note or importance.
In interweaving the lives of many of the minor characters in *The Willow Pattern Bridge* with people whom history is close to forgetting, I aimed to establish a form of engagement with the past that built upon the techniques I had observed in Hollinghurst, Boyd and Foulds. I attempted, within the arc of a continent and decade-spanning narrative, to embed a series of smaller stories or micro-narratives: Malachai Priddy’s ill-fated cousin, Mayhew’s travelling companions, Miss Martha Anderson’s father. These are characters not at the centre of history but at the sidelines. Nevertheless, they are characters who work to sustain and underwrite the novel, to add to it a fullness and anchor it to the past. *The Willow Pattern Bridge* represents the culmination of the research project and is itself one of the contributions to knowledge this thesis offers.
Appendix
Caddo, Oklahoma 1934
He heard her voice again last night, calling to him from her sick bed in Eureka. She lay on her side shrunken in her bedclothes. Her face was turned away to the wall where a strip of paper - faded songbirds among roses and wisteria - was lifting from the plaster. Her hair was damp and clung to her skull and the nape of her neck. At first he couldn’t make out her words, just the airy sound of her tongue at her palate and what he thought was his name somewhere within it. When he moved closer there was a smell like nail varnish or the solvent you might use to clean the needle valves on a carburettor. He laid his hand on her shoulder and rolled her body back toward him. Her skin was drawn tight around her face, glossy, jaundiced, giving her an Asiatic cast. He saw that part of her jaw was gone and that a jutting spar of bone remained, the skin grown back badly over it.

When he snapped awake, gasping for air, heart hammering in his chest, his nightshirt soaked at the armpits and all along the hollow of his spine, dawn was beginning to show at his window. He pulled himself out of bed and stood looking down through the net curtain onto the empty main street. It was a week after the Corn Carnival. The parade of Buicks, V-8s, and Plymouths all dressed up in feathers and corn-stalks, flower-heads wired to the welded metal arches above the automobiles as men in starched shirts and patriotic ties drove their families through town, daughters and wives in summer dresses of sheer cotton and white lace like the virgins or brides that they once had been, following the procession of floats and papier-mâché animals, boxy approximations of elephants and buffalos, giraffes painted in nursery blues and yellows, the colours of the Kindergarten. Younger
children cross-legged in two-wheeled trailers hooked to the tow-bars of tractors, their fathers or older brothers sitting up in the cabs above the massive, high-traction, agricultural wheels, waving to the crowd that lined the main street. He stood there a long time looking down onto the empty street, a faint breeze blowing dirt into the track marks that grew clearer with the coming of the light.

The dream was still with Wallace this morning as he looked up at the sun-bleached bunting strung across the storefronts on Main Street. From the sidewalk outside the Haskell Store, the town clock was visible against the vast blue sky. It showed nine. He was already late for church but stood for a moment taking in the stillness of the morning, the slap of the bunting as it snapped at the dusty windows of the stores in the town just short of the Atoka County border where on a quiet day you could hear the Blue River in the distance.

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The preacher was up from Celina. He read from Romans 12:31 and talked with eloquence on the rival powers of good and evil. A heavy-set man, with a high, square forehead and smooth, moist, very red lips: the mouth of the woman in the Palmolive soap advertisement, Wallace thought, as he watched him deliver the sermon. His complexion was almost feminine, as if powdered, the white roots showed through a half inch in the black of his glossily coiffured hair. A loose sack of smooth and useless skin hung under his neat chin. As he talked the preacher’s eye twitched and a bead of sweat formed on his brow, rolling into the corner of his eye. He pawed at it with the edge of a cotton handkerchief, pausing to emphasise how callousness and indifference to the best things could so easily grow in the hearts of men. When the sermon was over Wallace hoped to introduce himself. But the preacher was speaking with Rita Pheiffer whose father owned a fish hatchery south toward Durant. And
with her sister, Bessie Weir, who has taken to a folding wheelchair - the seat and back of sun-bleached olive-green army-issue canvas- with some unspecified malady since her husband’s death a year ago. Although he would have liked to, Wallace couldn’t think of a way to introduce himself into their conversation. The preacher was growing animated and the women were laughing now. Wallace saw the preacher being ushered towards a black Gardner Brougham, the headlamp casings polished bright as a dentist’s mirror. ‘We are not his only stop today.’ Rita Pheiffer said waving at the preacher’s Brougham as it pulled away from the church. ‘He has two more congregations to visit before the morning is out. But we were his first’ Rita Pheiffer added, with a note of pride and a righteous dip of her chin as she kicked up the footbrake on the wheel-chair and heaved her sister over the lip of the stone step, back into the church.

As he watched the preacher pull away, Wallace thought of his own automobile, the Chevrolet Open Tourer bought four years ago when it was going for scrap. The original owner, a college freshman in a $6 boater and an ivory linen suit, wrote it off within a week of taking delivery. Wallace restored the Tourer over time: a thoroughbred up there with the Lagonda, the Franklin and the Buick Coupe, way too much motor for a mechanic from Caddo. Wallace only came by it as the machine was so badly damaged the boy had thought it beyond repair. Looking at the state of the vehicle it was a miracle the boy had walked away alive. He had come off the road at speed and smashed headlong into a redbud tree, the hot pink blossom covering the crumpled hood. Wallace let him use the telephone at the filling station to call his father back in Mesquite and break the news. He could smell liquor on the boy’s breath. The boy passed the receiver to Wallace who gave an honest appraisal of the state of the vehicle. He had given him a fair price, considering the work it would
need. A decade’s savings gone in a single afternoon, and the sweet, dizzying feeling of possessing the crippled automobile he would repair with every free hour he had over the next four years. Wallace remembered the boy’s face as he drove him to the bus station. The vague, uncomprehending smile as he clutched the envelope of cash against his stomach, like a hot compress against a cramp, wondering how he had managed to total the Tourer and yet leave with a good part of its value in cash. After the sermon this morning Wallace had it in his diary to check the fluid levels and the sub-systems, hauling off the tarpaulin in the airless lock-up where he kept her a few blocks from the Haskell Store. Perhaps he would run her to the sulphur springs at Maytubby or out across the flat land to Simmons Lake. He thought of the engine, the pitch moving from that faint whine down into the low soft rumble, the shaking of the seat as it started up. It pleased him. There was a huge tear unrepaired in the canvas roof and the door panels, which he had to replace at some cost, and there were fender dents, and other holes in the bodywork. The leather upholstery was ruined in the crash, an empty grain sack from the Haskell Store fastened with a belt over the driver’s seat. The trim needed work and the chrome in places was beginning to rust. It was only the size and the sound of the engine that would give any sense this vehicle was a thoroughbred.

Wallace watched Rita Phieffer wheeling her sister out of the sunlight. Rita had brushed her sister’s hair to the opposite side this week and clipped it back above her forehead making her seem somehow girlish but also its opposite. There were two smudged dots of rouge on her cheeks, her face below them slack and expressionless. Wallace nodded to the sisters then set off on foot back to Caddo. About half a mile from the church, he noticed the preacher’s car stopped at the roadside a few yards from a windmill water pump, the black blades turning slowly as water pulled up
from earth was dumped noisily into a feed trough. Two wheels of the preacher’s Brougham were sunk over the margin of the road as if he had been forced to swerve and had come to a stop a yard or so before a wire fence. Wallace had hit an armadillo on the same stretch last year. The armadillo curled into a tight ball, sending the Tourer lurching onto its axle and he had to fight to regain control and not be thrown off the road. When he passed the creature on his return he saw its pink-clawed feet splayed on the road, patches of grapefruit-coloured flesh showing through where its armour had been broken open, a pair of turkey buzzards tearing at it with their beaks. He sounded his horn hoping to afford the poor dead creature some dignity but the birds continued at the carcass.

Inside the Brougham Wallace saw the preacher’s head was bowed. A wooden crucifix hung on a metal chain from the rear view mirror mount. Wallace wondered if the man who had spoken so movingly to their little congregation was injured or in need of help. Perhaps the motor had overheated, perhaps the elegant black Brougham had blown a gasket. He heard of it happening with the latest off the line, though this was the first he had seen up close. As he approached Wallace saw the preacher glance at him in the wing mirror. When he was a few yards away Wallace raised his hand, palm open in greeting, in acknowledgment of their earlier proximity, hoping the preacher might recognize him from the congregation. The Brougham pulled away before Wallace was close enough to speak. He watched it free itself effortlessly from the ditch and glide off as if on rails, a large trunk with a gilt monogram, secured by thick leather straps to the back.

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When Wallace arrived back at his rooms above the Haskell Store he went to the bathroom to freshen up. Tiny black hairs, like iron filings, covered the curved bowl
of the pedestal sink. Wallace placed his hands on the sink’s shoulders and felt their clammy heat passing into the porcelain. His razor lay open, shaving foam dried grey along the uncased blade. Wallace splashed some water from the faucet onto his face, then walked back toward the kitchenette, humming the first bars of Shuffle Off to Buffalo. He heard it played last night on his Atwater Kent. But the way Wallace hummed it now, he realised, all the jaunt and pomp was gone out of it, the melody was tired and languid, hardly the song he heard at all. He tried it again but the notes came out flat and even further from the melody he remembered. In the kitchenette a pyramid of crockery stood submerged in a greasy lake of dishwater. Wallace looked at the cups and plates, wondering what the preacher might make of them, feeling somehow vaguely ashamed. The mesh on the food safe had come away, sprung from its dull wooden frame, Wallace wondered if the Haskells might have something he could repair it with. Laid out on the table was the Atwater Kent, the 206, the tombstone radio he bought mail order last month, the back taken off exposing its valves and bulbs: pentode, rectifier, the ac-powered super-heterodyne chassis. ‘Assembled with the utmost care and precision’ the brochure told him. The mighty Atwater Kent that could pick up police, amateur or airplane signals, that could give a man unfettered access to whole worlds, whole lives and universes opened up with the turn of the dial. One of the valves had blown last night as he was listening to George Burns and Gracie Allen on the White Owl Programme, the announcer’s voice suddenly dropping an octave, all blurred and bassy as if broadcasting from underwater.

Wallace was at the sink, up to his wrists in the dishwater, trying to work his thumbnail between the plug and the drain, when he heard Ma Haskell knocking at the door downstairs. He wiped his hands on the waffle-weave dishrag and made his
way down the narrow stairs that linked his rooms to the back of the Haskell store. It was not like Ma Haskell to call on a Sunday.

‘A letter, Wallace, for you,’ Ma Haskell said as he opened the door. LaRuth Haskell four feet eleven in her lace-trimmed blouse and pinafore, dust at the hemline of her tea black ankle-length skirt, her scrawny arms holding the tray toward him, sagging folds of loose skin visible below the shoulder where she cut the sleeves away against the excess heat of the small store in the summer months. Her voice was husky and lacked its usual animation. She seemed tired and distracted. Inconvenienced, perhaps, by having to bring him the letter. As it was a Sunday Wallace wondered how long the note has been in her possession. He did not ask but nodded and thanked LaRuth.

‘Your sunflowers are persisting,’ he said, ‘despite this dry weather.’

He gestured with the unopened letter toward the back of the store where four large sunflowers were trained against the wall. Their big heads bowed, their petals browning at their edges like burned cigarette papers. The thick string that tied them back had begun to fray.

‘We will see,’ Ma Haskell said and shading her eyes with both hands looked to the sky.

Wallace watched Ma Haskell make her way back inside. She bent by the sunflowers to rip a sprig of chick-weed from the bed then tossed it away weakly. Wallace watched the weed roll back in the breeze towards the sunflowers. He took the letter upstairs. He opened the sash onto the main street and sat down at the table by the kitchenette, pushing the Atwater Kent with its blown valve and open back to one side, over towards the uncleared breakfast plates. The postmarks showed the letter to have been redirected several times. The address scrawled over in blue crayon
with notes from the postal service Wallace couldn’t decipher. Wallace heard the voices of children in the hot air outside the Haskell Store, a skipping rhyme. They were clapping as they sang: *A-tisket a-tasket a green and yellow basket I sent a letter to my love And on the way I dropped it, I dropped it, I dropped it, Yes, On the way I dropped it. A little boy picked it up And put it in his pocket.* The voices faded as they moved away from the store. The main street fell quiet for a moment then from the distance came the sound of a tractor.

Wallace was often called out to look over these decrepit machines, farmers across the county too proud or poor now to replace them. These last few years he had gained something of a reputation. Lige Edelstam, who employed him at the Marathon Gas Station and Garage called him ‘a revivalist of working machines’. Hart-Parr’s, John Dere’s, Harvesters, the occasional Case or Rumley in need of a new magneto. The farmers would wave their wives away inside when Wallace pulled up in the Model A pick-up Lige loaned him (the same pick up he had driven out in with the boy to inspect the wreck wrapped around a tree the day the Tourer came into this life) pale hens in the yards scattering as he walked towards some barn or tumble-down outbuilding where the pile of rust and perished rubber lay for him to work his transforming magic. He closed his eyes and listened to the sound of the tractor. Some in town still ran the same steam-powered machines with their bucket seats, Wallace had seen them riding and prosperous upon when he first arrived in Caddo. But the engine passing along the main street sounded newer.

He could see from where he sat the corrugated iron canopy which told him that this was Harry Louks or maybe Harry Beatty’s machine, of which, Wallace remembered, Harry Louks owned a one tenth share. Though why either man might be driving it through town on a Sunday was a mystery to him. He scanned the
envelope quickly, absentmindedly, still listening for the tractor, trying to recognize the sound of the engine and the owner. He took a knife from where it lay on the table beside a butter pat, a knife that had somehow found its way into his possession from the Blue Bird Inn, Nova Scotia. The horn handle was cracked, Wallace pushed the rounded blade under the envelope’s flap and gave a little twist of his wrist. It gave easily and Wallace took the letter from it. It was exceedingly light, like an onion skin from the bottom of one of the wooden crates the Haskells set outside their store. There was writing both sides, a tiny black compact hand in good ink. The first line read simply: ‘I am writing with regard to your father.’
Wallace knew then there had been an error. That the letter on the table in front of him this Sunday morning, at the end of its journey through the sorting offices and sprawling postal depots of Oklahoma City and its environs, had been deposited with the wrong W. Wright. He was not one for letters, not given to sending or receiving mail, save a year ago some correspondence with the State. Agents at the Oklahoma Tax Commission identified him as Willard Wright, an unmarried smallholder from Overbrook whose last known residence was Caddo. This other Mr Wright owed back taxes of $197 and 38 cents the collection of which, the letter told Wallace, the State was willing to enforce by law. Most mail was redirected to the Garage. In fact so rare an occurrence was it that in the past when mail came his way Ma Haskell always brought it to him, rapping the bony bird’s-claw of her fist at the wooden partition door that divided his quarters from the store below. The mail face down on a small silver tray with a gadrooned rim and clawed feet that once belonged to an aunt of hers in service back east. Only once in all the time Wallace had lived above the Haskell store had LaRuth come into his rooms unannounced.

Wallace had been preparing for his day at the Marathon Garage. He remembered in the moments before being idly aware, in the way of men who live alone, of the sulphurous, metallic stench edged with a hay-sweet odour of his morning movement filling the room from the open bathroom door as he pulled on his clothes. She found him with shirt-tails untucked, braces hanging in slack loops by his sides, trousers at his knees Ma Haskell seemed unfazed as if accustomed to seeing Wallace in such
disarray or perhaps, he reflected later, too shocked to register it. She had come to tell him Pa Haskell had been taken with a seizure while preparing to open the store.

It was the first of many which saw Pa Haskell diminish over a span of months. First came the loss of the use in his right hand and then all the movement in his right leg, which he dragged now. The more sensitive learned to ignore or look beyond it if he passed them on the main street. Acting as if the sick man was entirely well, as if by make-believe they might make it so. After his second seizure Wallace was called into the shop to find him lying foetal behind the counter, thin legs twitching, dabs of froth at the corners of his mouth, the gap in his eyelids showing the flickering veined whites of his eyeballs, fingers twisted into claws, palms hinged backwards at the wrists. La Ruth had called for a doctor and Wallace sat there with Pa Haskell on the floor of the store for an hour before he arrived.

Later he recalled seeing Pa Haskell one morning placing the useless index finger of his right hand on the chrome-edged keys of the National cash register, then roughly taking the same hand and resting it on the lever before he hammered down with his good fist with all the force he could muster, as if to school the fingers of his errant hand in their previous use, the buff-coloured $1 sign flashing up to his eye-line. In striking the liver-spotted skin of his useless hand with such force a roll of check-paper was thrown from the register and rolled out like a streamer along the store’s dark wood floor, towards the bags of grain and baskets of dried goods out front. Wallace was passing the store early having been asked by Lige to man the pumps that day which meant listening for the sound of the bell when an automobile rolled over a chord in the road to alert him. Wallace had not wanted to linger at the vision of the old man he could just make out behind the sun glare at the window. But something in the rise and fall of his shoulders, that hunched, jerking rhythm, caused
Wallace to pause. Pa Haskell stood there in his visor and starched white apron, shirt-sleeves rolled above his elbows, sobbing alone in his empty store in the hour before opening. Returning that evening Wallace called in for a tin of canned salmon and some Saltine crackers and observed the fingers on Pa Haskell’s useless hand were bruised and torn ragged, all bloody at their nail beds. The Haskell’s had lost their son, LeRoy, at a place called Cantigny on the first day of the Third Battle of the Aisne. There were some in town who linked the old man’s seizures to that loss all those years ago.

Wallace had been fairly new to town at the time of LeRoy’s death, not yet living above the Haskell store, but he recognized that the man who had extended a guarded welcome to him when he first set foot in his store had surrendered something of himself when the boy from the Western Union came with the telegram from the commander of the Kansas 353rd Infantry. How LeRoy Haskell came to be serving at Aisne was a matter of debate. His regiment, it was thought, was stationed two hundred miles east further along the line. What hope this constituted gave Ma Haskell - she was Ma to everyone and LaRuth only to a few favoured customers - comfort, believing still there was a chance her son might return, unharmed, subject of some grave error in the great machine of military efficiency.

Wallace often sensed Ma Haskell watching him when he called down for a pound of Ferndell best grade or a pack of Players No Name or simply dropped in for a little human contact after a slow day at the garage. He would catch her glancing from her ledger at the counter, seeing, he knew, something of her lost son in him, but having to recalibrate her fantasy as the years passed – the two of them, LeRoy and Wallace, so close in age– adjusting the vision that would one day walk back into her store; Wallace standing there as evidence that her boy would be older now, thicker-framed,
the first strands of silver at his temples, more careworn after all these years away. The traces of that boy, who Wallace had only ever seen in the photograph she kept in a silver plated frame on the countertop, large doughy features, smiling under a peaked cap, face half-whited out where the sun was hitting it, collar up, something like a smile playing across on his lips, a good part of his life expired in all that time he was gone.

Years ago, just after the Haskell’s got the news about LeRoy. Wallace had been sweet on a girl called Molly Cobb. She had been to a few dances in Durant with LeRoy but he had called things off before he left for Europe. Wallace had tried to fix his feelings for Molly on paper. Molly was the eldest of six. Her brother Silas, had been thrown from a horse she had saddled. He had been found a mile from their farm. His body torn and lacerated, his foot trapped in the metal stirrup. The horse must have dragged him a good part of that mile before it stopped. When the party of men sent out from his father’s farm, where Wallace had been working as a day labourer, found him, following the trail of bright blood like a lit fuse through the scrub, they had thought Silas dead until Wallace noticed the slightest rise and fall of the boy’s narrow chest. The horse came to a halt by a cotton wood, saddle rolled over around its belly. Stock still in the calm where the long shadow from the trees fell out across the grass. The theory that went around was that a rattlesnake must have spooked the mare just out of sight of the farm, The snake must have caused the horse to rear up and throw the boy from its back before dragging him that long mile through the dirt to where Silas lay when they found him.

After Silas had been thrown from the horse Molly had taken him everywhere with her. The cuts healed but the fall had done something to his insides, what the doctors called adhesions, knotted and tangled and the doctors could not say whether it was
year or ten he had left. He carried a crutch made from rosewood and brass. Wallace remembered seeing him once as he passed the Cobb Farm after a day pea-picking nearby, Silas shirtless leaning on a feed trough by the boundary fence, Molly dabbing at the sores and pustules that formed on his shoulder. The stained cotton swabs tossed into a kidney dish at her feet. Later that summer when Wallace was again hired to labour on the Cobb farm he remembered Molly coming across the field to bring the pickers lemonade in a tin jug. Silas at her side, silent as he often was, his huge eyes like those of a someone in old age who had seen all of life they wished and was done with it.

That summer Wallace employed the services of a typist in town, Miss Rogers, fearing his own untrained hand might not best present the man he was, the man he so wanted to be for Molly. Miss Rogers taught at the Sunday school. She charged Wallace a dollar upfront and he stood waiting in her small hot room, light filtering though the curtains, with their heavy floral pattern, closed against the sun, a big manduca moth up by the pelmet, its rigid wings pulsing tensely as Miss Rogers typed the words he had written to Molly. Wallace watched Miss Rogers’ lips twitching as she read the words silently to herself, adjusting the notes on the desk before her. Only once holding it up to the light, the better to discern what he had written. He considered it a kindness she did not ask what was written and looked in her professionalism to record without fuss what was before her. Her machine chiming when the end of each line was reached and she swung the platen back across the paper table of the Salter Standard No.7. Wallace did not send the letter. He walked the five miles out to Molly’s father’s house from the dormitory of the farm where he was labouring and stood frozen by the painted mailbox where the path to their door began, the typed letter in his hand.
Bluegrass and bull nettles clung to the wooden pole on which the metal mailbox was fixed. A breeze lifted the dirt in red ribbons from the road that led back to town. Not one trap or buggy or single person passed in all that time. It would have been nothing to post the letter. Wallace did not know how life might have turned out had he done so. Eventually he was questioned by a neighbour returning from town as to the purpose of his standing there for so long before the path to the Cobb Farm. ‘Why have you been standing so long at the mailbox boy?’ the neighbour said. Wallace made no answer. Molly married an optometrist called Tiny Colman, twenty years her senior and moved down to Fort Worth not long after, taking Silas with her. Silas was found hanging by the neck in the optometrist’s cold store on his eighteenth birthday. There was no note, which led some to believe it had been some kind of accident. Wallace liked to imagine the boy found some peace at last and despite what others said he believed he understood Silas’ reasons for leaving this world.

What brought Wallace to Caddo was still hard for him to pin down. There had been a string of other bigger, brighter, louder towns each with entertainments of their own and more chance of work: Evansville; St Louis; Springfield; Tulsa; strung in a bowed line between Caddo and the reform school at Louisville. Places he passed through which each in turn might have made claim on his young and unformed soul. Cities of women and music and liquor. Palaces erected to vice where he tried his luck, with only half a heart and with no real conviction. Thinking at first these places a way to measure the breadth of his new freedom, to understand better its true nature or its limits. Following rumours of work day-labouring brought him eventually to Caddo. Wallace remembered he liked the church, the flat, neatly cut stone exterior told him they had recently built, one of three in the town with a population less than a thousand. He had admired the voices of the congregation at their singing as he
walked past one Sunday having heard of a farm looking for labourers nearby and willing to pay cash upfront. He stood looking at the field set aside by the congregation for their dead; two white wooden crosses, fresh flowers at one, at the other a pull-along truck. Wallace was almost a thousand miles from Louisville and he remembered thinking then that seemed a fine distance to be from his old life. He remembered the journey to Caddo in a series of images his mind was still given to idle over when the garage fell quite. A thunderstorm in Frankfort where he sheltered on the veranda of a storefront for an hour with a freakishly tall Dutchman who was visiting with cousins.

‘I am visiting with cousins.’ the man said aloud after half an hour when the silence between them had become so profound it was like a sheet of ice across a river, and something in both men demanded they break it. Wallace remembered how the man laughed as the rain came down. As if he had never seen such a thing. As if it were the best joke in the world. Exposing his teeth. Head tilted backwards as he laughed at the rain. A big, deep-chested laugh. Wallace had taken a step to the side to avoid association. A man can only laugh at the rain so long before it looks like madness. Wallace rode freight cars from Lexington to Bellville hearing from a friend in reform school it was easier to travel from outside of the larger towns and alight before the long trains reached their depot, where there were stories of dogs that would bite a man clean though his shin bone and not let up until the police arrived and of watchmen who thought nothing of discharging their revolvers if you decided to run when they found you in the dull beams of their signal lamps. Wallace remembered the freight cars, the darkness of their interiors. The smell of stale piss gone dry in the wood floor, parcels of faeces wrapped in newspaper and kicked into their corners where the iron rivets were. He was eighteen years old and hungry for
the world. How much life there seemed in life back then. But the world and all its potentiality shrunk up around him. He willed it. Smallness and exactitude of habit became friends: just like that pull to stop moving, to mark his life by its limits, that affected him when he first arrived in Caddo. A man could only laugh at the rain so long before it looked liked madness, the words he had said to himself that afternoon in Frankfort still came to him now.

Looking down at the letter on the table, unfolded beside the plate and the uncovered pat of butter, Wallace felt a sudden and urgent need to be back in the garage, an anxiety he knew could only be soothed by an uncased motor: each part nameable, functioning in its proper way and if not, then replaceable. Sent for from Fort Worth or dug out from rooting among the high piles in the dim corners of the garage, piles he knew his way among, parts that might fox another man; worn gear casings and wing nuts; crankshaft extensions, piston sets, exhaust valves, camshafts, pushrods, dented body parts of automobiles whose owners had clipped a white tail driving into town, waiting to be beaten out with a rubber hammer and replaced. Radiator splash shields, Model A cowl quarter patch panels, windshield filler trims, the saddle tank of a Norton that came in last summer, rain gutters and rumble lids, the Chevy coupe, whose door, he knew by touch alone, measured just shy of thirty inches under the handle ferrule. The half gallon oil can with the long spout in the shape of a lady’s finger you had to know exactly how to tip otherwise the entire contents would come pouring out and ruin your shoes. To reach out and touch any of these would carry him a little closer to safety, to a world he knew.

Wallace heard Ma Haskell talking with someone on the street outside. There was a firmness to her voice, her words staccato and halting. Wallace pictured the set of her mouth tightening in the way it did when people called to enquire about starting
an account or being given a little longer to settle an account that has been outstanding for some months. Wallace pictured her hands crossed neatly below her aproned breast then held one in the other behind her back. Her way of signalling the conversation had come to an end and no matter what they asked, would go no further. They had been calling more the past six months after the last big storm. The farmers had prospered since the war, a demand for all the corn they could produce to feed the boys out at the front. Wallace remembered when farmers would think nothing of buying their sons a runabout for when they were courting or having an Excelsior with a sidecar shipped down from Chicago that the farm boys would fawn over and bring in for Wallace to tune up before they went off to race their friends.

Few then had thought to lay away money should things ever alter, believing rain follows the plough, taking it as fact, as gospel. Thinking what riches they accrued out on their farms a reward for the years of toil their fathers and their fathers before them had put in. The fields of winter wheat, those money crops: milo, maize, alfalfa, broomcorn, cow peas, the cotton and the wild hay would all continue to turn to gold at their hands.

Why should they have thought any different, Wallace wondered? Travelling labourers, as Wallace was once himself, had been the first to call at the Haskell Store for credit, but recently farmers, people the Haskell’s recognized, some they knew by name, would come by asking to have their credit extended. Mothers with their young, freckled boys with sunburned noses and ears that needed pinning. Little girls clutching their mother’s arm, hiding their faces behind their mother’s skirts. Women in their summer dresses, colours muted by the dust, hair tied with faded ribbons at the nape of their neck. Faces set as if always looking up into the sun at midday. The lids of their eyes pulled wide, their men with them sometimes. Waiting in an old
vehicle piled with their belongings. Pots and black pans, a griddle, a mattress moulting feathers, Mason jars stored in boxes that had once held Mother’s Oats, lashed to the back of the vehicle with rope. Ma Haskell could not refuse them all but was careful in who she chose to give credit. Drawing up contracts on the back of old flour sacks and blue sugar bags for them to sign in promise of payment and witnessed by their uncomprehending children. Wallace had seen one family, from the window of his room above the store, with a broken rocking horse secured to the roof of their vehicle. The back leg braced clumsily with ply board and two nails where it had come away.

He first heard of the storms, days before the newspapers or the radiomen got hold of them, from a feed salesman called McKenzie Getchell who passed through town every quarter and would make the Haskell store his first port of call. McKenzie liked to drop by the store to get a sense of what was happening in town and on the farms nearby. No piece of gossip was too small, no rumour insignificant or story too minor to be someway helpful to his trade in seed. Ma and Pa Haskell always willing to share news: who sold up or moved on, who passed away and who the farm had been handed down to, or if the larger places had been split between sons as was often the way. Wallace thought the old man liked McKenzie because he saw in him some other echo of his boy. Or perhaps they simply wearied of Wallace and found in McKenzie the glamour of a new arrival whose appearance in town they could rely upon four times a year. McKenzie always had the air of someone arriving, he could be counted on to keep and command this persona even when reduced to selling discounted cattle and poultry feeds in the winter months. McKenzie carrying his leather seed catalogue with its tiny printed illustrations. Boarding for a fortnight in the rooming house across the main street, paying cash for a full two weeks upfront
even if a lead took him away sooner, far out across the county or the state. Pa Haskell admired McKenzie’s dealings with the larger commercial operations across Kansas and Oklahoma. McKenzie Getchell would often talk of the postal sales service he was starting up. McKenzie had a business mind Pa Haskell respected, and might have imagined for his own son had the boy been living. Every time he came to town Pa Haskell would ask McKenzie, through Ma Haskell if his speech was slurred as it often was in the days after a seizure, to tell him the story of the mail order seed company. McKenzie would pitch the idea to him in fine detail, as if Haskell were an executive at the State bank in Buffalo. McKenzie would control it all, his new business entire, from an office in Oklahoma, an office on the 33rd floor of the City Place Tower. He would never have to leave the place again.

‘And you’ll swing by some time for a drink and I’ll pour you one straight from the cut glass decanter I’ve sent for from Europe,’ then turning to Ma Haskell, with a wink. ‘You won’t mind will you Ma if the old fella has one drink. I mean look at this place,’ McKenzie would say raising his palms to the ceiling of the imaginary office that the small store had temporarily become.

‘I mean we really must celebrate this success.’

Then in a gesture McKenzie never tired of repeating, he would declare,

‘Hold on a minute Ma. I’ll send out for a bottle of French Champagne. How about it?’ And they would all set about laughing as McKenzie picked up the black Bakelite mouthpiece of the phone. Wallace once walked in during one of these shows and McKenzie turned to him, covering the mouthpiece with the palm of his cupped hand.

‘One moment friend and she’s all yours, I’m just ordering up some champagne. Can I get you a glass?’
Pa Haskell beating the counter in delight with this good hand, tears prickling in his eyes. McKenzie in his expensive city bought suit. The thick band on his beaver fedora, its high crown, centre dent and pinched sides, a black silk ribbon band shot through with a line of regal purple. McKenzie having gained a few pounds on his large frame when he returned in the winter months. Inviting Pa Haskell to feel the heft and texture of his winter coat and its worsted barathea. A couple of years back McKenzie had started to bring his Oldsmobile F28 to the garage but Wallace then, and every time since, could see nothing wrong with it. McKenzie made calling in on Wallace at the Marathon Garage and Gas Station a regular feature of his trips to Caddo. ‘Tune her up,’ McKenzie would say with a smile, tossing the keys to the ignition through the air for Wallace to catch. ‘Oil and gas and whatnot and so forth,’ with a flourish of his hand, more like a bandleader counting in his players than a salesman of cattle feed and corn seeds passing through Caddo, Oklahoma as he worked the county.

It was on one of these trips Wallace remembered McKenzie describing the farm equipment, ploughs and scythes, engines and harnesses, the barns he had seen buried under tons of loose earth that had blown in from nowhere, wrecked and useless. ‘The black blizzard,’ McKenzie called it, ‘pushing in as a tidal wave across the opens fields’. McKenzie describing how the wind had taken the topsoil clean off thousands of acres of good land as Wallace looked down into his engine and sent a long stick down into the oil sump. A wave of dust higher than the Kansas Power and Light Building. Wallace remembered reading in the newspaper that the Kansas Power and Light stood four hundred feet off of the ground, the tallest building the state over. McKenzie said in towns across Kansas they turned on the streetlights at midday when the storms blew in.
‘You had to see it to believe it,’ McKenzie said. ‘They were praying for better weather this year but feared the storms might be back.’ Wallace thought the story might make for a good sermon, he wondered how long it would be until one of the preachers came with the news, how they might interpret and transform it. Wallace had seen how the women were taken in by those visiting preachers and hung on each and every word they spoke, glowing in the privilege of their conversation once the sermon is done with.

‘There is more in McKenzie Getchell,’ Pa Haskell would say ‘than the men that come visiting the church.’ Ever since the death of LeRoy the Haskells had chosen to observe at home what was left of their religion. Some days when he was in town McKenzie would spend a whole afternoon at the garage. Admiring men’s tractors and automobiles with a pleasure Wallace took to be almost obscene. The deep creased crown of his hat, and powerful pitcher’s build. (He played at high school, he once told Wallace. He had even had a tryout for the St Louis Browns but his shoulder had popped from its socket the morning he was due to play. He could still dislocate it at will. A trick Wallace saw him use to amuse children, their easy laughter reassuring their fathers or holding their attention a while longer) McKenzie Getchell, faux covetous, running his manicured hand over the bonnet of a tractor brought in as Wallace fitted a new muffler or mushroom cap. Until the strangers took him into their confidence. McKenzie’s hunger for snippets of gossip set him apart from the other salesmen who would pass through town. Wallace would see him dandified in the evenings, off to eat at the home of a new acquaintance and their family, swinging a handful of flowers tugged up from the foot of a cactus on the highway. It was not often the seed salesmen were in town at the same time but Wallace once saw McKenzie talking with another whose trip to Caddo had coincided
with McKenzie’s own. McKenzie stood close to the man, whispering to him, pulling the sleeve of his jacket over his wrist so the jacket, which was badly cut to begin with rode up on the man’s shoulders. McKenzie’s forehead flush against the other man’s.

As Wallace sat with the letter at his kitchenette table it occurred to him perhaps this was a joke played by McKenzie Getchell. Wallace once confided, falling a little under the spell of the large man, that he had never known his father. It was a quiet afternoon in the garage near the end of McKenzie’s last visit. McKenzie offered his sympathies; instantly and expressively earnest, elbow propped against a shelf, supporting his chin in his hand, brick-brown eyes fixing on Wallace. His own father had beaten him, McKenzie said, as he paced around the garage, taking a clear-glass and silver rimmed hip flask filled with honey-coloured bourbon from his jacket and standing in the wedge of light by the door as he took a long pull:

‘Beat me so bad once that I broke two ribs and pissed blood for a week.’ Wallace saw McKenzie lift his face, eyes closed, into the sunlight then turn to the garage and fix his gaze on Wallace:

‘I hit him across the skull with a tyre iron the day I turned eighteen, left town the next day.’

McKenzie laughed loudly then turned back into the light and lifted an arm in greeting to a car arriving on the forecourt whose driver he recognized.

As Wallace sat there with the letter, he wondered if McKenzie Getchell could be its author. Half truths, dumb pranks, downright, barefaced lies Wallace had heard it all from McKenzie. He once told him of a farm in Coffeyville where the farmer, a great friend of his he said, got around in an original Duryea Motor Wagon, one of
only a dozen built at the end of the century. McKenzie offered, in that fleetingly believable way of his, to take Wallace there to see it.

‘You might even wanna make an offer on it,’ McKenzie said. ‘The first American gasoline automobile.’ he added as if Wallace needed telling, before he clapped him on the back and broke in to his habitual, roaring, short-lived laughter, from deep in his corn fed gut. McKenzie wrote to the Haskells last Christmas. Wallace remembered LaRuth showing him the card, the glitter covering the tips of her fingers, a strange girlish grin on her old woman’s face at having been remembered by the seed salesman in the festive season.

‘Look,’ she said, ‘from Mr McKenzie Getchell.’

Wallace nodded at the figure pirouetting in a green dress on a frozen pond. The edges of her skates covered in silver glitter and gold across the boughs of crooked trees that overhung the scene.

McKenzie Getchell’s Christmas card flashed up in Wallace’s mind as he read the first line. He a felt tingling on the palms of his hands, then an urge to empty his bladder. There are three names mentioned in the letter: Priddy, Quinn and Barzee. In formal, old-fashioned sounding English the letter urged the recipient to make contact if the names meant anything. But there was no signature or return address. Wallace had heard the names before, he was sure of it, from his mother, before she got sick. Now an unwelcome emotion hit him, a feeble jittery sadness he hated himself for, the kind he had last known at the reform school in St Louis, when called out from the line in the yard under the spire and the clock tower on those grey St Louis mornings. The dirt-smeared windows facing the square, not a single one onto the world outside. Or like the time a quiet boy called Penhaligon, called by his bunk to tell him, gently with such softness, that he heard they would come for him later and the older boys
were intent on violence. Work socks stuffed with marbles or dirt from the yard as the bruises would not show above the skin but linger in their dark pools under the flesh. Wallace escaped the worst and was known among the older boys as useful. He could fix things. He could even do the work of missing mothers: darn socks or sew a button on a shirt. The skills counted for something in there. Others weren’t so lucky. He could hear them in the darkened dormitory stifling the cries and calls for their mothers. An obese boy with cedar-coloured skin whose name he could not remember, only his sagging teenage breasts with their wide dark nipples in the shower room, once asked Wallace to make a knife for him as he intended to kill a warder who had offended him by talking ill of his dead mother. The boy came to Wallace with a bracket from a drainpipe and some twine, holding them out like an Indian with a cob of corn in a painting of the founding fathers. Wallace refused to help and had been woken that night, rapid blows from the boy’s fat fists raining down on him. Wallace remembered how soft the boy’s fist felt as they struck his face. His attacker pulled away by a boy from the next bunk named Lampadusa, a fine dark moustache already in place on his top lip. Lampadusa wrestling the obese boy away, fearing if they were found the whole dormitory would be punished. Wallace remembered the tears on the obese boy’s face in the half-light of the dormitory. Spittle in loose, long viscous lengths from his open mouth as he flailed his fat fists and swung at Wallace.

‘Kill him, I’m gonna to kill him,’ the obese boy repeated, Wallace did not know if this meant him or the warder he had wanted to stab with the improvised blade, whose commission Wallace had refused.

‘It can wait,’ Lampadusa repeated sleepily ‘just wait until the morning then do what you like.’
Wallace did not sleep. He lay there in his cold sheets waiting for sun up, the light falling in blades across the dormitory floor. Missing his mother. Thinking of the size of the country and a place for him out there somewhere safe from the injuries, from the others who sought to harm him. Planning how to make himself favourable again to older boys who might protect him if he could only involve their interest in his abilities, prove useful as he had those first months.

Wallace set down the letter and went to fetch his diary. His heart was thumping. He felt like a huge rip had just been run through his life, all the outside suddenly pouring in. He needed to link himself to something simple. Something regular. He checked his watch, he was due at the garage in a hour. He slipped the letter inside his jacket, walked to the stove and poured himself a cup of coffee from the enamel pot with the burned base. He had brewed it earlier and then forgotten about it as he had left for church. The brown grounds spilled through the spout, he felt them between his teeth, moving his tongue under his lip before he swallowed the bitter grains and the coffee both.
The Marathon Gas Station and Garage stood a mile outside of Caddo on the road to Durant. The shabby clapboard office was offset by two dazzling red and lollipop-yellow gas pumps and a small frame-barn set back at a diagonal twenty yards from the forecourt. The land once belonged to a chicken farmer named Mitch Quinlan who sold up and moved to Honolulu after his wife suffered a cerebral haemorrhage in the bathing pool at Medicine Park. The barn roof was covered in sheets of heavily decaying corrugated iron, points of light let down into the space below like a night sky prickling with stars, its weatherboard walls painted a deep, earthy red that had been faded by the sun over time to somewhere close to terracotta. Inside the barn Wallace had his auto-shop, the ‘lubritorium’ as Lige insisted on calling it on account of the coffin-length, concrete-lined pit he installed so Wallace could access the undercarriages of automobiles.

Across from the gas station, over a hot strip of faded tarmac, its cracks spawning crab grass and cud-weed, sat a cluster of low scrubby oaks and a carpet of thorny undergrowth in which lay the broken remains of several soapbox cars. Lige briefly sponsored a race for the children of the town, Wallace offering advice on the cars’ design, until a boy lost his arm at a place known as Foxes Corner after that the race only ran informally, without the support of the Marathon Gas Station and Garage. Lige recently installed the new pumps on the forecourt, replacing the gravity fed Wayne 515 Ten Gallons with their glass tops and rusted bodies with a pair of Gilmore Tokheim 36B’s vending Red Lion gasoline with tetraethyl, a lion pouncing out from the sign. Wallace would watch him, shuffling out from the office in his
Ulster, chamois in hand, at a quarter past the hour, every hour of each working day. Lige’s dream, the only thing he ever talked about with any enthusiasm, was to set up his own tourist park called either Paradise Hill or Resting Waters, he could never quite decide between the two names. There would be exhibition ballroom dancing, like he once saw it done in front of the Ipana Troubadours in a whites only dance club in Cincinatti, there would be an 8 Ball Pool and a grillroom open 24 hours, a vast kitchen with its own cold room where beef carcases would be hung for dressing. ‘The basic needs of American life married to the latest innovations of modern technology’ Lige would repeat the phrase like a catechism, as if it were the obvious proof to the complex equation of modern life. Twice a month he and his daughter Lana would take trips around the state and sometimes beyond in their Duesenberg.

Years before Rickenbacker drove to victory at the 500 when Lige was still travelling the states selling heels for the O’Sullivan Rubber Company, he had loaned the Duesenberg brothers, friends of his from back in Rockford, Iowa, what he called a ‘a significant sum of money’. Later a Lawyer named Mason came in with the money that got them off the ground but when the first Model A rolled off the production line Frederick and August Duesenberg were as good as their word and sent word to Lige to come and collect what was rightfully his. It was same automobile the King of Spain got around in, though King Alfonso’s was a Model J, the Hibbard and Darrin, with a straight-eight engine. When business was slow Lige would have Wallace take the Duesenberg out onto the forecourt, polished up and gleaming, still handsome despite the miles it had on the clock. It was in the Duesenberg that Lige and Lana would drive out scouting possible locations for the park to be built. Wallace never knew if this was just a fantasy Lana encouraged in her father or if Lige had income beyond the ailing filling station, maybe there was
money due when his mother, who he spoke of sometimes, finally passed. The vendors and land agents must have taken Lige seriously enough when they saw the Duesenberg draw up, the scruffy man in the boxy Ulster and his daughter step down. Lana was almost thirty. She had grown something close to stout the past years, a thickening at her hips and her silk-stockinged calves, no longer the waif who was Queen of the Corn Carnival three years straight. Still, she was one of the only people in town who took care over how she looked: frocks copied from pattern books or bought mail-order from Sears on their January dollar days, making some in the congregation, like Rita Phieffer, suspicious of her. Wallace had never seen Lana in the same dress two days straight: jades and jello pinks and midnight blues, with box shoulders and lace trims, ensembles put together with bolero cut jackets and wool capelets. It was a game they played whenever Lana came by the garage, Wallace asking what this or that piece of clothing was called, then getting the words wrong when he said them back to her; sombrero cut jackets and capulets.

After a recent trip to Muskogee to look at a plot that was up for auction, Lana had come back with the idea of setting up a stall on the forecourt to sell gifts and trinkets hoping to attract tourists on their way to Maytubby Springs. She had recruited Wallace to help her set the place up. The stall would sit under a huge canvas awning in the lee of the office facing onto the forecourt. Wallace didn’t have it in him to tell Lana that on Friday he counted fewer than half a dozen automobiles pull into that gas station the entire day: a panel van rusted at the grille, a hole in its front fender the size of his hand, its exhaust held in place by what looked like a wire coat hanger, spewing plumes of black smoke, amber traces at the edges; a Model A Ford whose driver missed the turning for Durant and wondered if the filling station had a restroom; a LeSalle Coupe straight off the production line, driven by a woman in her
sixties wearing golf whites, silver hair set in pin curls, her heavily gold-ringed hands tiny on the shining wheel above the cocoa-brown steering column. Then towards the end of the day another Model A the owner cut the rear section off to convert it into a flatbed. There was a foal penned in the back, a bay with a black mane and a white star between its eyes, unsteady on its feet. Wallace watched it sliding around on its soft hooves as the owner pulled away from the pumps. The news on the radio that afternoon was of the last troops pulling out of Haiti. Lana once showed Wallace a letter a Marine named Harry Easterman sent to her from Port-Au-Prince and he thought of it as he watched the flatbed drive off, its living cargo uneasy in the back. There was none of the sternness in Lana her father possessed. None of the worry or habitual reticence of Lige that saw him trail off mid-sentence thinking better of disclosing what was on the tip of his tongue, his roughly-shaved throat, raw and spotted red along the windpipe.

Lana’s mother had left when Lana was a girl, with a truck driver shipping propane across the state, as the local legend had it. Wallace remembered her vaguely from the few times they had met before he started at the garage, tall and skeletally thin, a mixture of diffidence and uncommon glamour, as if she were always recovering from some illness that had kept her away from the world so that everything was now tinged with a strangeness she responded to with a sort of cautious indolence. Speaking in an accent Wallace could not place, Cajun or French Canadian. Lana had inherited her mother’s looks. Wallace wondered if it was hard for Lige to look at her, if Lana’s resolve to stay in Caddo was to balance her mother’s flight. In her twenties Lana was courted by several men but had a knack of stringing them on so long that eventually, inevitably, their ardour waned. Wallace remembered seeing her dressed up for dances in Durant, a tea-dress skimming her sides, her face powdered, her lips
red as the gas pumps in her father’s filling station, where she would come to meet Lige who would run her the five miles to the dance in his truck. She would always come by the garage the next morning, laughing in that full, deep, throaty chuckle, about the men she danced with the night before. The clumsy, toe-stomping farm boys, the wild-eyed soldiers furloughed from the base in Oklahoma City. Lana tried nursing for a time working for $8 a week while she earned her G.N. Certificate after the demonstration room and dormitory had been built at Hygeia Hall. Wallace remembered her coming back to visit her father in her white paper hat turned down at the edges like something you might improvise around a table a Christmas time. She hadn’t liked Oklahoma City, so far from home, and never got her diploma. Lana tried her hand at teaching not long after, taking a correspondence course from a company in Washington D.C. She still helped out some days at the town school but mostly she had seemed to devote her time to her father. Lana would spend three afternoons a week doing her father’s accounts. She persuaded Lige to buy a portable adding machine she kept in his office, her quarter of Lige’s massive mahogany desk immaculately tidy among the surrounding sea of faded papers and old invoices. Wallace last saw Lana on Friday before closing. She was standing at the door of the garage, waiting for her father. Wallace could hear Lige in the distance giving instructions to a boy in a black dickie bow ‘Albert’, the name of a his predecessor, sewn in black thread beneath the breast of his short-sleeved shirt:

‘Like this, you see? Got it? Never, ever, like this?’

Then the nozzle clashing harshly against the metal arm of the pump. Lana picked up a crescent wrench, the size of a femur in a tall man’s leg, from the workbench closest to the open barn door, the surface of the wrench pitted and oil-
stained at the head. She stood puzzling over it as she spoke, testing its dead weight in the flat of her open hand.

‘When are you going to get yourself a woman Wallace?’ Lana asked.

Wallace turned from the silhouette of the smartly dressed woman with the wrench and muttered ‘huh?’ to the open bonnet.

‘A woman Wallace, when are you going to get one,’ Lana repeated playfully this time.

He stood up and drew his oil stained sleeve across his brow.

‘You mean a wife?’

‘A wife.’

‘I don’t need a wife.’

He reached into the bonnet and turned at something with a wrench.

‘Whose gonna cook for you Wally?’

‘Me?’

‘You. Who’s gonna shave that old turkey neck of yours when you’re too old to do it yourself? Huh?’

There was a place Wallace would drive out to when the aloneness grew too big, a handful of times each year and less these past two or three, when he needed to be close to another human body; out on the shores of the Red River, the arrow straight roads after Durant delivering him past all the tiny bodies of water, past Webb Lake and the cemetery, through Mead and on to the inconspicuous two-storey house, curtains drawn and the lights on in every room where you could pay to go with girls. Girls dressed up to look older than they were, bottle blondes with anaemic skin, eyebrows plucked bare then pencilled back on in thin arches that gave them an air of being perpetually alarmed, silk and rayon crepe stockings, cheap bauble earrings on
thin chains at their ears, dark rings under their tired, hooded eyes. Their dressing
gowns pulled tight around their bodies. Peach silk scarves draped over the electric
lamps, the reek of patchouli incense to mask the men’s smoke and sweat. From the
garden, where the girls went to smoke between customers, on a clear night you could
stare straight out across to Catfish bay, see the boats of sports fisherman from
Sherman and Gainsville heading back for the day with their cargoes of catfish, bass
and crabbies. The cathouse burned down a few months after Wallace’s last visit, a
girl he had once been with found dead with an unborn child inside her. Wallace
assumed it was her as the description in the paper matched almost exactly. Wallace
heard the story in the back of a Tackle and Bait Shop where they sold beer from a
White Seal ice-box after a day on the river with Burl Cobb.

Wallace would never have dared raise the subject but another man who came over
from Whitesboro to fish the river had heard from a friend that there was a place
nearby a man might find a little company and that had got them talking. Later when
Wallace had driven past, compelled to do so, he found the house undamaged save a
great streak of black on the pitched roof and the porch where the fire had spilled out.
He had thought to lay some flowers but wondered if that might somehow arouse
suspicion. Wallace had sometimes day dreamed of falling for a girl from the
cathouse, of maybe somehow saving her. Returning to his rooms above the Haskell
store with the girl, coat draped around her shoulders, her few things in a little leather
bag. Ma Haskell watching them arrive, saying nothing. Pa Haskell coming to the
doors to tell him he would need to make other arrangements, to find somewhere else
to stay, his speech slurred and Wallace nodding solemnly.

Wallace knew this was not what Lana meant. There was no way she could know
of this other world, of the place an evening’s drive to the south. Wallace knew that
was what she meant in asking when he would take a wife, she was asking if he was content in his solitude, and maybe implying that she was not in hers.

Lana set the wrench down on the workbench and took a back issue of Picture Play from her handbag. Tallulah Bankhead stared out dreamily from the pastel portrait on the cover. Lana leafed through the pages, flicking through until she came upon a picture that interested her.

‘You ever been to Europe Wally?’

She turned the magazine’s centrefold towards him, an advert for Conrad Veidt in Rome Express, a silver train moving at speed toward the reader.

‘No’

‘You ever been any place that ain’t Caddo?’

‘Lana, ain’t you got enough old man to deal with in that father of yours?’

‘I’m just interested.’

‘Well no, I never been to Europe.’

‘Your mother was an Englisher’

‘She was.’

‘You ain’t never been tempted to go back?’

‘To England?’

‘Yes, to England.’

‘I’ve been to Oklahoma City enough times and never much liked what I saw there. I don’t suppose England would be much better.’

‘You could go see the King of England, send our regards from Caddo.’

‘Lana,’ Wallace said rising up from the car and running his forearm across his brow, ‘I ever make it, I’ll be sure to do just that.’
‘Thank you Wallace I appreciate it.’

Wallace worked on in silence a few minutes longer. Then lifting his head from the bonnet of the car, looked across at Lana who was holding the magazine to the light, attempting to shape her face into the expression of one of the women on its pages. He laughed. Lana looked up, an angry blush blossoming across her cheeks as she snapped shut the dog-eared magazine.

‘Abbisinya’ Lana said rolling the magazine into a thin tube and pushing it into her bag.

‘Abbisinya,’ Wallace replied and, laughing still, turned back to the car.

Wallace watched Lana make towards her father’s waiting car, the old man behind the wheel hunched in his Ulster, the engine already turning over.
When Wallace arrived at the gas station, Lana was leaning against the bench outside Lige’s office. She was wearing a cardinal-red Artsilk dress, tied with a sash at the waist and a felt toque with propeller quills she had made herself, copying it from a photograph in French Vogue of Myrna Loy on the Cote D’Azur. Lana stood in a long bar of shadow cast by the office’s candy-coloured awning, a bright slash of light bringing out the vamps and quarters of her coral crepe shoes, the rhinestones in their white metal buckle. Lana was inspecting her teeth in a mother-of-pearl compact, an uneven pinkish sheen pulsing on the interlocking squares of its outer shell. Standing half in sunlight, half in shade her attitude was that of a girl waiting in line for a screen test, like the girls on the newsreel he and Lana sat through last month at the Liberty in Durant: *Behind the Scenes of Movie Land* offering *Intimate Glimpses of Your Favourite Stars*. A staccato announcer describing Busby Berkeley’s Dancing Cuties as they welcomed the Columbia Football Team to the lot, fresh from their victory at the Rose Bowl. Even though it was still early and a Sunday Lana was made up: her powder caking in patches under her eyes and across the bridge of her nose, making visible the soft down on her chin and the tops of her cheeks. Her full lips with their deep bow painted to match her toque, lipstick glittering stickily.

‘You look hot Wallace,’ Lana said snapping shut the compact and running her tongue over her teeth so it glided in a prominent, slow bulge beneath her upper lip. ‘You got a fever?’

Wallace touched his forehead with the back of his hand, it was cold and slick with sweat. He hadn’t noticed as he hurried from his rooms above the Haskell store to the
gas station. On Main Street he passed a woman he recognized who smiled at him and her young son, hair parted razor sharp, showing a wide line of white scalp, who made a pistol of his fingers at Wallace and fired.

‘I’ve been waiting over an hour for you. Were you out drinking with Burl last night?’

Lana paused.

‘What is it?’ she asked, concerned as she stepped out from under the awning towards Wallace.

‘There’s something I got to show to you,’ Wallace said patting the breast pocket of his shirt for the letter. Lana put her compact back in her purse, fastening the peacock shaped clasp with a sharp, metallic click. She took a long look at Wallace as if they were strangers and she were trying very hard to place him, then shielding her eyes from the sun with the back of her hand, nodded gently and put her free hand on his elbow,

‘Let’s go inside the office shall we?’ she said ‘it’s cooler in there.’

*Lana and Wallace sat in the office with the two big bandage-coloured Roman blinds blocking out the sunlight. A Weller Pottery Boy perched on top of an olive-green five-drawer steel filing cabinet, lowering his rod into the brackish water of a bowl below where a pair of goldfish, size of cigarette lighters, hung motionless above the pebbles, a knotted string of anaemic faeces floating from the belly of the bigger fish. Wallace had taken the letter from his pocket and laid it out on top of a pile of Lige’s papers without saying a word. Lana read the letter, flipping it back and forth, several times, taking in the writing on both sides.

‘You recognise these names?’
‘Sorta’

‘Sorta how?’

Wallace went very quite for a moment. He spread both hands out on the table in front of him, the green veins were flattened and faded, the colour of old glass, branching out thickly above the wrists, the stubby thumb on his left hand misshapen from where he once hit it with a claw hammer, rupturing the ligament. His nails were cut back way too far giving the fingers an oddly foreshortened, stunted look. There were oil stains ingrained the creases of his knuckles. With a serious, studious look his gaze moved from fingertip to fingertip inspecting the nail beds, then the wide white crescent of each half-moon, then the flaking, papery cuticles, When Wallace finally spoke his voice was very soft, as if reading to himself some unimportant passage from a newspaper, the baseball scores or the news of the latest longshore strike, unknowingly, just beneath his breath. Lana had to lean in to hear him.

‘Before my mother passed we were living in rooms in a town called Eureka. My mother was working for a man from Maine, a widower, who had moved out to run the foundry, schooling his daughter in reading and mathematics’

Wallace turned over his hands to the palms, he glanced at the web of pale veins in each palm then slowly turned them back. In all the years she had known him it was more than Lana had ever heard from Wallace about his life before he came to Caddo.

‘She got sick not long after we arrived there, under a year from our arrival. Quicker than anyone thought she would.’

His knuckles slowly rose on the table as if some magnetic force were drawing the fingertips towards his palms, contracting until they formed fists. The ridges of his knuckles whitened. Wallace swallowed.
‘They took away a section of her jaw and some of the teeth which made it hard for her to talk toward the end’

Wallace looked from his fists to Lana. His eyes were glassy but his voice was stronger now

‘She said a lot of things as she lay there Lana, things that made no sense whatsoever. I was only young and doing what the doctor instructed I should do. But I remember, I think I remember, those names in the letter.’

Wallace relaxed his hands then with a shrug threw them up like a stage magician releasing a dove from the brim and the body of an upside down top hat.

‘Who knows, Lana, it’s so long ago now. Maybe I made the whole thing up.’

Lana nodded coolly, lowering her head to keep her eyes in line with his.

‘Strange thing is’ Wallace continued, ‘I don’t remember those names but I do somehow recall the shape of the names on the paper, so maybe she wrote them, she would in those days. And after she passed I was sent away. She left instructions, the names of two trains I was to take and she asked the foundry foreman to send word to who was meant to meet at the station in St Louis.’

A white chevrolet dump truck with a shattered headlamp pulled up on the forecourt. The driver got down from the cab. Stretched his arms above his head, and interlocking his fingers turned his palms out to the sun. He spat once on the ground and then walked around the truck kicking the tyres. He scanned the forecourt and seeing no one was around walked over to the office and tapped on the glass door.

Lana shook her head. Wallace stayed in his seat. The man pressed his face to the window, making a square visor with his palms then walked back to the truck where he sat waiting for some sign of life to appear.
‘Well, you have to go and find them. That’s what you have to do.’ Lana said

‘Who?’

‘The men in the letter. Barzee or this Quinn fellow or’

Lana looked back at the letter.

‘Priddy’ she said, stabbing the letter with her finger.

‘That’s your man. Go find Priddy’

‘I don’t know Lana.’

‘Oh, you have to Wallace.’ Lana said, breathily, dropping her chin.

‘Who knows if the letter was even meant for me?’

‘Oh Wally, don’t be such an ass.’ Lana said snapping from the role of breathy provocatrix she cast herself in only a moment ago,

‘Sure it was.’

‘But it doesn’t make sense. It’s just a bunch of names. Look.’

Wallace turned the letter over ‘there’s not even a signature.’

‘Ain’t you a regular Nancy Drew.’

‘How would I even find them?’

‘You never heard of a telephone directory?’

Wallace rolled his lips in between his teeth and softly shook his head.

‘Oh don’t be such a baby Wallace. What’s the worst that can happen?’

Lana seemed to relish sending Wallace off, as if this were a scene from a feature she saw advertised in the back issues of Show Time, one of the pictures she would nag Wallace to run her down to Durant to see, if Lige were busy or there was no date in her the diary for that weekend. Wallace joined her in the cinema more this past year. Sitting the dark beside Lana, glancing to the side to see her, wide-eyed, head tilted back, light from the screen reflected on her face, her soft mouth part open, the
cone of dust revolving in the projector beam above their heads. The images of the actors reflected in her wide eyes. There had been other trips the pair had taken too. Trips they never mentioned. In the past five years Wallace had twice driven Lana out to Durant to the house of a woman who knew how to take care of what Lana called her little problem. ‘Wally I need a favour. A big one. The type you swear never to mention to anybody… ’ Lana asked pointing hammily from the garage to her father’s office. The first time Wallace collected her she smelled of gin, the sweet, clean, fragrantly antiseptic smell, lipstick smudged a little across her lower lip, not quite clownish, but close. She was silent in the car on the way back to Caddo. Wallace had to pull over for her to be sick at the side of the road just before they reach town. The passenger door swinging open and Lana leaning out before heaving herself back into the car and slamming the door. Her eyes screwed shut, head tipped back against the seat, her mouth still moving slowly as if mulling something over. The second time, last year, was easier. Lana talked to him all the way home, though when he dropped her outside Lige’s house, a gloomy stone building near the Getsemane Cemetery, Wallace watched Lana steady herself for a moment against the fence post and fix her skirt. That second time Wallace told her she needed to be more careful, that this cab service he was operating for her would not run in perpetuity, she needed to be kinder to herself, to that body of hers and that trips to that woman’s house would sure take their toll. He remembered Lana wrapped in a blanket and dozing as they drove back to Caddo, her face pale next to the red smear of lipstick.

‘Now Mr Soap Box Car King, Mr Live Alone are you reckoning to lecture me?’

‘Look after yourself is all,’ he said staring straight out at the road ahead.

The first trip Wallace remembered the woman on the doorstep at the house on Stone Drive looking out as he pulled away and how Lana had insisted he wait there in the
car for her but warned him that it may be an hour or more before she came out so
maybe he should bring a book or the sports pages with him. There was an advert for
the new ford V-8, A Great New Car at an Unusually Low Price, New Rear Spring
Construction, Down-Draft Carburettor… when Lana got out of the truck she left her
purse and turned when she was almost at the woman’s door and came hurrying back.
Wallace could see she was scared, see in her face, in the tightness around her mouth,
but Lana knocked on the window and leaned in and picked up her purse from the seat
where she left it then turned and walked back towards the house and came out later
clutching a brown paper bag of tonic and medicated sanitary pads. How on the way
back from Durant that evening, just as the light was going, she had called out from
her sleep, her head resting against the window and when fully awake, ‘Well, that was
swell Wally, we must do it again sometime,’ when he dropped her at the house and
he said ‘Take care of yourself please. Do it for me.’ and she had laughed and waved
to a young man in uniform who was passing on the other side of the street and then
blew him a kiss as if to instruct Wallace that no, no she would not change for him or
anyone. She told him the details the second time as if trying to shock him or move
him or scare him - the room in the woman’s house, the bed she was laid on, how she
had a young girl helping her. Lana even joked they take a trip to Fort Worth to see
Myrna Loy in Men in White when it came to the cinema there the next week.

It was after the first trip Lana’s hair began to thin, not so much you would notice
it on a dull day, or if you didn’t know her, but if the light struck it right like as when
she came to the garage sometimes at sundown you would see how much of it had
gone, how fine the hair was getting, though she would do many things to disguise it
brushing and dying and spraying it with chemicals and treatments and in truth it did
nothing to diminish her looks, her eyes were still large and made up to look as good
as any of her idols from the magazines. But all the same Wallace often wondered if those trips out to Durant had some effect on her hair all the same. The trips, the cinema, the house on Stone Drive. Now this letter. Wallace had never seen her so animated.

‘Damn it Wallace,’ Lana said, getting into her stride, opening the Roman blind so the office was suddenly fiercely bright. The dump truck on the forecourt had gone.

‘You have a chance to make some sense of your past and that’s more than most get. ‘You think I know why my mother left? You know what I’d give just to talk five minutes with her?’

Lana was standing now behind Lige’s desk, her hands firmly on her hips.

‘So you take that rust bucket of yours and don’t come back until you have something to show for your troubles,’ Lana said, pointing to the door. He felt sorry for her.

‘I mean it Wally. Go on, get out of here.’
It was three p.m. by the time Wallace had finished packing. At the table in the kitchenette he studied the Rand McNally road atlas borrowed from Lige’s desk and sketched out a route. He had packed slowly, his hands sticky with the heat as he folded shirts into a suitcase Lana loaned to him. The journey would take him three days maybe four, gradually following the better roads north west through Kansas, Colorado, Utah, Idaho and up into Oregon, back to the town ten miles outside of Medford where he’d lived as a boy. After returning from the gas station he had felt immensely tired, he lay down on the bed covers and slept for a few minutes but was woken with his heart racing. He had walked over to where the few things of his mother’s sat: the cracked plate with the print of the old bridge on it, the wooden box covered in shells. And as he stood looking down at them had seen her vividly, the outline of her dress as she stood by a window of their rented rooms in Eureka, hands clutched in front of her, the watery light of winter in the rooms by the harbour side falling on the nape of her neck.

Back at the gas station Lana had drilled Wallace in what to say when he made contact with Barzee or Quinn or Priddy or whoever was still around the town, she seemed, a little hopefully Wallace thought, to assume they would still be there waiting with answers. She had even typed out a list of questions, in the formal, legal sounding language she learned on her business course. Wallace tried to picture the man his father might be but he couldn’t fix him. He saw himself at first, only older, thinner, bent double, white stubble about his chin. Staring up at him wordless, slack mouthed as if on the verge of revealing some great secret. But the image would not
hold and wavered and then became Pa Haskell, then Lige and none of these would do. He grew frustrated and looking out onto Main Street thought his father might in fact be any of the old men who passed.

The heat of the day had slackened by the time Wallace made his way down to his waiting Tourer. He had collected it from the lock up on returning from the filling station. A group of boys were gathered around the automobile, inspecting it, and from their postures seemingly unsure if it were worthy of their scorn or their admiration. One boy, braver than the others, was peering in through the passenger side window, the sides of his hands flush to the glass. As Wallace approached he jumped back towards his friends. Wallace recognized him from the soapbox car season.

‘Going someplace nice Mister?’ the boy asked but Wallace ignored him. He had filled two big jerry can with gasoline and left the money on Lige’s desk, along with a note explaining he would be away, a week or two at the most and that the Olsen car was ready for collection. Lana promised she would smooth over the rest. As he placed the jerry can in the trunk, Wallace thought of the things he would have to work out on the road: the practicalities of travelling so far. He knew the Tourer was fit for it but he feared the wear and tear the journey might take on the vehicle after so long in the lock up, the points of frailty, things that might be hard to come by in towns he did not know: a crank shaft, a fly wheel, a set of pushrods.

He sat in silence for a moment in the Tourer and watched the boys walking off down Main Street. He could clear the state line before nightfall, could sleep in the Tourer if need be. It was as if something of himself had been abandoned in a little town outside of Medford, the only place his parents ever lived together with him. The only place he’d even been part of a family. Wallace knew he lacked the charm
of McKenzie Getchell or the accommodating nature of the Haskells to their customers but he thought of how he might mirror them, how he might take something of these people on the road with him. How he might school himself in the hours alone to talk and present himself as McKenzie did, might borrow a phrase or two which seemed always to work for him and put strangers at their ease. He started the car and was calmed by the sound of the motor. As he drove out of Caddo he practiced his best McKenzie Getchell impression in the rear view mirror. A little of the seed salesman, a little of the storeowners, he might learn to forget for a while to be the mechanic in the small town in Oklahoma. He thought of Lana, how he might borrow the smile she always greeted him with. In sum it seemed a flimsy defence against the world. He watched Caddo shrink in the rear view mirror. In the heat-haze of the evening, the buildings softened to a blur before they vanished. Ardmore, Paulus Valley, Norman, he passed through small town after small town, driving for a long time until his forearms ached and his neck grew stiff. Hands tight with all the driving, knuckles tender, tightness in the ligaments in his wrists.

* 

Night was falling. Wallace turned on the headlamps. A dust swirl was thrown up from the road revolving in their glare. There were blue shadows at the roadside and the yellow flash of an animal’s eyes from the undergrowth. After clearing the state line Wallace had suddenly been overcome with a need for sleep. He drove on for a while but as soon as he saw a layby, he pulled the Tourer into it and turned off the headlamps then after a few moments the engine. He listened to the metal parts in the car contracting as they cooled. Wherever he was it was quiet and dark outside. He rolled the window down a quarter inch, and took a handkerchief from his pocket and set it between the crown of his head and the window. A few seconds later he was
asleep. He dreamed of the sea of his childhood, the sea at Eureka. He was standing by the ocean with his mother, she pointing out towards the horizon telling him that over there was Japan and China, a world away. The beach was empty, as he looked along the tide line he saw driftwood and flotsam strewn all along the shining sands. Then his mother was gone and he was alone.

Wallace woke a little after dawn, the air outside already hot. He watched a Dodge pick-up truck go by, two men sleeping in back. One had his head rested heavily on the other’s shoulder. The light was clearer here he noticed. There were green ridges as far as the eye could see. He could smell himself. His mouth was parched. He badly needed to piss and got out of the car and found a spot. He felt stupid as he stood relieving himself into a patch of scrub by the roadside early that morning. He could turn around now. He could be back in Caddo by nightfall and safe again in his rooms, fix the radio and have it bringing in news from abroad on low volume. He could laugh it off when Lana asked why he was back so soon. Tell her he had never intended to go to Oregon. That he had business, a vehicle to see out of state with thoughts to buying it. That he pretended to be setting off to humour her to bring a touch of excitement to the weekend. But he knew she would see through this. That she had watched him leave her father’s office that morning.

Wallace buttoned up his flies and climbed back into the car. He reached across the passenger seat and picked up the Rand McNally atlas. On the cover was a picture of an Indian scraping an arrow onto a cliff side, his black shadow on the rock before him, as a touring car passed below by a telegraph pole the shape of a crucifix. Wallace looked at the states that lay before him: the maze of red lines on the Rand McNally. He had drawn a thick black, improvised route on the fold-out two-page national map as Lana looked on. There was still a lot of ground to cover. He folded
in the map and tossed the atlas back onto the empty passenger seat. He started the ignition and sat there, the engine turning over, then almost without volition he was off, moving forward again.

Wallace stopped to eat in a diner called Angostinos between Walsenburg and Alamosa. White capped peaks rose in the distance across the prairie. A single storey building, painted firehouse red, set back a little from the road. The pickup with the wooden crated back that had passed him earlier was parked outside, one of the men still asleep in the back, his cap pulled down over his eyes. The smell of beets and boiled cabbage hit Wallace as he entered the diner. He took a seat on the leatherette banquette, worn through in places. A waitress approached. She was in her forties, hennaed hair sculpted into a Marcel wave. The waitress served him distractedly, filling his cup to the brim with coffee the colour of transmission fluid. A few minutes later the waitress came out from the kitchen with the pot roast he ordered. She had had to check with the cook to see if it was possible to serve it so early. Two pieces of tender meat coated in gelatinous brown gravy. Green beans gone soft in the prolonged cooking, some pieces of celery and carrot that seemed an afterthought, diced clumsily, their hardened tips thrown in to bulk up the pot roast. Wallace ate the meal quickly, shovelling the food into his mouth. The waitress brought more coffee then a few minutes later a fruit cobbler that she told him was on the house. Flavourless, the contents over-stewed and thick cream that had begun to curdle. Two men were talking in the booth in front of him.

‘I mean a robot can you believe it?’ the older man was saying.

‘Dempsey going up against a robot,’ the older laughed to himself, ‘read it with my own eyes.’
Then the younger man, the back of his head was a tangle of rats tails, looked
suddenly animated,

‘Dempsey would whup any robot. Damnit, I’d back Dempsey to beat a bear.’

The two men laugh and then older man turned to the waitress.

‘You hear that? A bear. Dempsey to beat a bear.’

The smile that had come over her lips dissolved when Wallace looked over to her.

When it was time to leave Wallace couldn’t find the waitress. He calculated the bill
from the menu and left enough money to cover the tip. Taking the notes from the
wad of folded dollars he had pulled out from behind his bed before leaving Caddo.
The boy in the booth in front had gone to the bathroom and the older man was sitting
alone still chuckling to himself, repeating the word ‘bear’ under his breath, and
shaking his head in disbelief. Wallace nodded to him and made his way out of the
diner. Outside, the waitress was standing a few yards from the kitchen door, at the
side of the building by a high wooden box that held a bank of trashcans. She was
smoking a cigarette, taking tiny puffs as if she found the taste unpleasant.

‘Take me with you?’ she said to Wallace as he turned to see her leaning against
the wooden slats purporting to mask the trashcans. She tried to sound languid, like a
siren, but came over shrill and desperate and he could see she knew it.

‘Oh Christ, take me any place away from here,’ she said up to the blue of the
morning sky. The waitress tossed down her cigarette and twisted the lit stub under
the toe of her pumps. She turned back to face Wallace.

‘Hurry back now,’ she said with a forced smile, a wink and turn of her head
baring a flash of her discoloured teeth. Wallace watched her make her way back
inside.
Back in the Tourer Wallace looked over the road atlas, the hastily eaten food settling heavily in his stomach. He felt a cramp and a need to take a crap but didn’t want to go back inside to the man laughing about the bear and the waitress with lipstick-stained teeth. He had a choice now. He could head north towards Denver, skirting the Rio Grande National Forest, up into Wyoming which he took to be a day’s drive away, under Yellowstone, through Idaho and into Oregon or he could continue east through Utah and up through Nevada. Utah or Colorado, he calculated, it would take him two days to cover either state maybe less if he kept himself awake and drove through the night.

By the end of the day he reached Price City. After hours down a poker-straight road where for long stretches his was the only vehicle. The Rand McNally open on the seat beside him. Telegraph poles strung in a long line flashing by one by one and beyond them mile upon mile of cardboard coloured scrub land. He had worried that the vehicle might not stand up to the heat. The road seemed to wave and melt before him as he drove on. The windshield filthy and he had had to pull over more than once to scrape the dirt away. The whole vast state seemed emptied of people. In those hours alone in the car his thoughts had turned first to Caddo. To the Haskell’s and Lige, to Lana sitting in her father’s office working diligently at his accounts. How easy it would be to disappear. How lightly his life with all its habits and routines was tethered to the world. He imagined Lana asking Lige if he had had word, and her father angry that Wallace had left at such short notice. Periodically as he drove Wallace would pat himself where the letter lay folded in his pocket.

Wallace found a rooming house in Price City that night. He paid the night porter through a brass grille who gave him a key, a large wooden block attached to it. The carpet on the staircase up to his room was threadbare and there was a cockroach the
size of a pinecone on its back by the skirting board, legs kicking as it tried to right itself. Wallace was too weary either to kill it or to complain. The sheets were stale and the room overlooked a depot where trucks came and went until midnight and stared up again at five a.m.
Wallace lay in his single bed in his rented room in Price City, the road that has unspooled before him through that empty state playing over in his mind. As if he were driving through all the unused years of his own life. He thought of the lives he invented at the reform school in St Louis. The sister he could confide in. That benign unwavering presence he would talk to some nights. How the burden of his being had been shared with her, the twin he conjured in his solitude. The confidences and fears they would let each other in on. The father who would arrive any week now, able to resolve the terrible mix up. Explaining how business had taken him away from Oregon. Wearing expensive cologne and taking him to see the Cardinals play, then to eat somewhere he could order whatever he liked from the menu, order fillet steak if he so wished. A place where people could watch him with his father, secure in the expansive company of that man. He woke some mornings still chewing those imagined meals. His mouth wet with saliva; his jaw aching. It was the hunger that had haunted him.

He remembered, after his mother’s death, being sent back east to meet the man called Mayhurst or Mayhew. She had arranged it early in her illness and he remembered, as the strength ebbed from her and her voice weakened, his mother telling him that the man he would be sent to meet, should anything happen to her, would look after him. His name written on a cardboard tag tied about his wrist with string. The hours on board the slow train, still numb with grief as the states he couldn’t name slid by outside the window. Climbing down at St Louis’s Union Station as he had been instructed. Worried in the hours before he arrived he might fall asleep and miss it. He had waited at the station all day but no one came. Staring
at everyone who passed, wondering if they might come to claim him. Hoping that through sheer force of will he might make it so; fat ladies in extravagantly feathered hats, the stern looking men jacketless, down to their shirt sleeves in that brutal heat. The sun through the window of the waiting room hot against his face.

Lying awake on his bed in the rented room in Price City Wallace recalled sobbing in the waiting room of the station in St Louis, the sheen on the polished slats of the bench where he sat. The exhaustion, the loss that seemed reflected everywhere he looked around him. The light fading at the big window as the hours passed. The jerk of the second-hand on the face of the clock as the seconds became minutes became hours. The smell of pipe smoke and thin, diluted bleach. The women with their children milling around, looking over at him. Watching them as they took in the tag on his arm and decided that someone would surely be there to collect him. Then when the stationmaster, his slight stoop, the shine on the skin of his bald head, the pale indentation where his cap had been, a watch chain with a medal attached to it, when he came to talk to him, to confront him or comfort him, he didn’t know which, Wallace remembered being scared and running, the paper tag still tied around his arm. He remembered the sudden jolt of the noise and life on the streets outside after the hours in the waiting room.

It was the year of the Olympic Games in St Louis and the Louisiana Purchase Exhibition, the streets packed and swarming with people. A woman with arched eyebrows and a hat with a glossy pheasant’s wing, wrapped in a red scarf, children his own age laughing, parading along with their giant sticks full of fairy floss. The brutal heat. The sound of the automobiles as they passed, packed with families from all across the state. Wallace slept in an alleyway at the back of a steakhouse that first night. Wallace was tall for his age, broad in the shoulders for a boy of twelve. He
remembered how he had taken to stealing: an apple first from outside a store. The first week he had gone into the grander stores, telling them his mother was elsewhere inside if they enquired, before pilfering larger, more expensive items. The lies had come easily, instinctively. He would wait for hours around the entrance to the fair where he had followed the crowds on that first day. The military bands passing, the big wheel, the strong men and athletes. As if he might hide his grief amid all that chaos. He didn’t know what it was and wondered at the time if this was always how St Louis might be found once you departed that dim waiting room. Indeed, if this was life itself in any city away from the small towns of the west coast his mother and he had made their many temporary homes. Some days the spectacle itself was enough to dull the grief, to distract him as he wandered around the ground for the World’s Fair, past the lagoon where the families paddled along in pleasure boats, the flight cage where the birds flitted from steel perch to steel perch as the crowd looked on. He scavenged for scraps of food, which were plentiful. Sausages in split buns behind the Bavarian stall. Popcorn, orangeade, pickles. Repulsed at first to be eating things others discarded but forcing himself when he felt his stomach cramping. It was easy to become a boy who was separated from his family. He even made friends with one boy and played a while by the lakeside. Guarding the secret of where he slept at night, the lies about his mother and father fluent now, pointing them out on a boat in the distance, even waving. The boy’s mother had given them money to buy ice cream. Wallace remembered looking to see the boy watching him devour it, realising he betrayed something about himself. ‘I have to go now,’ the boy had said.

Wallace passed a week like this. Climbing into the coal chute by the locomotive house on the north side of the park by Oakland Avenue.
Once, when the guards arrived early and he did not think he could make it in without attracting their attention, further down on Skinner Street by the Wild Animals of California. Wallace would walk around the Grand Basin as the park began to fill. Their visitors perpetually at leisure, pleasure their sole purpose. He would stand in the Palace of Electricity behind the lagoon, in the grand columns of its entrance. The X-rays and the Fission Light. The scaled-down electric locomotives that moved in circles around the track laid out in the building. And in the Palace of Machinery with its turbines and machines that boasted the power of 8,000 horses. As the days wore on Wallace saw people’s reactions to him begin to change. He washed and cared for himself the best he could. But his nails were getting long and his hair unkempt. He could smell himself and his underclothes itched. He washed his face each day as his mother always insisted he should, still his fingernails looked grimy. Wallace was making his way down the Plaza of St Louis one morning after a fifth night sleeping rough.

‘Hey. Hey’ a boy said, rangy, freckled, teeth protruding at a painful looking angle from the front of his face, carrying about him the sense of sudden and explosive violence.

‘Hey, I seen you here yesterday.’

Wallace said nothing.

‘Where’s your Momma?’

The boy drew closer to him. Wallace recognised him from the day before when he saw him watching from the bridge over the lagoon on the east side of the Grand Basin.

‘You not gonna answer me?’ the boy said, screwing up his eyes against the sun.
The boy moved closer, his hands on Wallace’s shoulders, then a sudden, searing, pain ran through Wallace’s groin. He fell to the ground as the ache spread up into his stomach.

‘Git up,’ the boy was crouched down next to him. Wallace shut eyes tight, tiny points of light fading and leaving trails.

‘Git up now or I’m a gonna do worse to you,’ the boy said.

Wallace got to his feet. His face wet from the tears that had begun to stream down his cheeks. The boy had him by the wrist now gripping him tightly

‘I said don’t be cryin.’

The boy led Wallace through the crowd, brushing against the bodies, buffeted along. As they crossed the bridge over the lagoon, a tall man in a black homburg hat stopped the boys. He had a little girl with him who was eating a strawberry ice cream from a waffle shaped into a cone.

‘What are you doing to that boy, son?’ the man said looking at the two of them as the crowd jostled by on either side.

‘Oh sir, it ain’t nothing. This my brother.’

The boy put his arm around Wallace’s shoulder and grinned at the man.

‘Ain’t you my brother?’ he said turning Wallace.

‘Poor thing got himself lost.’

The man with the homburg said nothing just looked at Wallace. Wallace felt him peering at him, his pale green eyes narrowing for a moment.

‘I’m a take him back to Granma. There she is, over there by that fruit stand.’

The boy gestured toward a woman, leaning against a fruit stand, arms folded, hair in a bun wearing a wrapper in royal blue percale. The girl was tugging at the man’s ring finger. ‘Come on Papa,’ she said, ‘come on. We’ll miss it!’
The noise of a military band struck up and the boy tugged Wallace away sharply by the elbow. As the bass drum passed, Wallace turned to see the large man in the homburg looking for them in the crowd but the gap closed again.

‘I found him by the stall over there,’ the boy said to the woman ‘I seen him yesserday.’

The old woman looked at Wallace. Her wrapper was trimmed with deep pleated ruffles that looked like they needed laundering, stiff with dirt.

‘Where’s your momma?’ the woman asked.

Wallace felt a sharp stab in the ribs as the older boy poked him

‘Pshh, stop that now Nolan, you’ll hurt the boy. You ain’t got a momma?’ the woman asked.

‘S’alright, you come with us. We got a place you can stay. You hungry?’

Wallace felt the old woman’s hand run in his hair.

‘Come along with us now. We’ll take care of you.’

‘Ain’t that right Nolan?’ she said turning to the boy.

They walked silently through the streets of St Louis that afternoon, Nolan a little behind his grandmother who led Wallace by the hand. On her wrist was a clumsy tattoo that had faded with time, of a palm tree with a big eyed snake wrapped around it. They walked for what felt like hours down the city blocks, away from the direction of the fair until finally they reached cobbles. Cramped buildings, a squalid square packed with shacks and cellars. She showed him to the corner of the two-room house.

‘Sleeping, shitting, eating,’ the woman said pointing in turn to a nest of filthy blankets, the outhouse and the kitchen table. ‘Ain’t that so Nolan?’
Wallace lay awake that night in the corner of the room, listening to the
neighbourhood, women screaming at their men, babies bawling, the sharp barks of
dogs, the whistle of a freight train somewhere in the far distance. There was a brown
bird in a brass cage that had not been cleaned. The next morning Nolan and Wallace
made their way into St Louis at the woman’s instruction. ‘Beggin’ mainly and some
thieving.’ Nolan told him before insisting they take a detour down an alleyway
running behind a row of abandoned shops. Wallace watched Nolan pick up a stray
cat that was drinking from a puddle at the side of the street. Nolan held if for a while,
cradling it in his arms as he tickled its pale belly. Wallace then watched as Nolan tied
the cat to the base of a telegraph pole with a piece of string, Nolan pulling his sleeves
over his hands to protect himself from the cat’s scratching. It was a struggle but
when it was done Nolan stood back like a painter admiring his work. Before he led
Wallace away, almost as an afterthought, he took a lock-knife from his pocket and
cut off the cat’s tail.

When they returned that evening the animal was still tied to the pole, the blood-
soaked fur stiffened in the sun around the nub of bone and gristle where its tail had
been. The cat was still alive but had cut itself badly scratching and biting at the twine
that held it to the pole. It hissed as Nolan went to examine it. He prodded the cat in
its ribs with the toe of his boot, then began to laugh as he kicked at it harder and
harder until in the end Wallace had to turn away. Wallace was caught stealing the
next day in a shop Nolan sent him into. When the police officer had taken him back
with Nolan to the grandmother’s house she had denied ever seeing Wallace before.
Wallace was sent up before a series of boards at the Orphan’s Court. They reunited
him with the trunk he had left at the station. Stern men dressed in black shuffling
sheaves of paper in front of them, who spoke as if he wasn’t there. Then came a list
of other crimes and misdemeanours he had not been involved in, the list ran on and on, simple assault, burglary, affray, some of which he recognised as Nolan’s doing and remembered him boasting about the morning his grandmother had sent them out to beg. Wallace was passed to the supervision of the state and had been forgotten about in the reform school.

When Wallace woke the next morning in Price City he felt sick and had a terrible headache. A thin needling behind his eyes, a low, dull ache at his temple that spread right the way down to the base of his neck. He ran the tap, the water brackish at first then running clear. He filled a tooth mug and swilled the tepid water around his mouth. He thought about the journey ahead. The feeling of travelling back into his past, the places he remembered from stories his mother told long after they had left. He had one vision of his mother from that time. He could have been no more than four or five years old, it was evening and the day was cooling. He was standing in the doorway watching her as she bent her head into a vase of freshly cut garden flowers. Her eyes closed as she took in their fragrance, then turning to look at her young son, a smile breaking wider and wider across her face. She seemed a different woman in this image. Not the woman constantly worried about money and rent and restless, always wanting to move on, to leave town, never settling for more than a month or two before it was time to pack again. To move on as if something better would be waiting for them an hour or so down the road.
It was dawn when Wallace left the hotel in Price City. The thin-barred brass cage in the lobby that held the night porter when he had arrived was empty. He pushed the room key on its oversized wooden block through the crescent in the grille. There was a half-empty quart of milk resting on the worn seat on the attendant’s stool, Alpine Dairy embossed on its sides. The key cabinet, he saw, was full apart from a single brass hook where his own room key should hang. When he got to the Tourer Wallace surveyed the day’s drive he would take along the great route system of highways inside of the Rand McNally Auto Atlas. Elko, Redding, Reno. Across the top of Nevada, into Northern California over the Yolo Causeway west of Sacramento where Lana and Lige had spent a week last summer, sending him a postcard back at the filling station: the bright, white, man-made causeway stretching out over the silver waters and the rice fields beyond. Lige had come back to Caddo with a rash across his neck and chest, a dose of scombroid poisoning after eating a tin of bad mackerel on their last night at the motel. Wallace knew this westerly route would add time to the journey. It would be quicker to go north through Idaho, through Burley and Twin Falls, but having seen the Yolo Causeway on the map, having been reminded of the postcard and how pleased he had been to get it, to be thought of by others who were absent, even if it was just Lige and Lana, and even if Lige had probably protested and told his daughter its was idiotic to send a card back to Wallace as she’d see him next week and what kind of way was that to conduct herself. Nonetheless Wallace wanted to drive the Tourer over the causeway. He wanted badly to pass over that
bright bridge Lige and Lana crossed on their vacation, on their way to six nights at the Yolo Club with its circular and legendary BBQ. It would be dawn again before he reached Oregon.

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Wallace’s heel and instep began to ache where they rested on the gas pedal. Cramping so he had to flick his foot every few minutes as if fishing with a line tied to his toe when something takes at the bait. He heard his spine crack at the top as he rolled his shoulders back and forth, a dull ache radiating through his lower back above his pelvis. He wished he had gotten round to mending the seats in the Tourer earlier; there’s so much he would have made right in her had he known he was going to take this trip. But as he drove his thoughts began to simplify. The voices, the faces that had skittered across his mind earlier in the journey quietened and faded. Eventually there was just the road, just the highway and the thin broken line down its centre: snaking, curving, curling, as if it were a line that reeled him back to some point he been set apart from. He felt the sun slowly climbing across his windscreen as he drove. Until it was dead ahead and glaring into his eyes. He drove on, competing now, seeing whose will was the strongest his or that of the sun. The journey became a test, a physical test of his endurance. His palms were sweating at the wheel, the indentations in the wheel moulded for his fingers, greasy. His eyes narrowed, the skin on his face growing tight and tender.

Eventually the sun gave in and fell down by the side until the sky was filled with all the soft colours of dusk and it was almost time to turn on his headlamps against the dark. The darkness filling up the scrub all around, filling the world up to its brim, right to the top of the mountains in the distance that he glimpsed in the rear view where a weak bar wavered on. The car ran beautifully all day, smoothly, no
stammering, no complications with the engine, as if all those days under the tarpaulin in the lock-up near the Haskell store it had been waiting for this. Wallace trusted the machine, felt it willing him on, felt it has been made for this journey, all the moving parts finding their full expression. His hands warm around the wheel. Despite the aches and the cramping in his foot he felt at one with it. The soft roar, the hushed whoosh of the wheels on the good road became the sound of the sea as he thought of the beach at Eureka when he was a boy in that final town his mother took them to after all the others. Playing in sand while his mother read, the wind coming in over the dunes behind her. The tangled root-bed of a tree had found its way down onto the beach He was standing where the dry sand met the wet, three lines of breaking surf ahead of him out towards the ocean. And if he turned back towards the beach and his mother he saw there were trails in the sand, footprints running side by side and paw marks a dog must have made. The sea and the wind getting louder and louder but it soothed him, and in his memory he raised his arm to wave to his mother, dressed in black on the empty beach and wearing a hat with a wide brim, one hand holding it on her head against the wind and the book now face down on her lap, her legs were folded under her to the side and she waved back to him and as she did the wind got up again and he saw the parasol blow inside out before wheeling off. Somersaulting in circles, down the empty beach. Sand squalls spinning around it and his mother on her feet and the sound of the tyres of the Tourer on the highway and swoosh of the traffic that is passing was the sound of the sea at Eureka. And he wanted badly to be there now, back on that beach running behind his mother as they chased the black umbrella and the wind got up and sent it careering higher and higher, his mother holding her black wide brimmed hat to her head still and running as fast as her skirts would allow and Wallace gaining on her and gaining on her. The patterns her heels
made in the wet sand. And now by the sound of the highway Wallace was looking in on the scene again, seeing his younger self running from the point by the sea where he stood, the white lines of the surf parallel to him. And remembering that she had taken him there because she had promised all summer, she promised since they arrived in Eureka, but now it was September and the beach was deserted and because she had had news from the doctor. And he didn’t understand what she was telling him, when they first got down onto the sands and the sea was there before them, holding his warm hands in her cold hands, something about her bones and a sickness she had coming to her. Then as she composed herself on the beach at Eureka, planting the black umbrella back in the sand, held his hands in hers, her hands were so cold he remembered, and she looked down at him and he knew that’s when he had heard the name Barzee. She said: ‘Your father’ and then ‘that boy, that bastard boy Barzee.’ And he had nodded, ‘Go on now, go and play,’ she said and she had waved him away barefoot toward the cold sea and the lines of white surf all coming in one after the other; and the cold sea and wet sand and the dry sand and his mother sitting sideways on her legs under the black umbrella, waving to him in the moment before the wind got up and sent it spinning down the beach.

Wallace saw a road sign for Roseville ten miles away. He was drowsy now. The memory that had risen up by the sound of the highway left him spent, so spent he no longer felt the ache in his instep or his back against the sack from the Haskell store tied to the broken seat of the Tourer. A mile outside of Roseville Wallace fell asleep. Sleep took him gently, body lowered down onto a feather bed, all the aches softening as it washed over him, shoulders dropping, tension gone from them, his eyes smoothing, the sound of the tyres that was the sound of the sea at Eureka easing him, soothing him, until his head dropped forwards and soft, clean, warm waves claim
him, until the noise of a klaxon jolted him bolt upright and he opened his eyes into the oncoming traffic in the distance in the lane he drifted into. Wallace swerved back into his lane in the face of an oncoming wagon sounding its horn from two hundred yards in the distance. The driver looked down on him from his cab and mouthed something angry Wallace couldn’t make out as he passed. Wallace felt his hands trembling. He wound down the window and pinched his thigh hard. It was 5 a.m. He slowed the car down and as it crept along the empty road and came to a halt Wallace looked out of his window. There was a low mist hanging over the orchard to his right that stretched for miles behind the broken down wire fence. There were figures, bent backed, hurrying along the lines of trees. He saw the men were lighting fires. They stretched out in lines into the distance, the low flames flickering and guttering. The flames burned on in the chill early morning. The men were calling to each other across the orchard. He watched the trail of low flames until the sound of a horn behind him shook Wallace from his thoughts. A man from the orchard who was standing close to the broken down fence, looked out and over to him. Glancing in his rear view mirror Wallace saw a farm wagon behind him. The back of the flatbed truck was piled with caged chickens. The birds three to a cage, piled precariously high, stray feathers falling softly onto the road. Wallace gestured with his hand out of the window and started his engine.

Wallace followed the road north towards Medford. There was an old hotel with a broken down sign from a realtor fixed to it. The windows on the ground floor were boarded up. There were two men sitting in rocking chairs on the porch. Wallace pulled up in the Tourer and walked over towards them.

‘Morning gentlemen. I wonder if you can help a fella out.’
The boards on the porch were badly rotted and Wallace wondered what the men were doing here. He scanned the town but could see no other sign of life.

‘I’m looking for man named Barzee I believe lived here some years ago now’

The older man had an unkempt beard but his hair was cropped close to his head, so close Wallace could see the scalp. The younger man wore two shirts and over them a pair of old denim dungarees, on his head a battered, brown fedora. The younger man, Wallace thought might be the bearded man’s son, repeated the question to the older man with the long beard.

‘He went out east. Chicago. Went to play music,’ came the sudden, unexpected reply.

‘When?’ Wallace asked.

‘Thirty years now. Family all passed. Had a farm out over between Ruch and Buncom.’

The man with the beard and the cropped hair made a gesture with his hands as if he was bringing two tiny cymbals together.

‘You won’t find much here,’ the younger man said to Wallace.

‘Hotel closed sixteen years ago last summer after the last of the folk here moved on not long after. My father still likes to come sit here some days on account of the memories. The state intends to raze it. You were lucky to find us. I bring him by here some mornings on my way to work. Though we never stay as long as he would like to.’ The man pointed to their pick-up which was parked across the pot-holed road.

After a few moments silence, the man in the double shirts guided his father down off the porch. He led him over the road, one hand on the old man’s elbow, the other lightly on the small of his back. When they reached their vehicle, the body coated in
mud and dust the younger man gave a wave back to Wallace. Instead of turning back to Caddo it was then he resolved to drive to Chicago.
Wallace was ready for the road this time. His body was hardened to it. Ready to let the parade of faces rise up before him, flickering so he half saw them as he stared along the centre of the freeway: Lige, Lana, Lampadusa, the boy with the fat breasts who beat him at the reform school in St Louis. Rita Phieffer, head tipped back, her teeth on show and her wrinkled throat, laughing with the preacher as Wallace stood there trying to strike up the courage to involve himself in their conversation. The girls at the cathouse in Durant, the sullen men playing poker at the table, Molly Cobb and her brother Silas with his big empty eyes. Then his mother. Last of all at the end of the long line. They all filed through this mind as the Tourer ate up the road between that abandoned town in Oregon and his endpoint in Chicago. Wallace had enough money still to cover the cost of gas and the Tourer felt good, it felt right to be running her this far and this hard after all that time under the tarpaulin in the lock up a few blocks from the Haskell store. The Tourer could go and go just so long as he kept her gassed and kept himself focused on the road, no stopping for food or anything that might come close to comfort, anything that would soften the journey, make him drowsy make him likely to abandon it and return to Caddo to work whatever Lige has lined up for him in the lubitorium. As long as he stayed focused he would reach Chicago. The rest he could figure out when he got there.

When he saw the first signs for Salt Lake City he almost turned south but stopped and stayed the night at the Cherry Tree Motel, a cottage court of single low buildings. He passed an automobile camp on the way in, the occupants eating at a long fold-out table. There must have been thirty of them three huge metal soup bowls
between them to share. The owner of the Cherry Tree, seeing the state of the
bodywork on the Tourer came out to ask if Wallace had come from the camp,
anxious at first but appeased when Wallace told him he had not. The room smelled of
fresh paint and the window would not stay open so he wedged a tooth mug from the
bathroom into it. He heard footsteps outside coming and going throughout the night
as if someone was packing up all of their possessions, as if a full-scale house
removal were underway. He had forty dollars left in his wallet.

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It was early morning when Wallace reached Chicago after driving through the
following day and night. He pulled the Tourer into an alleyway at the junction of
Michigan and Jackson Boulevard, between the Navy Pier and Shedd Aquarium. He
got out and walked down to the harbour side. The lake was choppy. He pulled the
collar up on his jacket and walked towards a one cent coffee stand but it was locked
up and the vendor was nowhere to be seen. He stood watching the water, the little
wind ruffled lips of white that vanished and sank across the great gun-metal expanse,
a coastguard boat in the distance making its way towards the Harbour Light. Wallace
walked back to the Tourer, he felt the early chill around the tips of his fingers, his
neck and the top of his hips. Inside the Tourer he swung himself around so his feet
stretched out across the passenger seat, his head wedged up against the driver side
window. He bunched his collar tight around his neck and closed his eyes, turning
slightly onto his side. Wallace felt the muscles and sinews in his body beginning to
relax, to signal back to his brain something close to pleasure in little throbs, his
conscious mind giving up on making sense of anything at all, no longer turning over
the impulses that had led him on this interstate night drive, content to stumble on into
the nested softnesses of sleep that lay ahead, now tantalisingly close. There was a rap on the window. Wallace turned around awkwardly in the seat, one eye open just a fraction, the other screwed tight shut. He looked up to see a police officer at the end of the shining nightstick, the rounded tip resting on the window. Even though it was cloudy out the officer was wearing dark glasses and a peaked cap with a shield at the centre that seemed too small for his large head. As Wallace swung himself around and wound down the window he saw the officer had on leather riding boots and trousers that bellowed below at the hips, the type Teddy Roosevelt might have worn on safari. The officer could have been Teddy Roosevelt’s less portly brother.

‘This your vehicle?’ the officer sounded weary, as if this wasn’t the first time he’d found Wallace here. In the wing mirror Wallace saw the policeman’s motorcycle, an Indian like the one Harry Louk’s boy used to ride, he’d looked it over a couple of times when the front fork got a hairline crack that worried Louk’s boy and meant he was never able to ride it over 20mph. Wallace thought of what McKenzie Getchell might say if caught in this situation, how he would smooth the exchange with the lawman, engineer it so the officer helped him on his way, effortlessly befriending him. What the hell, Wallace thought, there was nothing to lose.

‘Indian Scout?’ Wallace said to the officer, gesturing with the top of his head back toward the motorcycle. The officer looked at him blankly, then narrowed his eyes as if reclassifying Wallace: not just some bum dozing in a car with beaten up bodywork but as a certifiable lunatic.

‘The motorcycle,’ Wallace added for clarity.

‘Chief’ the officer said after a pause.

Wallace thought of McKenzie Getchell, invoking him again. He rested his forearm on the open window turning his head back towards the motorcycle.
‘How’s she running?’

They talked through the open window of the Tourer about the Indian. Eventually Wallace got out of the car. He was surprised to find he stood a head taller than the police officer. The officer seemed impressed by how much he knew about the motorcycle. The officer’s name was Clayton and he had a Cleveland at home, with a sidecar he built himself from scratch, even turning the axle. Clayton took a photograph from his wallet and showed Wallace. A morose-looking woman in a soft cloche hat that came down over her ears, sat in the hand-built sidecar, staring unhappily out at the camera. Clayton took off of his cap and jammed it under his arm

‘What’s a mechanic from Caddo, Oklahoma doing all the way over here?’

Wallace explained the situation as truthfully as he could.

‘Well,’ Clayton said taking a handkerchief from his pocket and dabbing his forehead, ‘we are three million in this city and more since they ran the L out to Wilmette and Berwyn. How on God’s earth you expecting to find this fellow?’

But even evoking McKenzie Getchell left Wallace short of a reply.

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Eventually Clayton directed Wallace south towards a neighbourhood where musicians went to pawn their instruments when times got tough. It seemed as good a place as any to begin. Wallace thanked Clayton and followed his directions to a row of Loan Offices and Pawn Shops with massive lettered signs outside offering to buy everything from Guns to Diamonds to Watches to Fishing Rods to Reels. The windows glittered with a dizzying excess of everything their signs listed. Wallace went from shop to shop asking after Barzee, but was met again and again with blank and bemused faces, feeling more and more foolish at each time of asking. In the last pawnshop on the row there were scores of instruments hanging on the wide double
height windows; dented trombones, clarinets, a double bass missing all the strings but one, a violin with an ivory chin piece, a drum covered in what looked like faded tiger skin, guitars by the dozen, one with a mother of pearl fret board and some other instruments Wallace didn’t recognise and couldn’t name. There were three musicians still, or perhaps already, in evening dress standing looking at the tiger skin drum. Wallace made his way towards the counter and asked the assistant if he knew a Barzee. The proprietor was in his fifties wearing a jacket with sleeves that rode up well above the wrists, his features pointed and rat-like. His head completely bald, the dome like an emu’s egg.

‘Nope, I don’t know no Barzee.’

One of the musicians by the tigerskin drum turned to Wallace,

‘Barzee? Barzee? Yeah, he ain’t played since my pappy’s day.’

Wallace turned to take in the man.

‘Last I heard he was living down on… where was it now…’

‘He played with your pappy?’ the proprietor asked ignoring Wallace, talking across him.

‘Sure he did.’

‘Hold on’ the proprietor said and disappeared into the back of the store. He came out a few moments later with a stack of shellacs in brown paper sleeves which he spread across the greasy glass counter.

‘That’s him right there’ the musician said, his white bow tie undone at his lapels. Clipped to the paper cover of one of the shellacs was a photograph. There was a man in wire-framed spectacles holding a trombone and another sitting cross-legged on a stool with a banjo. Behind them is a man older that the others, looking at the floor; the only man in the photograph not smiling.
‘Can’t make him out too well, but that’s Barzee. Must have been the only record he played on.’

‘Can I?’ Wallace asked

‘Sure’ the proprietor said, then added, ‘Ten bucks’

Wallace looked at the man to see if he was joking.

‘Rare’ he said sounding like a bullfrog at the pond side at evening time.

Wallace counted out the notes and handed the man the money.

‘Last I heard Barzee was living with a waitress over on Loomis over by Gilpin,’ the musician said, leafing through the reaming shellacs on the glass countertop.

‘Or maybe it was Clinton and Harrison. This was years ago. Wouldn’t hold too much hope of finding him. I’ll give you that for free,’ the musician in black tie winked then turned back toward the drum he had been discussing with his friends as the proprietor scooped up the shellacs in his arms and returned them to the back of the store.

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Wallace parked the Tourer at the corner of Clinton and Harrison. The directions of the musician from the pawnshop lead him to row of low tarpaper shacks. There was a huge conical water tank with pointed asphalt roof on the building the shacks were built up against. Wallace paused by a torn poster for Johnson’s Wax that fluttered from a hoarding. He looked around him. On the other side of the street there was an ebony skinned woman, wearing white stockings and a crinkle-crepe dress of lavender wool. She peered out from over a pair of horn-rimmed celluloid spectacles as she pushed a perambulator along in front of the red brick tenement houses that faced onto the shantytown. Wallace approached her with the photograph that was clipped to the record sleeve. She looked at it:
‘I don’t know a Barzee, don’t know anybody of that name,‘
She smelled of palm oil: the pram, Wallace saw now, held a whole drum of the stuff.
‘Do remind me a little of old Edgar though.’
She took the sleeve from Wallace brought the picture so close to her face it almost touched her nose.
‘Quite the likeness. He live down over there at the shacks.’
The flimsy dwellings, built of old barrels and tarpaper, abutted what Wallace now saw was a large institutional looking brick block building, the high windows barred with strips of iron. Outside one of the biggest shacks in the row two men were smoking. One wore a newsboy’s cap, the other an ancient looking felt Carlsbad all misshapen and warped. The man in the Carlsbad held a broom and the other had his foot on an empty wire cart marked ‘Apples’. The shack they were outside had a serving hatch that was boarded up.
‘Edgar?’ Wallace asked. Without speaking the man in the Carlsbad tipped the handle of the broom towards a shack further along. Outside, a perambulator similar to the one the lady in the lavender dress was pushing, lay abandoned on its side. The shack had a curved roof with layers of rotted and water-bloated boarding piled on top of it. Fixed to the walls at the front by the door were empty picture frames of various sizes and shapes, some ornate, some made of plaster, and around them shards of broken mirror glass, by the door and an old army issue camp bed folded and pushed flush against the wall. Wallace opened the door.
‘Who is it?’ a voice barked from inside the shack. The room smelled like an abattoir. There were rags hung across the window.
‘Now look, no need to be getting rough. No need for that.’
The man spread his arms wide, stretching them out to their full span in the gloom of the shack.

‘I’m sick. You see I’m sick.’ He said slapping his chest with his hand.

‘You gonna beat a sick man? All this over a little money? I said I’ll pay when I can.’

‘Are you Barzee?’ Wallace asked

‘Who asking?’

‘My name is Wallace, Wallace Wright, I think you may have known my mother, Lottie, an English woman.’

Wallace pulled up a stool half a yard from the bedside. The room was tiny, the fetid air made it hard to breathe, there was chamber pot, unemptied, at the foot of the bed. He heard something in the darkness at the edge of the room, a scratching then a rattle. He could hear the men by the empty apple cart talking outside.

‘How ever did you find me?’ Barzee asked Wallace.

‘I am not a well man. I need my medicine. Regular. Getting hard to get hold of my medicine. I am glad you found me though. Fated. Must have been. I can tell you a story,’ the man said, his voice suddenly strong then fading ‘if you get me that medicine bottle from the chest over there,’ he said, lifting himself up in the bed.

Wallace looked at Barzee more closely now. His skin was waxen. His hair all but gone and what was left was greased back from his forehead. The veins were thick in his bare arms and across the backs of his puckered hands.

‘Are you sick?’ Wallace asked.

‘Sorta, yeah, I’m sorta sick.’

Barzee moved in his sheets like a wounded animal. Wallace thought of the farmer he knew out near Nails Crossing whose tractor he once mended, he would capture
foxes from his land and house them in stinking hutches too small for them to move in, lying on top of soiled newspapers behind chicken wire, never feeding them so eventually over time they sickened and died. It acted as a deterrent he said. You got used to their howling.

‘Need my medicine,’ Barzee said again stabbing his finger at an upturned tea chest. Wallace retrieved a brown bottle from among a pile of black rubber teething rings, some chewed right through. He watched Barzee unscrew the metal cap and finger out a dusty tablet, like a broken piece of chalk, which he tossed down his throat without water. The bottle’s label read Lily and Company, Indianapolis, from the weight Wallace concluded there was only a handful left.

‘I’m asleep awhile. Why don’t you, …’

Barzee circled the phrase drowsily then flopped on it,

‘Eh, why don’t you come see me tomorrow.’

Wallace watched him slump back in his bed, the bottle still in his hand.

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Wallace returned the next morning. He had found a hotel a few blocks away and taken a room for a dollar. There were stained sheets and a window with a broken latch that wouldn’t close that let the noise in from the street below all night. Wallace dreamed of Barzee and his father. Barzee was a boy but with the face he had now, his teeth all gone, playing with his father in the garden of their house in Mahloh. That next morning on his way to see Barzee Wallace bought a can of K brand Spaghetti from a corner store. There was a kerosene primus in the corner of Barzee’s shack. It wouldn’t light at first but eventually the flame licked up in a whoosh around the burner cap. It took a few minutes for the spaghetti to heat through and as there were no dishes Wallace had to pour it back into the can and carry it over to Barzee in
his bed. Wallace watched Barzee spooning the oily worms of spaghetti to his lips, grunting and chewing noisily.

‘Thirty years ago I came to this city,’ Barzee said, sauce around his mouth.

‘Played cornet with the Creole Belles. Played with some others too. I was a strange boy by most people’s reckoning, always had that gift for music. My people were farming people couldn’t stand them much and I always knew I was made for better than they could offer. Liked my own company and my own counsel is what I kept,’ Barzee tipped the can back to his mouth, a string of spaghetti hung over the edge of the tin and he licked it off. His tongue was furred thickly white all over.

‘Now there was a man called Quinn, whose name you may have heard when you were growing up. I worked running messages between your father and Quinn who were involved in an enterprise, a mining initiative of sorts. That’s how I happened to see your father that afternoon: to observe him observing Quinn.’

‘I don’t understand’ Wallace said.

‘No matter, I’ll explain it all to you sometime. Now pass me over that medicine.’ Wallace reached for the brown bottle on the tea chest. There was liquid in this one.

‘Your father was a true friend Wallace, loved me like as if I was his very own flesh and blood. I need to sleep a little now, you come back see me tomorrow.’

It went on like this for two more days. Wallace arriving with food for Barzee: first hot dogs in a glass jar, then a loaf of bread he bought from a Mexican boy in the kitchen of the hotel. Wallace and Barzee, sitting and talking in his shack. As the days went by Barzee claimed to know more and more about Wallace’s father. Wallace did not mention the letter. He was waiting for Barzee to mention it as he was certain these visits were some kind of test, there was something Barzee was withholding. In the afternoons when Wallace returned to his hotel he wondered if Barzee was
fabricating the whole thing. Wallace thought perhaps he needed to gain his trust. His money was running low now and as the week wore on his gifts became less and less substantial so that on the last day when he arrived he has only another can of K brand spaghetti to offer.

‘I got some bills want paying.’ Barzee said between mouthfuls. ‘No way to put this easy to you.’ he added looking up from the bowl Wallace had taken from the hotel kitchen, ‘but looks like good luck done send you into my life.’

Wallace took the empty bowl from Barzee’s hands,

‘I know your father would have wanted you to do this favour. I know that right here in my heart.’ Barzee tapped his fingertips into his breastbone and it made a hollow sound.

‘I ran up some debts Wallace. And there ain’t no way I can pay them clear. They been here to see me, took a claw hammer to my knee cap.’

Barzee drew back the filthy sheets and showed Wallace his knee, the wound was suppurating where it showed through a dirty browned bandage, a fetid reek like old meat coming off it.

‘Under there by the desk you’ll find something. Now hear me out Wallace. Nobody ever going know it was you. Who knows you here? Who knows you come looking for Barzee? I have such a story I could tell to you. Here’ Barzee said, ‘take a little medicine, come on now, do you good. Make things clearer.’

Wallace took the bottle from Barzee. The sides were warm where Barzee had been clutching it. He wanted Barzee to trust him. He took a long pull of the sweet syrup. Wallace felt himself drifting off, edging towards sleep. Barzee heaved himself out of the bed and shook him.
‘I want to show you something. I want to show you that favour needs taking care of.’

Wallace helped Barzee into the front seat of the Tourer. He looked frail, an apparition almost, outside of his shack. His skin white as calf-skin, white as coconut flesh. A greatcoat pulled on over a pair of stained long-johns.

‘I want to show you someone, man by the name of Mr Maddox.’

Barzee said as he directed Wallace though the slum. In the gutter two children bickered over a warped metal hoop.

‘Got myself into some debts with Maddox on the ponies and on the dogs and paying for my medicine, which costs more than it did, seeing as you can’t buy it over the counter no more.’

Wallace was feeling dizzy from the medicine, like the time he’d been out in the sun all day fishing with Burl Cobb and come home to the Haskell store with a bright red butterfly shape burned across his nose and cheeks.

‘He offered me double or quits and I took it twice, and if they don’t collect on me then others get it into their heads not to pay their debts. Maddox calling in debts as if it was the end of days. I got word about a fellow who was cut up with a bow saw on account of owing him just half of what I do. Found his body locked in the trunk of a car that got run into the lake. Everyone knew who done it. Anyhow the fellow what gets my medicine got word to me that Barzee would be next. Told me I best pay or get out of here. Well see I ain’t got no place to be getting out to and I ain’t got no money to be paying up with. Then fate sends you my way. Stop the car.’

Wallace pulled the Tourer to a halt outside a Pool Hall called Duffys. The sign was lit with neon bulbs but half of them were blown.
‘Up there is where Mr Maddox office is. Every evening he comes out at six. He leaves by the alley there.’

Barzee leaned forward in the car and pointed towards the alleyway. A black dog, half-starved, was rooting between two upturned garbage pails, a pool of piss shining blue on the cobbles.

‘Ain’t overlooked. All you got to do is walk up and put one in him. Bam.’ Barzee said with a little spurt of animation ‘No one ever would know it’s you.’

Wallace looked at Barzee in his grimy long johns, the patches at the crotch, his greatcoat pulled tight about him, the webbing of blue veins across his face, the dryness at the corner of his lips, the grey muzzle of stubble, his wide dark lashes blinked twice.

‘I know you got it in you. You’re father’s son. He was a great man. Would never shy at helping out a friend. Truly, Wallace, there is so much I could tell you.’ Barzee closed his eyes and leaned back in his seat, he began to hum. It was a tune Wallace had not heard for years, not since childhood from his mother. He closed his eyes and it was his mother right there next to him in the Tourer. He felt a tear rolling down his cheek and into the corner of his mouth. Barzee snapped himself upright and his humming stopped. He slowly opened his eyes and for a moment that was something childlike and almost innocent about the man.

‘Ain’t the half of it Wallace.’ Barzee said softly, ‘I used to crouch by that window, listening to your mother sing in that sweet voice of hers. None of them songs ever left me. When I came to the city to make my fortune it was your mother’s songs I would sing myself to sleep with at night. How do you like that? Never had nothing like that on the Barzee farm. My own father was too busy beating the life half out of my mother. And my mother was too busy nursing bruises or beating my
brothers. Had a wire cable she used for the beatings she would give us, would feather us up something wicked, whip your initials into you for transgressing. Then that would set my old man off who’d go at her with his fists. That’s why the bond we have is special Wallace, I told you we brothers.’

Barzee tapped his knuckles at Wallace’s shoulder,

‘Lot of things never left me. Your mother used to speak her thoughts out loud. How’d you like to know what your mother was thinking on those days alone in that house with you? I got them, that’s my treasure, got them all locked away in here,’ Barzee tapped his temple with his forefinger, the nail rimmed with black.

‘Just like music, all those days of watching, remembering, locking all them special things about your mother away. She had a way with the language Wallace, way of phrasing things just right even if it was only the air and her sole self she thought she was talking to.’

Wallace said nothing but just stared ahead and watched the dog limp away from the slick of its piss through the bowed triangle of the windscreen wiper mark.

‘You know they prized me for my memory. Most days before I came to depend so heavy on the medicine if I wasn’t working with the bandleaders I’d be working for the bookmakers. That’s where I picked up the habit. Memory better than any man I ever met. I can give your mother back to you Wallace. Easy. Just like that.’

Barzee snapped his finger with a click that sounded like the bones might shatter.

‘Just got do this one little thing for me.’

Barzee clutched at his kidney with his right hand, twisting in his seat, buckled with pain.

‘Take me back. I’m sick. I need my medicine.’
Wallace sat in the Tourer turning Barzee’s revolver over in his hands. It was old and heavy, and weighed about the same as a pipe wrench. It had a swing out cylinder and a hard honeycomb grip. Wallace remembered one of the Cobb brothers, Burl, taking him to shoot rabbits one night not long after he had arrived in Caddo when he was day labouring for them at the farm. Burl with a Winchester .22 repeater slung over his shoulder, the trick was to walk up in the dark then whip the covers off from over the lamps. They’d only be taking cottontails, Burl told him as they walked from the Cobb Farm down a dirt track to where the rabbits were. Cottontails never got to more than three or four pounds. Burl said he’d taken a ten-pound swamper the year before and a buff-brown Jack, which must have weighed about the same, from a patch of brush near a neighbour’s place where they were treating his alfalfa crop unkindly. Wallace remembered Burl used the word ‘unkindly’ to describe the feeding of the jackrabbit on the alfalfa. Wallace stood there with the lamps that night, one in each hand, spinning around as Burl commanded. They had run out of rounds for the Winchester after an hour but Burl had pulled an old Bulldog revolver from the waistband of his trousers, with no guard around the trigger, and let Wallace fire off a several shots laughing as the bullets bit into the dirt yards wide from the long-eared cottontails who seemed unmoved by the firing. As Wallace sat in the Tourer he went over Barzee’s proposition. But it didn’t make sense, the parts just didn’t fit together. He checked his watch it was 5.55pm.
When Barzee had passed him the medicine, Wallace had taken another two pulls; he must have drained off a quarter of the bottle this time. It made the stinking shack and Barzee’s company tolerable, the boasting, drawing on the bottle, hoping the clarity might come over him again. Before he knew what had taken him he had gone to the drawer and picked up the revolver muttering ‘Ok, Ok,’ to Barzee and made for the door. He did not know if he would do it. But he wanted time. Time to consider how to get the truth from Barzee. He was groggy still from the drive across country. And now he found himself sitting in his car contemplating shooting a stranger, the elation from the medicine making him feel that for once in his life everything might be ok. He knew it didn’t add up, that it was wrong and yet there seemed something fated about it. Wallace checked his watch again: 5.59, he peered from the parked car down the alley and saw a man emerging from a side door a short distance away.

As Wallace walked towards the man he felt a sense of calm he had not known in a long time, a lightness that neared elation, a feeling he remembered from childhood, from walking with his mother on the beach at Eureka with the sun on the back of his neck. Each moment seemed extended beyond its normal length, as if he were drifting towards something so certain and absolute he need not fear it. They were almost eye to eye now, Wallace and the short man with a cowlick of black hair and a nose that had been broken several times over, lumpen, full of fractured of cartilage. He was wearing an Ulster like Lige’s only this one was in much better condition and trimmed with fur. Wallace felt so tired, he just wanted to sleep for a very long time yet every part of the man who approached him now seemed intensely vivid and clear, as if picked out by the headlamps from darkness around him, as if Wallace were seeing this unremarkable man as he had never seen anybody before, with something close to total clarity. Wallace felt his hand tighten around the revolver in his pocket,
his index finger slowly slide along the metal trigger guard then onto the cold lip of the trigger. The man nodded, a suggestion of a smile on his lips, which were red, Wallace noticed, and sore looking. His finger slid across the trigger and Wallace tipped the revolver back in his pocket so its barrel was square on to the oncoming man. Wallace felt a pounding inside his chest like someone had turned the volume up on it. And everything was very bright and loud. Then the man passed him. Wallace felt his grip loosen on the revolver. He turned on his heels and braced himself against the brick wall. He felt the salvia streaming into this mouth, then a prickling along his neck and all across his scalp. Wallace vomited, a thick mustard coloured vomit over his shoes, forehead pressed against the damp brick of the wall. He span around and pressed his palms flat against the bricks. Then the heavy fug that came down over him after he had swallowed the medicine lifted and he stood there breathing in the air watching headlamps climb the wall of the alley.
‘Is it done?’

‘Yes’ Wallace said without hesitation, placing the revolver down on the table, the handkerchief wrapped around it.

‘Your father would be proud of you Wallace, helping old Barzee out like this. We brothers after all ain’t we?’ Wallace was silent. Barzee shrugged.

‘Lemme see now what I can remember. Better make it quick as you won’t want to be lingering too long. Safest not be, I’d wager.’

Wallace watched as Barzee dragged himself up in his bed, pulling his upper body straight with his thin arms. His filthy bedclothes hung loose around him, his face like a painted corpse propped up in an open casket.

‘Don’t you worry one bit you done the whole neighbourhood a favour.’

Wallace heard the wet rattle of mucus shifting in Barzee’s chest and up into his throat as he chuckled to himself.

‘Now. I told you earlier ‘bout my watching. And about how I came one day to be watching your father as he was looking in on Mr Quinn and what your father took to be Mr Quinn’s boy engaged in some un-Godly acts out in those woods. Well what your father didn’t know,’ he paused and reached for a pipe on the stand by his bed. He tamped down a plug of tobacco with his thumb. He drew on his pipe, the bowl glowing in the gloom.

‘Is that it was no boy that Mr Quinn was with, that was his bride, save she was young, in her teens, thirteen, fourteen I heard. Quinn met her up in Alberta and brung her down into Oregon. They say Quinn traded one hundred prime pelts for her. He
had disguised her so as not to attract attention; varying as it did town by town as to how folk might react to such a pairing. She was the reason for his leaving Alberta. Caught sight of her once washing herself over at Quinn’s place. You can see why a man would want to keep a piece of flesh like that all to himself. Well that afternoon Quinn catches your father looking in on them. I did not hear what was said but I think your father was given an almighty shock, thinking he had seen worse than what he had done. Quinn chased him through the woods.’ Barzee pushed his hand down his long johns and tugged at the crotch.

‘Anyhow Quinn chases your father through the woods then brings him clattering down. Managed to get up close and your father was in a bad state indeed shook by what he saw and what he thought he was witnessing.’

‘Where did my father go?’

‘I couldn’t say. Home perhaps. Most folks go home.’

Barzee coughed, a deep hard rattle, there were tiny specks blood on the front of his shirt.

‘But that ain’t the all of it. See not long after your father left, Priddy started staying over at your mother’s house. I would see them together. Priddy working in the garden out at the front of the homestead with them drill beans he strung up. Digging the long grass to make room for vegetables and such. Seen him playing with you a number of times, dandling you on his knee.’

Wallace moved closer to the bed.

‘He must have lived there with your mother, let me see now, two whole years. But Priddy being the man he was, well, wasn’t happy just to take up with that young English woman. Strange pair they made, her with those burns him with that red hair of his. By this point the mine was taking out a bit of quartz enough to keep it going.
That was when Mayhew, who owned the orchard your father worked came out to visit.’

Wallace heard the name Mayhew and for a moment he was back standing on that platform in St Louis.

‘You sick?’ Barzee asked ‘Medicine?’

‘No, I’m fine.’

‘Well this Mayhew came out. Big news he was arriving in our town. Quinn gets to him first. Takes him out for a luncheon at the Condor Hotel. Meets him right there off of the coach that brung him from Medford. Spent a whole day with Mayhew.’

Another fit of coughing came over Barzee. His body buckling and bending. An old woman, a neighbour, leaned in around the door but Barzee shooed her away.

‘Now I don’t know if he threatened Mayhew or charmed the man or perhaps it was some of the both. But he got to him, and this fellow Mayhew signed over the property there and then. Now maybe he told Mayhew of the illegality of the actions so far; your father had overlooked permits and licences I heard; and maybe Quinn lined it all up to look like he was doing this fellow Mayhew a favour in taking the land off of his hands before fines and such were visited upon him and then there was of course that boy who was killed. I suppose somebody had to take responsibility for that. And with your father gone that perhaps looked like it would fall to Mayhew. But anyhow soon after Quinn was running that mine and Mayhew arranged for some of the German fellows to take over the orchards or what was left after the mine had been carved out.’

‘And my mother?’

‘Well, now you must not be angry with me when I tell you this, I was a boy at the time you will remember but shortly before Mayhew signed over that land to Quinn I
was called in to lead two men over to your mother’s house. By now Priddy had taken up with your mother, though to my knowledge officially he was still sleeping in the front of the house. I know this because I passed the place often. I was keen on watching as a boy as I told you. When this man Mayhew seen your mother and Priddy together, as they were, well that was just about the end of things from Mayhew’s point of view. Over that long drunk lunch in Condor Hotel, Quinn had persuaded Mayhew your mother and Priddy had been in league all along, that they had driven your father out of that place, that it had always been their plan. That Priddy was a notorious agitator and that your young mother had fallen under his spell. I think Quinn even went so far as to suggest Priddy had threatened your father’s very life when he returned home from the orchard one evening to find your mother and Priddy together in flagrante delicto. And well, seeing them standing there that was all the proof Mayhew needed. He left that day without speaking with your mother as I recall.’

‘So what happened to my mother and Priddy?’

‘Well, far as I remember, Quinn kept Priddy on he had little choice in the matter as where is he gonna find work? And now he was supporting your mother and your young self after a fashion, he had that troop of men to look after, so he had to keep working for Quinn. But then some old fellow got himself killed too, and so soon after that boy. More faulty nitro I believe was the cause. I was there and can report it was not a clean sight, this fellow blown to pieces, skull clean taken off of the top of his head and I saw the men coming up out of that mine each carrying something of him as if he were some scarecrow they might reassemble. Well when this was done Priddy began threatening to strike and to go to newspapermen in Medford. Started up at Quinn with all this fancy talk of lawyers and illegalities. Quinn by this point was
involved with an organisation known as the Defenders of the Working Men, they were Quinn’s own personal Knights of Labor. Anyhow, to fillet this story for you, they came for Priddy one night.’

Barzee paused now patting the filthy sheets for his brown bottle. He found it and took a sip.

‘I seen it. Now don’t take this wrongly but I liked to watch that place of yours. I was a watcher. No sin in looking. Nights I would walk out past the place. See the lamp on and your mother holding you, perhaps just settling you down into your bed. Many nights I got so close I could even hear the song she was singing you, that how I got them learned and learned her voice. Priddy would be sitting there in that chair I used to see your father in. And the night they came for him regular as ever I was there. Priddy came to the porch shouting out “Who’s there?” and then Quinn and his men came from the woods. I thought they were just there to spook him. Some had axe handles, one had, I believe, an old cavalry sword. They looked funny I thought, all wearing potato sacks with cut outs for their eyes. Anyhow Priddy, old stag he was, just bellowed at these men to get and be gone. I remember them walking slowly towards the house. Priddy turning and saying something to your mother, telling her stay inside most likely. Then eventually these men circled Priddy who by this time had walked out past those bean rows to where they were coming at him from. And there were some words said. Then he bellows at these men again but that circle just kept closing tighter. So then Priddy throws himself at one of them, swinging, lands some fine punches, a regular Galveston Giant, lord knows where he learned to punch like that, but they was too many of them, blows all coming down. I remember Quinn standing back from it all, though he had given a speech to the men to make them act like that and a promise of money when they finished the job. Most was old and bitter,
else just boys he had enlisted. I used sometimes to watch him drilling them. Anyhow they going at Priddy and Priddy, you remember, is strong so he fighting them off and throwing them, some of those boy didn’t know what had hit them, I remember them howling in pain when Priddy caught them with his fist or his front of his head. Never knew one man could hold back so many. But after a time they were just too much. I think it was on account of the fight Priddy put up they went so hard at him afterwards. Their fists and feet and axe handles coming down like they were beating out a carpet on a line. I thought they might quit but they didn’t they just kept on at him. After so long he just had to be gone. After that some of those younger boys got spooked and made off. But that was when Quinn stepped forward and had a couple of his boys drag Priddy’s body. I watched them as they put it in the cart. Anyhow they took the body up to the mine along the back roads and strung it up for all them others to see. I remember watching, crouched in the fern stems.

‘Well, there ain’t no pretty way to put this. Quinn decided to take the skin off Priddy’s back, to act as some type of warning I suppose’

‘You saw this?’

‘With my own eyes, like I told you I was a watcher, nothing I liked more. Kept out of sight, when I saw the cart leaving with Priddy’s body on the back I followed it. Saw Quinn cutting the skin off clean off. Priddy hanging upside down by his feet, skin cut away. Came off of him like a wet shirt. Muscle all purplish blue. I fell asleep after that. Next morning there was a commotion when the men at the mine saw Priddy hanging up there by his feet. One of them had the wherewithal to send for the sheriff. For a while suspicion fell on a couple of the folk over at the orchard due to some resentments but soon people began to suspect a couple of the Chinamen in
Priddy’s employ. Turned out one of them killed a boy in San Francisco over a gambling debt. Anyhow after a while it was all forgotten about.’

‘And my mother?’

‘She left morning after they took Priddy. I was at her place watching, she was angry as the devil with me. I remember her just screaming at me as if I myself had brought the whole set of circumstances down upon her. Well I just smiled. Gave her a little wave I think.’

Barzee coughed and shifted in his sheets,

‘I see how you looking at me. Quinn was powerful man, and who was I to talk out against him. Far as I knew, from all I’d seen that was the way the world worked.
Ain’t my place to change it. Anyhow the mine closed up a year or so later, they didn’t take much out of that mountain. Quinn left not long after and that was that, I heard a rumour they hanged him down in Texas for stealing horses. To think that man was almost Mayor of our little town.’

‘And the letter you sent?’

‘I told you, I didn’t write you no letter.’ Barzee coughed into his hand and twisted in his sheets, ‘Writing never was my strong suit.’ Barzee closed his eyes.

‘Wallace, you be kind to Barzee and fix me some more medicine. I told you a fine story just now, you owe it me.’

But Wallace had gone.
‘Well look who it isn’t!’

Lana was sitting on the bench on the forecourt of the garage. She was wearing a powder blue beret with a matching cape draped over her shoulders, even though it was too warm out for either. As Wallace approached she stood up, the cape dropping dramatically from her shoulders and falling crumpled onto the slats of the bench. She held her arms low and wide open like an opera singer receiving a bouquet and calls for an encore from an audience below. When Wallace was close she punched him softly on the shoulder.

‘You look tired Wally,’ She said cocking her head to one side and inspecting him ‘I’ve got a date coming any minute but I want to hear EVERYTHING.’

She mouthed the word exaggeratedly, tongue lingering on her teeth.

They sat in Lige’s office. The fan was broken and the smell of Lana’s perfume caught at Wallace’s throat. He was tired and dirty from the road and wanted only to go back to his room above the Haskell store and wash. Lana leant over her father’s desk and offered him a cigarette. Wallace told Lana the story and watched as her eyes widened theatrically. An expression of shock she had rehearsed in front of her mirror in the hours after her father drove her back from the movies.

‘You were gonna stiff this fella?’

‘No, Lana, of course I wasn’t.’

He remembered the room, the heavy service revolver with the wrong calibre bullets that did not fit the chamber, though he did not mention this to Barzee. For
surely he must have believed it his last line of defence for when the Maddox came to collect on his debts

‘So why’d you get out the car?’ Lana asked.

‘To get a better look I guess. My head was fuzzy.’

‘Wallace Wright, gun for hire. Now I’ve really heard it all.’

They sat there in silence for a moment.

‘Wallace, I can’t stand the tension. Ma Haskell came looking for you while you were away. You won’t believe what I have for you.’

Before Lana could hand Wallace the letter Lige came into the room wearing his sweat stained Ulster.

‘Nice of you to drop by Wally. Good vacation? I got three vehicles out there need looking at. Lana someone outside for you, I presume.’

As they walked out to the forecourt Lana pushed an envelope into Wallace’s hand.

She rose up on her tiptoes and whispered,

‘Sorry. I read it. Couldn’t help myself. I was worried.’

Wallace tucked the letter into his pocket and walked over to the garage, enjoying the familiar smells of engine oil, tyre rubber, solder as he entered. The garage was cool. The faint sun falling through the dust smeared window on the far side. Casting light on the pyramids of parts that occupy all the spare floor space. There was a large sedan car reversed in so the front part of the bonnet lay outside of the garage door in what remained of the day’s full sunlight.

Wallace opened the letter. As he read it he sensed Lana standing behind him:

‘Lana I’ve driven two thousand miles, can I get a little privacy?’

She watched Wallace reads the letter.
‘Oh Wallace, there’s even a name and a return address this time.
You’ve got to go. You’ve just got to.’
The bi-plane dipped low across New York harbour, spinning in a corkscrew then pulling up sharply to applause from the crowd below. On its next pass it buzzed over the Louisana Star, so close you could see the pilot’s leather helmet and goggles, the ribbon of his white scarf snapping up around his ears.

From the liner the view of the bi-plane was spectacular. Wallace stood by the guardrail. A small crowd had gathered: a thin man and his teenage son, a pair of honeymooners wearing matching camel-coloured trench coats and leaning against the guardrail, a delicate looking lady in her seventies in a green velvet turban, her daughter behind her in a raccoon coat, smoking a cigarette in a Lucite holder. The liner blew its horn and the bi-plane, now making its third pass, dipped its wings in response. The man in the trench coat reminded Wallace of a person he had passed in Penn Station when he arrived in the city yesterday: the man had been wearing a sandwich board with the slogan: WILL WORK, WHY WAIT? His resume was painted by hand below ‘Age: 26, Height: 5’10’’ Weight: 190lbs’, the foot of the sandwich board proclaiming: ‘Seven years experience in Promotion, Publicity and Printing’. Wallace stood there for a moment with his suitcase at his feet watching the reactions of the crowd; some smiling as they hurried past, others laughing, then a woman carrying a bunch of purple-blue anemones, stopped to offer him dollar from her purse which the boy, whose expression remained blank, rejected with a shake of his head, tapping at the billboard with his thumb.
At the prow of the liner, the man in the trench coat had a cine-camera, a Kodak Model K, bound in brown leather, on a strap around his neck. Wallace watched as he focused the handheld machine on his new wife: her back pressed against the handrail, one foot lifted so the heel of her sportsters rested on the lowest railing, pouting as she half-heartedly blew a kiss, and turned her right hand with its wedding band back and forth. The liner navigated the channel and the harbour grew gradually smaller, the bi-plane now only a spec in the distance. It began to rain and the assembled passengers made their way inside down into the 2nd class dining saloon. First the lady in the turban helped by her daughter, then the honeymooners, his arm around his new wife’s shoulders then finally the thin man and his boy who both looked at Wallace quizzically as if it was beyond reason to stay outside any longer. Wallace nodded at them as they moved inside.

As he stood there alone, as close to the prow as passengers are permitted, Wallace was overcome by a sensation that the whole vast continent was coming loose behind him. He thought of Edgar Barzee in his shack in Chicago, those days spent in his company, the stories, the stench, the medicine, of sitting in the Tourer turning the revolver over in his hands. What had he been thinking? Having broken with routine so easily perhaps he was minded then to see how far he might go beyond himself, beyond the smallness of his life in Caddo. Perhaps he wanted a story to share with Lana. He hadn’t mentioned the medicine, just his luck in finding Barzee and the stories he had shared with him. It began to rain more heavily. Wallace made his way inside through the iron door with the high step.

* 

New York City had possessed a compact intensity Wallace had not expected: a whirl of noise and commotion that made Oklahoma seem quiet as Caddo. He felt tiny
among the buildings, the iron and glass maze, his reflection distorted in the windows of the buildings, and then ashamed for feeling small at his age. He had found a hotel few blocks from the station after enquiring at the ticket office. He hadn’t wanted to walk more than a few blocks, feeling his sense of direction, so keen and alive as he had driven the Tourer across the country, blunted among the buildings of the city.

The train trip to New York had taken two days. As he had stepped down from the overnight Fort Worth train in Chicago and waited for his connection to New York he couldn’t believe he was back in the city and even though he knew the chances were slim, he began to worry that Barzee would have done something to Maddox and that he himself would be implicated, that someone would have connected him to the Tourer with out of state plates, that perhaps even the policeman who he had spoken with would remember him. He bought a paper from a newsstand and read it cover to cover for any sign of Maddox’s death or disappearance. It was only after Wallace boarded the Pennsylvania Railroads Broadway Limited and locked the door of his cabin he felt somewhere close to safe again.

Wallace wondered, lying on the white sheets his narrow bunk, where Lana had found the money for the ticket. He looked through the leaflet he had found on his pillow, the services available: hair trimmed; beard singed; tonic bath. The valet service and stenographer. As he lay there he worked the problem through slowly. Lana must have had the ticket already. It must have been she who was intending to travel to New York. Perhaps Harry Easterman, the Marine in Puerto Rico she had been corresponding with, had sent her the ticket. She must have already been planning to leave for New York herself but decided to give Wallace the ticket. He didn’t know what to make of this. What did she know that he didn’t? Had her own
nerve failed her at the last minute? He fell asleep in the narrow bunk with all of these things swirling around his head.

In New York City the restaurant next door to his hotel, where a whitewashed window told Wallace he could have Ox-Tail Stew and Tripe a la Creole for 15c or a Vienna Roast for 10c had closed, though the barber’s shop downstairs was still open, the proprietor standing on the bottom stair of the flight between the Hot Towel sign and the rotating red and white pole, smoking a cigarette, the tobacco pungent on the night air. Wallace was tired from the train, still not quite believing he had allowed Lana to talk him into this after everything that had happened in Chicago. He walked three blocks west and went down into the first place he found open: a bar that advertised on a chalkboard outside Snatch Galbraith and his Orchestra. He ordered a soda water and was going to order a hamburger but was told the kitchen had closed early as the chef was sick. At the piano the bandleader wore a cream suit, double breasted. The other members of the band wore the same suit but in a darker fabric. The bandleader, who had a hook-nose and a high hairline, would call out the song title from the piano across the smoke filled club, the crowd giving back a small murmur as each title was named. Wallace hung back near the bar, writing the names of the songs on the back of the napkin his soda water had come on, thinking that he might tell Lana about them on his return to Caddo. A girl in sheer stockings and a sequined hat perched on the side of her head had taken to the floor before the stage and started dancing. At the bar Wallace had felt hot and clumsy, conspicuous again, here in the city in his country clothes among the laughter and the music and the cigarette smoke. He thought of the sad faced girls in the cathouse in Durant, picturing their faces in the crowd here this evening. Eventually the bandleader stood up at the piano announced a special guest, then leaning to the microphone whispered:
‘Ya’ll know who’. The crowd were on their feet applauding as a small woman with butterscotch skin and big eyes had taken to the stage in a black silk dress with threads of gold lame woven through it, bulging slightly at the little packed pouch of her stomach. ‘They don’t live in cabins like the old folks used to do Their cabin is a penthouse up on Lennox Avenue Underneath that Harlem moon’ Now a saxophone was punching a set of smoky staccato notes across the little bar room, then tripping and flailing behind it a trumpet. Then she sang again the next verse. Years ago Wallace had been to see a Minstrel Show in a tent outside of Durant with Burl Cobb. He remembered Burl laughing as the acts trooped across the stage. Wallace hadn’t known what to make of it and he didn’t know what to make of the music now. When the woman with the butterscotch skin finished singing the crowd were silent for a moment before their applause began. Wallace walked back to his room the music bright and intense still in his head. He stepped out into the street without looking only to see a yellow Studebaker Taxi Cab putting on its breaks and sounding hard its horn. Wallace had stepped back onto the sidewalk and waved the cab on.

* 

There was no sign of his cabin mate when Wallace returned to his room. There was a single leather case set on the berth and next to it a bible open at Matthew 28:19, with lines ringed in black ink, which Wallace stood over and read, thinking perhaps it may have some bearing on the journey ahead, that his companion had selected the lines in advance of the crossing. It read: Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Lana had given him a book to read. Sitting in his tourist class cabin he unwrapped it. Inside was a post card with a photograph of Caddo main street coloured in on the front, but whoever had coloured it had guessed wrong for some of the buildings, and
it must have been taken years ago as the street was still fairly empty, only a few of the buildings that stand there now, though he could just about make out the Haskell store at the edge of the shot: listed on the back of the card were some items he might get for her while in the city. It read:

*BON VOYAGE as the French say. Here is a memento of home: you might recognize the picture. I hear it gets COLD in EUROPE so wrap up. Should you have time any of these might make appropriate gifts: a Serona De lux Rayon knit street suit, a fur stole. A pair of blueberry satin shoes by Violaine of Brooklyn. LANA x*

That evening Wallace ate a plate of cold ham in the Second Class dining compartment. He was in no hurry to return to his quarters so walked a while on deck. He passed the elderly lady he had seen with her daughter earlier on the observation deck when the ship left the harbour. She was slumped in a deckchair, the only one unfolded, next to a stacked pile of chairs, hands at her lap, face to the stars, a thick blanket across her knees. She wore the same racoon fur coat he had seen her daughter in the day they set sail.

‘I imagine it is your first time,’ she said, then with her voice rising ‘I hold no affection for England no affection whatsoever. I am returning to see the place a last time before I die,’ the woman worked her tongue around her teeth, which seem too large for her mouth, an expression of puzzlement on her face.

‘That was my daughter you saw me with earlier. She is dreadfully dull company. I know what she has in mind for me,’ the elderly lady said, ‘just as soon as she can make it lega. I am worth a considerable amount on account of my late husband, her father.’

Wallace smiled at the woman, unsure how to respond.
‘You will not have heard of him. He made suspended monorails for slaughterhouses and stockyards. We hold several patents. My late husband is still talked about in Pigeon Hill, New Brunswick. When we were courting he told me about the cattle on his father’s farm, how he had stood and watched each year as they were stunned, the beasts skidding around in their own filth. Barbaric really, to think of it. His mission in life was to clean up the whole process. When he was a boy he would weep to see those cattle killed. Imagine that, my husband as a little boy weeping as the cows were killed?’

Wallace passed her daughter when he returned inside. She was standing at the bar talking to a man in a pin-striped suit. He had a small and very dark moustache clipped thinly across his lip, his hand, Wallace noticed, was touching her fleshy hip. As he laughed he would lean in close and trace the line of her underclothes. Wallace wondered if perhaps he should remind her that she had parked her mother outside, in case some deckhand found her mother frozen there in her seat come morning when he set out the deckchairs, but he thought better of it and returned to his cabin.

There followed a few hours of pitching and tossing, fitful sleep accompanied by the snoring of his pious cabin-mate, a fedora across his face, bible open on his belly, the tiny electric light above his bunk casting a light the colour of turkey fat over him. It was clear the man had been drinking. The fumes filled the small cabin. He began to snore until it was more than Wallace could take and he got up and pulled his coat on and went back out for another walk. He looked at his watch it was almost midnight. The old woman had gone from the deck chairs when he got there but a few yards away Wallace saw noticed a movement near the guardrail. It is the honeymooning woman from earlier. She was balanced on the guardrail on the prow of the ship, the rail he watched her leaning against earlier smiling for the camera and
waving her ringed hand. Wallace couldn’t believe his eyes at first as she raised herself to her full height, like a gymnast on a balance beam. She was wearing the same camel coloured trench but it was open and blowing around her.

‘Hey, steady, now, hey, hey,’ Wallace called out to her stepping forwards slowly.

‘Come on, come on now, don’t do anything stupid, it’s an awfully long way down.’

The woman’s cheeks were covered in mascara, watery black lines webbing her pale face. She shook her head as Wallace drew close. She looked over her shoulder down into the black ocean, the lights from the cabins of the liner were reflected on the surface.

‘Come on honey,’ Wallace said, his heart racing,

‘Long way down’ he said ‘did you row?’ Wallace asked.

‘You’re on your honeymoon aren’t you? I saw the ring. I was up on the prow earlier watching the air show.’

Wallace stopped a few feet away from where the woman leant back on the inside of the rail. She was holding on to the outside of the guardrail by the tips of her fingers. She looked over her shoulder again then down into the ocean. She closed her eyes. The wind got up and the wings of her open camel coloured trench coat billowed wide about her. The white light from inside the dining section was on her face, the tracks of her mascara running down her cheeks. She let go with one hand but as she did Wallace jumped towards her and took the wrist of the hand that still held the guardrail. She was hanging over the side with only Wallace holding her. She looked down into the water and back to Wallace, who strained to keep her in his hand. She looked terrified, suddenly aware of what awaited her. Wallace leant over the railings, both hands clutching at her wrist,
‘Grab on to me’ he shouted struggling to make himself heard over the wind. She swung her hand up and held onto the guardrail. Wallace leaned further over and grabbed her by the belt of her trench coat, pulling her back over the rail. They sat for a moment slumped against the white rails. The windows inside were steamed and blurred colours moved by in front of the bars. As he helped her over Wallace had noticed a slight swelling at her belly. Eventually he turned to her and said,

‘Smart not to let go.’ He smiled, and put his arm around her.

She looked at him confused for a moment and then laughed and pushed her hand to her mouth to stop her laughter, which after a while turned back to sobbing.

‘Can I buy you a coffee?’ Wallace asked.

They sat in the far corner of the bar as the band played. The woman’s hands were wrapped tightly around the coffee cup as if it were the only source of heat on the whole ship.

‘I must look a sight’ she said.

‘No worse than anybody up at this hour.’

Wallace gestured to the daughter of the woman he had been talking to earlier. She was being propped up at the bar by the man with the thin moustache, both so drunk now they could barely stand. One of her shoes had come off and was lying upturned under her bar stool.

‘I hope you don’t think this impolite’ Wallace said ‘but I noticed you were…’ Wallace gestured at her stomach. She pulled the trench tightly about her, almost embarrassed and a little shocked that Wallace had noticed. She sniffed, then wiped away some of the mascara stains.

‘Yes’ she said softly, then ‘He works away a lot…’
Wallace nodded and tried to look understanding as if he received this type of confession on a regular basis.

‘I just don’t know how it happened. I didn’t have anyone to tell. It just all got out of hand.’

Wallace looked up from the table.

‘Well, all I know is there ain’t much worth throwing yourself over for.’

Wallace felt a tap on his shoulder, it was the old woman from the deckchairs earlier. She had changed turban since he saw her last, this one silver and inset with tiny shining stones.

‘Would you mind if I join you’ she said setting herself down into the booth beside the woman.

‘Your husband is looking for you’ she said. ‘He seems like a nice young man.’

The woman nodded.

‘My daughter had the key to our room. I came down to find her. I passed your husband on the corridor. He seemed concerned. Forgive me but I overheard the better part your conversation just now. And I do not know, or wish to know the particulars, but I’d say by the looks of you he needn’t be any the wiser to your situation,’ the old woman paused.

‘Unless you have told him already? But I somehow do not think you have.’

The old woman looked over to Wallace.

‘You did a good thing. Why don’t you let us girls talk now?’

Wallace smiled, relieved to have handed over responsibility. He nodded goodnight to both women who were already deep in conversation. Wallace resolved to take a final turn around the deck before bed. Out there he saw the woman’s husband looking for her.
‘Say, you haven’t seen my wife have you? She was wearing a coat just like this one,’ he offered the lapel. Wallace, hesitated.

‘That way, I think, going that way’ he said guiding the man back in the direction he had come from.
It was raining in England although the weather reports had promised sun. Two men, having removed their bowler hats and overcoats were talking quietly and taking sips from heavy looking glasses of beer in the buffet car. They swayed as the train moved around a curve in the track at speed, a high note from the whistle, then white sheets of steam, running back past the window. Behind the bar a big silver urn reflected back the men distorted and slant. The waiter wore a white jacket with a winged collar and black bow-tie, his hair clipped militarily short at the sides, acne scars at his temples, the pitted skin badly healed. On the bar top were two dozen or so glasses, rims face down on the counter and beside them a wire cake stand holding damp-looking pastries the colour of cardboard in the rain. The men paused from their conversation as Wallace entered the buffet car. Immediately he felt big again, oversized, as he has done since arriving in England too big for his cabin on the liner, too big for the cab that took him to the train station, too big now for the train carriage. He had thought he might call Lana from the station but realised it would still be night back in Caddo. He wondered what he would have said to her; would he have told her about the crossing, the neighbour who didn’t speak a word to him, the whole way over, the food in second class, the evenings smoking out on the deck, the old lady with the story about the stockyards or her daughter who night by night got more drunk until on that final evening she was sitting on the lap of the man with the thinly trimmed moustache, planting kiss after kiss on his shining brow as the glasses of neat gin before them grew warm.
The men pushed past Wallace and back into the carriage, one of them giving him a little nudge with his elbow as they passed.

‘I’ll take a pastry and a cup of coffee’ Wallace said the to the attendant fishing in his pocket for some coins.

‘Only tea today I’m afraid Sir.’

Wallace nodded. The waiter poured him a cup, thick and oily and dark as the beer the men with black bowler hats were just drinking.

‘Canadian?’ the waiter asked, he steadied himself against the bar with one hand, arching forward against the motion of the train, as he set down the tea. Wallace shook his head.

‘Pity. I was with some Canadians at Vimy Ridge. Bloody tough buggers if you’ll pardon my French.’

The waiter paused, looking at Wallace. Wallace wondered for a moment if the man in the white jacket with the military haircut was about to start crying. He saw his eye twitch, then watched him tilt his head slightly, as a person might who has just come out of a swimming pool.

‘Bloody tough buggers.’

The waiter turned, wiped the condensation from the window with the heel of his hand, leaning in to see where the train was on its journey. Some woods flashed by, then a river with a little stone bridge.

‘Did you serve?’

‘Cantingy’ Wallace said, only half meaning the lie and then feeling uneasy for doing so. He sipped his tea lest the set of his mouth should give him away. The waiter paused for a moment sizing Wallace up.

‘Infantry?’
Wallace nodded.

‘Gas?’

Wallace nodded again, hoping it might wrap the questioning up. The waiter shook his head.

‘Mind you time was I’d have taken gas over the influenza that booked my ticket home,’ the waiter gave a shiver remembering the effects of the Spanish Flu. As he did a woman entered in a red paisley cloche and asked for a cup of tea. Wallace smiled politely. She was a short, stout woman, but there was something sensual to the set of her mouth. She nodded and lit a cigarette. She looked at Wallace for a long time, gazing at him through the thick smoke from her pungent cigarette, as the stacked glasses rattled on the bar top, then, pulling a thread of tobacco from her bottom lip,

‘I say, you don’t know what time we get in do you?’

Wallace shook his head and at once she seemed to lose any interest. The woman in the paisley cloche finished her cigarette in three long pulls, her body rising a fraction as she drew on the cigarette, then washed it down with two sips of her tea which she left unfinished on the bar. When the woman had gone the waiter continued.

‘So what brings you over here then?’

‘I’m vacationing.’

‘That right? Where you from?’

‘Oklahoma.’

‘O-klah-ho-ma,’ the barman whistled as if a girl had just walked by.

‘And what line of business are you in, if you don’t mind me asking?’

‘I own a gas station and garage.’
‘It don’t fit, it don’t sit right, and it stinks just like her old man’ Wallace said to himself under his breath. He pinched the lapel and pulled it to his nostrils. The wool smelled of stale sweat; cigarette smoke, dust. He looked closely at the faded spots of hair tonic dappling the fabric, brushed them with his fingertips and seeing this had done nothing to remove the stains, gave both lapels a sharp tug. He turned side on to the mirror. The varnish of the narrow oak wood oval was chipped at the top revealing the palely striated grain, it hung slightly skew on the wall of the boarding house, Woodlands, where he arrived late yesterday afternoon, met at the front door by a woman in her fifties with a dark purple port-wine mark on the right side of her face. She had been wearing a navy patterned middy blouse, without a brassiere and a large white celluloid visor, which cut off the top part of her face. A tennis racquet in her left hand, a trapeze-shaped press clamped at the corners, there was a Pekingese yapping and fussing around her heels, occasionally inclining its wet black rubbery muzzle up to Wallace and giving a shrill bark. The woman called for someone named Archie to come and ‘see to their guest,’ barely glancing at Wallace before she turned and disappeared into the rooms at the back of the house the long-haired little lion dog rolling along after her.

Archie duly arrived. A ruddy-faced man, a decade or so older, with a jutting chin in a blue collarless shirt. At the base of his throat was a glossy pink hollow with white marbling where something had been cut away. He had a newspaper tucked under his arm. Archie took Wallace’s case and led him to his room. At the turn in the
stairs, beside the triangles of the sunrise stained glass, he paused as if something were troubling him and set down Wallace’s suitcase. Archie unrolled the newspaper, tapping a grainy image of four men with a telescope on the edge of a large body of water, the tiny caption underneath reading *Near Inverfarigaig*

‘Have a look,’ Archie said nodding as he passed the newspaper to him.

‘What’s that then?’ he asked.

There was a faint dark blur, a little inky smudge, as if something had gone wrong in the printing process, in the upper quarter of the photograph but before Wallace could answer Archie had taken the newspaper back from him,

‘My guess is that it’s a bloody big sturgeon, either that or an upturned boat.’

Archie glanced once more at the image, shook his head, exhaled and pushed the newspaper back up under his armpit. He picked up the case and strode off up the stairs, taking them two at a time, their worn runner held in place by brass rods.

‘You American then are you? ’ Archie asked when they arrived at Wallace’s room.

‘Over at R.C.C. I suppose? We’ve had a few of you boys through, showing our lot how to work the new machines. I was down the road at Chivers for thirty years, silverplating, mainly, until this.’ Archie pointed to the glossy hollow below his throat. It pulsed faintly.

‘Still thick with a lot of the chaps from your place though. Don’t by any chance know Charlie Girton do you? He’s a card,’ Archie said smirking at some half-remembered remark of Charlie Girton’s, ‘What about George Edwards, huge chap just like you, squiffy right eye, he’s a shift supervisor now I think. Deamon at the oche, even with one eye made of glass. We all used to drink up at the Barley Mow together. Hang on,’ Archie said stopping himself, ‘What am I thinking of you only
just arrived didn’t you? Course you don’t know ‘em. Well if you happen run into any of the old lot tell ‘em Archie Cavendish says hello, they’ll have a few stories I imagine.’ Archie said, smiling, and as he did suddenly looking much older ‘but whatever you do,’ Archie said ‘don’t breathe a word of anything you hear to her downstairs.’ He winked then turned and made his way downstairs.

It was very still and quiet up at the top of the house. He sat on the side of the bed and took off his shoes, massaging his insteps with his thumb and middle finger. He bought the shoes in New York in a store where he had gone looking for the items Lana listed in her letter. This was the second time he had worn them. They had already rubbed a raw inch of his achilles tendon red. In his socks Wallace went about the sparsely furnished room, slowly and a little drowsily taking in his new surroundings; the heavy moss-coloured drapes, a patterned linoleum floor, the bright squares of the crocheted patchwork bedspread, an electric fire with a brass back that twice failed to light when he tried it. Wallace heard his stomach. It wasn’t clear from Lana’s typed instructions if a meal was included with the room and Wallace, at the risk of looking stupid or ill informed, felt unable to ask. He peered out from the window half-thinking of walking out to find a place to eat. In either direction the streets just seemed to stretch away in soft curves of similar looking villas, white pebbledash and plain clay hanging tiles, recently planted saplings standing sentry on the grass verges, and try as he might he couldn’t confidently remember the route the taxi-cab had brought him here from the station.

Soon there were cooking smells from down stairs, sausages and the sharply buttery smell of onions, the occasional muffled sound of Archie and the woman who answered the door, then a yap from the Pekingese. In the end Wallace ate his way through a waxed paper sack of peanuts he had bought at the station earlier, their
veined, papery shells littering the bedcovers, the seed coats getting stuck between his teeth, the blanched kernels unsalted and oddly flavourless. When there were no more nuts to eat Wallace had drawn the curtains, which gave off a little soft of dust when he pulled them together, and got into bed. It was seven o’clock.

Wallace turned his head in the mirror to the side and tugged at the sleeves of the jacket. He felt the jacket stiffen across his shoulders, giving off a little hiss as the wool stretched. Lana had insisted he pack the suit, one of Lige’s cast-offs, chosen in preference over another in a mustard and yellow check, both purchased a few years back when a fleeting enthusiasm for golf led Lige to drive fifteen hours north to watch Tommy Armour and Macdonald Smith play in the Open in Edina, Minnesota, returning with half a dozen new suits and a set of commemorative clubs. Lana had let down the hems of the trousers, which came with an elasticated girdle, and given Wallace an off-white army service shirt to take with him to England. When he asked where it had come from she said it was better not to and left it at that, but when he looked inside as he unpacked he saw there was a serial number and a surname, Ziegelbauer on a white tape sewn in by hand with scarlet cotton thread. Wallace stood there looking at himself in the borrowed suit in the rented room in a country he didn’t know, feeling like a cut-price McKenzie Getchell. He glanced at his watch then looked again at the letter with Lana’s instructions, he felt his heart beat a little quicker. He was due in Cambridge in an hour’s time.
Wallace stood outside the porter’s lodge waiting for the Reverend Canon as the instructions from Lana had told him he must. She had planned the whole trip, every single detail. The Fort Worth train to Chicago with a change for New York City. The crossing for which she had persuaded the line to exchange a return ticket to Southampton in the name of Miss Lana Edelstam to one in the name of Mr Wallace Wright. In the same typed set of instructions Lana had listed the times of the motor coach from Southampton to London, where Wallace sat beside an emaciated young man in horn-framed eye glasses, a sketch book open on his lap. He sat there busily drawing whatever he could see outside the window with a tiny chunk of charcoal; the town quay with its gigantic liners, custom houses and dock sheds, then in a hacking, smudged way the sections of heathland the motor coach passed through soon after leaving the town, and later the chromium and concrete factories new and neat looking near Camberley, as they crawled through the outskirts of London before its final passage down the Great West Road. Between sketches the young man would frantically scratch at his scalp, raking his fingers through his hair which looked and smelled unwashed. At one point they passed an accident, a lorry carrying milk had skidded and overturned, the dazed driver standing alongside a stream of milk flowing out into the road.

Typed for Wallace on a separate sheet were the train times from London to Cambridge, the details of Woodlands, the guesthouse, Lana had told him was a little out of the way but great value, where a room was booked for three nights. All typed up for Wallace and handed to him in an oversized binder with the words ‘No excuses
now, it’s all taken care of. And it all makes sense on the adding machine. Or will do by the time you get back. Lana must have been working on it none stop while he was away in Chicago. She had even driven him in her father’s Dusenberg to the station.

Outside the porter’s lodge were two large chalk boards, smears of blurred words where last term’s messages had been wiped away, and on a pinboard beside them a faded list of names that looked as if it had been there for a long time. Beyond the porter’s lodge was a well-tended rectangle of grass, a weather vane and a little fountain with a naked boy at its centre. There were cobbles either side forming a long stone path around the rectangle of grass, and behind it a building which looked like a child’s idea of a castle, black oblongs of the deeply recessed window and battlements running along the side of the pitched slate roof. Wallace had followed a map Archie had drawn for him into Cambridge from the guesthouse. The walk had taken him a little under an hour. When he arrived he was hot in the jacket and could smell his new sweat mixed with Lige’s old sweat coming through. The stink was dizzying and it was then that Wallace saw them all for a moment, flashing up in his mind; Lana and Lige and McKenzie and the Haskells lined up along the main street in Caddo, coated, all of them, head to toe in red dust, their hands pushed flat against their sides, mouthing to him words he couldn’t make out then a huge wave of dust coming in behind them, high as the Kansas Power and Light building.

‘Mr Wright?’

The Reverend Canon stood in front of him and held out his hand. Hatless in linen suit with a high and very white clerical collar. He was a naturally fair-haired man, grey in flecks at the temples. He held a battered manila folder thick with a tatty batch of official looking papers in the crook of his arm.
‘Urban district council meeting,’ the Reverend said raising a sheaf of typed pages, ‘talk of expanding the boundary to take in Cherry Hinton. It’s there in the Doomsday Book. Hitone Count Alan, Rufus the Red. Edith Swanneck. Can’t quite see why it needs to be swallowed up now after it has withstood the pull of the city for almost a thousand years.’

Wallace wondered for a moment if the Reverend had mistaken him for someone else.

‘You found us today without too much trouble I trust?’

The Reverend and Wallace walked together into a wide stone courtyard with another, slightly smaller, lawn in the middle. The grass was recently mown in checkerboard stripes. The Reverend paused and looked down at the grass.

‘We finally rid it of the fusarium patch but it’s taken an age. Diseases of the grass are what you might call a ‘hot topic’ at High Table.’

He gave the same smile he had on mentioning Cherry Hinton and again Wallace was at a loss as to how properly to respond. Two younger men in black gowns nodded their respects to the Reverend as they passed. Eventually Wallace and the Reverend turned from the courtyard onto a stone staircase, they had to duck as they entered under the arch. It was suddenly much cooler. ‘Careful,’ the Reverend said pointing to a dip where the stone was worn smooth at its centre, ‘liable to slip’. They proceeded through the gloom until they reached a narrower wooden staircase which they took until they were at the very top, two floors up. There was a large dark wood door, polished to a high shine.

The Reverend’s rooms were wide and very tall, almost the size of the small barn at the filling station, and lined with more books than Wallace has ever seen in a single place. There was a fire in the grate which had almost gone out. On bent knees, his ankles pushed primly together, using a pair of iron tongs, the Reverend deposited
a single piece of coal from a bucket into the embers. There was a slight shifting, then a soft collapse, it seemed for a moment the fire had died but the fuel was enough to keep it going: loose skeins of smoke spiralling upward in thin, grey-blue twists. The Reverend slowly rose to his feet, then settled himself behind his desk and with great care went about filling the bowl of his pipe. He lit the pipe and took three long draws from the side of this mouth, closing one eye and then peering into the bowl. He exhaled.

‘Denteze,’ the Reverend said, removing the pipe, ‘specially shaped mouthpiece keeps the pressure off the teeth.’ He flashed his clenched teeth at Wallace as if to prove the point. ‘Picked it up on High Holborn last time I was in the capital. And indeed it is a capital invention.’ He smiled, then smoked on in silence a few moments longer, the index and middle fingers of his free hand making circles against the pad of his thumb with increasing speed until he finally began to speak at which point the circling stopped and his hand rested flat on the table.

‘A little over a year ago I was invited by a library in Manchester, the city of my birth, to examine some recently discovered Medieval Codices.’ The Reverend saw he may already have lost Wallace.

‘Books, some very old books.’

He waved his hand dismissively to signal the age of the books was not the thrust of this story.

‘I travelled up on the train and after spending the morning undertaking my initial consultation I had an hour for lunch before the train was due to take me back to London where I would be breaking my journey. The texts were, I am afraid to say, not quite as remarkable as the librarian had hoped, some nice miniatures of the Evangelists though nothing like the Harley Golden Gospels. They were badly
deteriorated, the gold tooling over the boards was almost entirely gone and the unfoliated parchment leaves were in only marginally better condition. I informed the librarian, a portly, smirking fellow to whom I am ashamed to say I took a near instant dislike,’ the Reverend took another draw on his pipe and exhaled very softly so the smoke hung close to his face, ‘that I would explain all this at length in my report and that although they were not without value they were unlikely to fund the new the roof of the library as he had intimated to me on my arrival he had hoped they might.’

The Reverend gave Wallace another smile. He must have looked back blankly as when the Reverend continued his voice was a little higher in his throat. ‘My business at the library concluded, I walked around the city observing the ways in which it had changed. The rate of expansion was remarkable, the city of my youth seemed almost quaint in comparison, not to mention the tracts of arable and pastureland now home to new housing estates I had seen from the train. After wandering for a while I came across a tavern I had visited with your father as a young man. The place was almost deserted. Breaking with my usual temperance I drank half a pint of porter, reading of the Test against the West Indies in the Evening News. I then made my way to the church behind the tavern where I remembered certain members of my father’s family are buried, there is also a small plaque to my late brother who was killed in action.’

The Reverend paused, as Wallace had seen the preacher at Caddo pause, on the edge of a profound insight which he tempered with a smirk.

‘And Mr Wright that is when I saw him, your father.’

Wallace felt his heart flutter, as if he had just driven over an unseen dip at speed.

‘In the church?’ Wallace asked

‘No, no in the in alleyway which connects the church and the tavern.’
Wallace looked at the Reverend. He looked around the room at the towering shelves of books which it seemed for a moment as if they might collapse on them both. He wished Lana was here with him now.

‘At first, what I thought I saw from the corner of my eye was a drayman from the brewery coming from the cellar, I almost passed him, taking no notice, but our shoulders brushed and he apologised, somewhat wearily, and something in the cadence, in the way his voice sounded, I knew it was him. I span on my heels and called out without a moment’s hesitation. ‘Charles!’ I shouted, the man looked back at me.

The Reverend looked apologetic as if Wallace had summoned him to account for himself.

‘What struck me most was in the moment our eyes locked he did not deny it was he, he did not turn and immediately run but simply shook his head, more, it struck me at the time, inviting my complicity than denying he was who I thought he was.’

‘And what did the look like?’ Wallace asked.

The Reverend gave a small frown as he attempted to recall the man. When he began to speak he emphasised each detail with a little flick of his pipe stem.

‘Stooped, a worn corduroy jacket, his hair now very white. But somehow the outline of the boy I had known remained. Why I did not pursue him I do not know. I have gone over this time and time again. Instead I stood and watched him walk away, seemingly in no great hurry, slowly overtaken by conviction I had made an error, that perhaps the confluence of the city and some long repressed memory had collided there that moment and caused me to mistake this man for your father.’

There was a knock at the door. Wallace turned in his chair. An elderly man in a blue apron appeared with a metal tray with a large brown china teapot, a knitted tea
cosy folded beside it, two pale blue cups on large saucers and a plate of arrowroot biscuits arranged in two concentric fans. The Reverend gestured for the man to enter and the man without speaking placed the tea things on a folding table with a faded tapestry panel beside the Reverend’s desk. The Reverend smiled benignly at the older man. With the same slow ceremony with which he had addressed the fire the Reverend went about pouring the tea. He lifted the pot high, a twisting amber rope spilled from the spout and down through the mesh filter he placed over Wallace’s cup. The Reverend set down the pot, removed by its handle the gauze from Wallace’s cup then handed the cup to the Wallace by the saucer.

‘At first I went into the tavern to see if the see if the man I had just passed was a member of their staff thinking they could discount this vision. But he was not. I ordered myself a large brandy as my nerves were badly shaken. By the time I recovered my senses I realised I had missed my train to London. I had not much of an appetite for travel so I took a room in Manchester that evening and as the night drew on became more and more perplexed. In the hours that followed I grew steadily convinced it was indeed your father I had seen. When I woke I knew I had to find him.’

The Reverend exhaled with what Wallace took to be relief. He silently raised both the teapot and his eyebrows. Interpreting the gesture Wallace shook his head glancing down to the untouched tea cooling in the cup and saucer he saw now he was still holding onto it with both hands. The Reverend refreshed his own cup. With rehearsed precision he took a sip then continued;

‘The next morning I called at his sisters’, your aunts’ house, what had formerly been his family home. That itself was a surprise, in the years since I had seen them they had fallen into a state of spinsterhood. I remembered them fondly as girls from
visits I had made to the house as a younger man but here they were now dressed in black, hair shot through with grey, the interior of the house almost unchanged from when I had last called to see Charles all those years ago. Indeed the house seemed even more full now of items and objet than it had on my last visit though in considerable disrepair from the outside. I introduced myself but they said they did not know anything and that their brother had not been in contact with them. It was, they told me, assumed he had died in America. That no word had ever reached them from his wife, and this, it was clear, had been a matter of some ill feeling. A death certificate had been obtained after five years of silence. The younger sister even went to retrieve their copy and led me to the window where I might better make out the writing. And surely enough it confirmed he had been pronounced dead. I bid them good day but part of me remained unsatisfied. I even went so far as to extended my stay in the city. I spent hours seeking out old acquaintances, men I hadn’t spoken to in decades but all responded in the same way: they were certain he had died in America, that this was the story his sisters had put about, one even directed me to a death notice which had run in the newspaper, looks, I have it here.’

The Reverend unlocked a drawer above his lap, there was soft click as the key bit and the mechanism was sprung. With great care he passed the piece of cutting across to Wallace. The paper was brittle and faded. Wallace studied it.

‘And now for my confession, I knew this to be untrue.’

The Reverend paused.

‘I’m not sure what you know, but when your father left America he returned to England,’ he gazed at Wallace over the bowl of his pipe as if waiting for some response, ‘and I was the first person he came to.’

Wallace leaned in a little closer as the Reverend’s voice had softened.
‘He believed his life was in danger. As we talked that evening he had begun to weep and pulled from his pocket a list of debts: the sums themselves seemed quite preposterous. He described for me a dead boy who seemed to haunt him and for whom he seemed to think himself personally responsible. He also talked for some time about a man called Priddy and another named Quinn and, you will remember, these are the men I mentioned in my letter.’

The Reverend leaned forward in his chair by the window and repacked the bowl of his pipe with shreds of moist tobacco, tamping them down with his thumb. Weak light came in through the lead-paned window, falling evenly on the Reverend’s profile and making him for a moment appear much younger. He leaned back and pulled the flame of a lit match down into the pipe bowl.

‘I mean’ he said, the smoke catching in the light and curling about his lips, ‘this was a man on the brink of madness.’ The Reverend briskly extinguished the match. ‘I offered him my room, I told him he might lodge with me as long as he needed but he was restless. I insisted he change his clothes, which were rank and caked with dirt. I saw his emaciated frame, his ribs were bruised black, there were scratches, self-inflicted I feared, along his arms. I did my best to tend to the them but he had little patience for me and pushed me away. Repeating, over and over as he did, the names Priddy and Quinn and the story of the dead boy. Eventually he wore himself out and I lay a blanket over the desperate sight of his sleeping body. I remember that night waking and seeing him rocking back and forth, the blanket now wrapped around his shoulders. The next morning he was intent on leaving, claiming Quinn would find him if he stayed too long. I gave him what money I had to hand when he left early the next morning but beyond that what more might I have done I ask you?’
The Reverend shifted his position and drew on his pipe. There was a soft crackle from the nested tobacco, then a high whistling from the vulcanite stem. ‘Life continues Mr Wright,’ he said as if surprising himself with the statement, then taking a short pull on the pipe, ‘life continues and the things that once meant the most fade and the demands of each day accrue and eventually you put these things out of your mind and continue with life, or rather life continues with you.’ The Reverend traced a little figure of eight on its side in the air with the stem of the pipe to illustrate his statement. There was a dent in the brilliant grain of the bowl. Wallace looked out of the window, the pair of boys in black gowns they had passed earlier now making their way across the quad. The silence seemed to bellow out, mushrooming across the room, folding into itself birdsong, a ticking clock, two voices from the far side of the quad. Until the Reverend snapped them from it, ‘after a week in Manchester I returned to Cambridge. I began to wonder if it had not been an hallucination. I went so far as to discuss it with my Bishop who was little help but in passing spoke of a colleague who specialises in a new approach. After several conversations here in my rooms the doctor posited that I had somehow subdued, repressed, was the word he used, the memory of your father’s visit, that I had known of you and your mother, the circumstances arising that I had failed in some way to help you, to live up to my own moral code. He even posited, which I daresay I thought fanciful, that I held myself indirectly responsible for the whole affair, that I believed if I had not reneged on certain plans a whole train of events would not have been set into motion. In the end the doctor convinced me that whether a haunting, an hallucination or a factual meeting, the effect it was having on me was one and the same. In the weeks that followed I began to inhabit a world of happy doubt about what happened that afternoon in Manchester.’
The Reverend lifted the lid of the teapot and peered inside. Disappointed with what he found, his fingers nimbly set the lid back with a tiny tinkle of porcelain on porcelain, then moved for the plate of arrowroot biscuits. He bit the corner of one, then set it on the edge of his saucer. He took another sip of tea then continued,

‘If the diagnosis were courtesy of the doctor, the cure I struck upon myself. Though in truth whether it was a cure or an ongoing symptom I’m yet to decide. Regardless of whether it was or was not your father I decided it my duty to make contact with you, his offspring, though I tell you now the chance of this ever succeeding I thought to be miniscule. I have never visited America but have read enough to know a thing or two about the size and scale and the movement of people. However I believed that you, as his only child, deserved to know the truth, or what parts of the truth I had in my possession. I must admit it became something of an obsession. At first I would write out the facts as I had learned them from your father that evening. The names Quinn and Priddy and Barzee, had lodged themselves in my mind and now I found I could recall them all vividly as that night around my fire when your father, weakened and sickening, first told them to me. I knew all three names had played some role but with the passing of time I had become more vague about the details. Though I remembered clearly the name Barzee, if only for the suspicion that hung around the name in your father’s account of the events that had caused him to return home. Charles had been reluctant that night to reveal the detail of his encounter with this man Quinn though he was clearly still profoundly shaken by it. I was in no doubt he believed he witnessed something that afternoon which placed your life and his in danger. So I decided to include these names in my letter to act as signifiers, stamps of veracity. I admit from your vantage Mr Wright it must seem eccentric in the extreme, this bout of hypergraphia.’
The Reverend took another bite of the arrowroot biscuit which he spent a moment chewing before taking a sip of tea. He licked the sugar from his upper lip where it was catching in the light and Wallace’s eye. The Reverend continued to talk for some time and Wallace sensed in his manner a great relief and unburdening. He had worked state by state backwards across the America from Oregon. The letter Wallace received was one of the earliest, he told him and was surprised it had found him. One of a dozen or so he had written in the first flush of vigour after his return from Manchester and his initial conversations with the doctor. After a further conversation with the doctor the Reverend had struck upon a more rational method, rather than penning individual letters like the one that had reached Wallace, naming Priddy and his mother and Barzee and sent him off across the states in search of Barzee, he had instead commissioned the printing of a series of cards, which Wallace now realised accounted for the second letter that Lana handed to him on his return to Caddo from Chicago. The Reverend had employed a firm of typographers in Cambridge to conduct the mail out and a graduate student to research and compile the list of all the Mr Wrights with the initial W alive in the United States at that time along with their last known address.

‘That was the second note you received, which your friend Miss Edelstam intercepted. The one that simply contained an instruction, to please make contact should the names Lottie and Charles Wright mean anything to you.’

The Reverend told him he wished he had done more for his father, that he might have helped him, earlier, or briefly when he saw him. Wallace asked about the death notice which stated his father had died in America.

‘Yes, I know, I know, but I must tell you Mr Wright. The state your father was in when he returned, he struck me as a man changed from the person I had known. I am
afraid I do not think he was long for this world, the wildness in his eye and unrelenting state of agitation. And as such I didn’t think it wise to inform his sisters, your aunts, of our meeting in England.’

The men paused from their conversation. Wallace was feeling suddenly very tired. He wondered what use any of this information was to him but the Reverend continued,

‘I have come to accept the likelihood of what I saw that day in Manchester being simply a product of my own mind, some long repressed anxiety; tiredness nearing exhaustion, the drink to which I was unaccustomed, the strange feeling evoked from being back Manchester after so many years away. All of these things combined to make me project onto that wretched man who passed me in the street the face of your father. I’m sorry Mr Wright. I do very much appreciate your coming here to hear my story. I feel so much better having unburdened myself. I had wanted to set things right. At least set right my own small part in the whole affair. I daresay I never expected a response and least of all to see you sitting here before me. I am indeed a little ashamed to have brought you all the way here from London not to be able to offer you any more solid information about that one meeting. I really am sorry to have dragged you all the way out here Mr Wright. I was delighted when Miss Edlestam informed me you would be in the country on business. I will of course be willing to contribute to the expense this journey must have entailed. Will you take a drop more tea? An arrowroot biscuit perhaps?’

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Before Wallace left the Reverend gave him the address of his father’s sisters, a house, he said, which had been in their family for some time. Though whether or not
they were still living there he did not know, the place had been in such disrepair when he had visited, he did not think anyone could go on living there much longer.

‘I hope this isn’t the sole purpose of your trip to this part of England?’

‘No, no’ Wallace lied uncertainly, and with a soft smile.

‘I’m on a shopping trip, for a friend of mine back home.’

‘Well, good, that is a relief. What else is on your itinerary? The Botanic Garden is worth a visit even now, the glasshouses and whatnot. The Folk Museum seems to attract more and more interest from foreign visitors. Are you at all interested in Brass Rubbing? No, perhaps not. The War Ditches then, that might be more your cup of tea. Sight of a splendid Iron Age fort, started excavating the year after I came down, all manner of gruesomeness gone on there, as the name suggests.’

The Reverend looked embarrassed above all, that this obsession of his had set in sequence events which had led this large man, seemingly friendly man, in the badly fitting tweed suit to Cambridge. As he left, Wallace asked, ‘say, Mr Canon sir, I couldn’t get your name, I mean your Christian name, I’m trying to make a sort of record of my time here, details of this journey, things I’ve seen and so on.’

‘Why of course. Though I must tell you Canon is simply an honorific’

Wallace looked back blankly.

‘A job title much like bus conductor, brick layer and so on’

Wallace nodded.

‘My name is Bird. Spelled with an ‘i’ unlike my homonymous namesake, the sacred polyphonist.’

Then he was boyish again for a moment and almost apologetic,

‘William Bird. But my friends call me Wim.’
The steam shovel was loading the truck with sand. Its wooden cabin was the size of a bathing hut and swung loudly on the turntable. A rumbling as the chain drive engaged against the axles then a thud as the bucket dropped, bedding into the sand pile. The operator was hunched at the levers, smoking a cigarette as he worked. His cloth cap pulled down close over his eyes. Beads of water were gathered along the trip line that led back to the cab, a ragged plume of steam rising up from the black metal smokestack into the sky above, which had begun to clear.

There was a crunching from the gears and from where he stood Wallace could hear that they needed attention. The taxi driver waited on the road nearby unsure why this traveller would want to be taken from the station to a semi-derelict house in the middle of a building site but Wallace turned and waved him away. There were new houses crowding around the old house, eating away into what must have once been the lawn and gardens. Wallace saw from where he stood he could see the roof was falling in on itself, the slates collapsing in a soft curve and gaps where the rafters showed through. It looked as if whoever lived there had taken to the bottom two rooms.

He checked again the address the Reverend had given to him. Archie had been understanding when he explained that he would not be staying the other two nights he was booked in at Woodlands. Archie, scraping the leftovers from breakfast into a tin dish for the Pekingese which padded and rose up on two legs as he did, seemed to assume Wallace would be returning in the coming year as he had it on good authority there were more machines still to install at the plant. There was a direct train,
Wallace learned at the ticket office, which would take him to Manchester in four hours with no changes.

Wallace walked towards the front door and set down his suitcase. He knocked at the glass. A woman came to the door. She looked hard at him as if puzzling for a minute to a place him.

‘Good afternoon,’ Wallace said.

The woman studied him, cautiously, as if expecting him to try and sell her something. When no pitch was forthcoming she seemed suddenly to realise who he was.

‘Ah yes. Good afternoon. Do come in, we’ve been expecting you.’

‘Trust you had a pleasant journey?’ she asked as she ushered Wallace into the hallway. She opened the door into a downstairs room that looked as if it had not seen daylight for a long time. It smelled of damp, of mothballs under lavender and standing water.

‘I shall just fetch my sister,’ the woman said gesturing to an empty chair by the fireside.

It occurred to Wallace that Reverend must have contacted the sisters to let them know he was coming. The wallpaper was coming away, Wallace noticed, above an old piano with a finely carved case; it reminded him of Miss Roger’s room in Caddo. From the corner of his eye, he was surprised by a fluttering. In the far corner stood an old fashioned birdcage and he was able to make out the long tail of a blue budgerigar.

The woman who had answered the door came back into the room with another women who was carrying a tray set for tea. More tea, Wallace thought to himself. She placed it down with great care and ceremony on a small folding table, the edge
turned like bamboo. ‘My sister,’ the woman said to Wallace a little formally, as if to avoid any confusion about the other woman’s station. The sister was also dressed in black but distinguished by a crocheted collar. Wallace wasn’t sure how to begin the conversation and so the three of them sat in silence, sipping their tea, listening to the sound of the clock from the hallway.

‘And are you in the city long?’ the elder sister asked finally.

‘No, I’m just passing through really. I return to America tomorrow.’

‘Tomorrow?’ she said looking suddenly alarmed.

‘But we were told you would be with us for three nights in total?’

‘Yes, we were expecting a Mr Ullapool this afternoon,’ the younger sister added.

‘You are not Mr Ullapool?’ the elder said, sounding concerned now and a little defensive.

‘No, I’m afraid I’m not’.

‘Well I’m sorry to say we have only the one room. From whom did you receive the recommendation?’

‘Ah, you must have seen the advertisement on the library notice board?’ the younger sister said brightly, clearly less concerned than her sister.

‘Well you may as well finish your tea.’ the elder sister added

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It felt like a great deal of trouble to explain to the sisters what had brought him here to Manchester. So instead he asked them about the house. The questions seemed to please the elder sister and her frostiness soon dropped away.

‘Yes we closed off most of the rooms years ago.’

‘Well we’ve lived here our whole life you see.’ Her sister added before asking:

‘Are you from the colonies? Canadian perhaps? Or South Africa?’
‘Caddo, Oklahoma.’

‘American?’ the younger Miss Wright asked as if there were some uncertainty.

Wallace nodded.

‘We had a brother who lived in America once didn’t we Tabby.’

But the elder sister looked at her sharply as if she might make her unsay the words.

When the sisters offered Wallace more tea he did not refuse. They talked a while longer with occasional watery chirping from the budgerigar to interrupt them, the younger sister making a quick clicking sound with her tongue to quieten it. The elder sister becoming more talkative with the passing of time and Wallace wondered if she were somehow trying to explain the state in which he found the house.

‘Our father decided to invest his money with a financier who claimed to have worked as an under secretary to Lidderdale at the Bank of England. He gave disastrous advice and then disappeared to South America where large portions of our father’s wealth had been diverted into government bonds and paper pesos.’

‘He never recovered,’ the younger sister added seeming to relish the indiscretion.

‘He died on New Year’s Eve 1900. Penniless, practically, save a small trust for my mother at Williams Deacon’s Bank. All gone now of course. Mother was ill for a decade after father passed away, as we were her nurses we were rather slow when it came to finding husbands.’

She gave a little nervous laugh.

‘Eloise was engaged briefly to a pianist two years her junior, whom we met in Brighton on walking tour of the south coast. He was a very romantic figure, wrote his own songs, I fear Mother would have thought him a slightly inferior sort. He’d trained at the Birmingham and Midland Institute. Played professionally on the
Olympic for the White Star Line. He would play for us; the Chanticleer Rag, Grizzly Bear, Goodbye Rose, songs he’d picked up over there, scraps of Bartók and Mahler too, though never with quite as much dash or confidence. He enlisted as soon as the war broke out, which I thought was decent of him considering he was in his thirties. Looked much younger though, boyish, I suppose that’s why they took him.’

‘That was the same summer I met a young man on the tennis lawn at the Royal York. We must have exchanged thirty or forty letters that year. And it was only after we were on first name terms I found it in me to reveal my real age. He’d assumed us contemporaries you see. He didn’t believe me at first, asked me to send him proof documentary evidence he called it. And of course when the war began both chaps promised they’d write. Elli saw her chap when he was on leave from basic training. That’s when he gave you the ring isn’t it Elli?’

The younger sister nodded and Wallace saw how she slid her thumb over the small silver ring on her left hand, obscuring it.

‘He was hit by a motorist the day before he was due board the troop transporter to France. The elder sister continued ‘an acquaintance of his got word somehow to us and we rushed down there to see him. Of course it was too late by the time we arrived, just an empty bed and no record of where the body had been moved to and no proof Elli was his finance. I remember,’ the elder sister said returning, unprompted, to her own thread of the story, ‘it was quite by chance I read about my chap in the newspaper. Shot down with his spotter flying over a line of cavalrymen. I’d always thought he’d come back though you see,’ the elder Miss Wright stopped suddenly. She seemed a little short of breath and glanced over to her sister in the chair opposite.
‘Well that knocked the wind out of our sails somewhat didn’t it Tabby,’ the younger sister said taking up the story. ‘Didn’t see the point rather after that. I mean you wait so long then something as beastly as a war comes along and well that’s that. I mean we could hardly complain, when there were girls much younger than us grieving. You’ll excuse me won’t you, I am rambling on rather.’

‘And your brother?’ Wallace asked

There was a brief uneasy silence. Then the elder sister spoke.

‘Terribly sad story, shan’t burden you with it. Went off to seek his fortune but we never saw him again did we?’

‘No, never. Not once,’ her sister said sealing her lips and softly shaking her head were further emphasis needed.

Wallace took a final slug of cold tea from his delicate cup. Whatever appetite had brought him this far seemed to have vanished. He heard the steam shovel start up again outside. The older sister adjusted her skirts, smoothing them down on her lap. She seemed a little embarrassed by the story she had just told. Wallace sensed a hardening in her again.

‘Well I’m afraid we’re expecting our Mr Ullapool imminently. I’m sorry we’ve no space. Will you be passing through again? I do hope so. The other guest room should be repaired by the summer so if you find yourself in Manchester do let us know.’

‘Yes, we can certainly set aside a room for you?’ her younger sister added brightly.

‘A little more tea before you go?’

‘No, thank you. I should be getting on my way.’

‘Well it is good to have met you Mr?’
‘Yes, we didn’t get your name did we Ellie, how silly of us’

‘Mr..’ Wallace paused, ‘Haskell.’

‘LeRoy Haskell.’

‘We’ll that is a marvellous name isn’t it Tab? LeRoy Haskell our American visitor, we shall make a note of that shan’t we.’

‘Yes and do be in touch should you wish to board with us in future. We offer excellent rates and breakfast is very much included.’

The sisters rose and Wallace shook the hand of each. They did not see him to the door. He stood for a moment in the hallway listening to the sound of the clock, the pendulum moving inside its hollow body. One of the sisters, he did not know which, had begun to hum.

As Wallace left the house he smelled wood smoke on the air. He stopped for a moment trying to figure out where it was coming from. The building site Wallace now saw stretched around the entire house save a long strip of garden, lawn mainly and some fairly deep but half-empty flower beds and what greenhouse in front of like a little clump of trees. Wallace heard the steam shovel rolling towards the space beside where he now saw two men standing talking. The driver was shouting to another worker on the building site. As much to avoid the attention of the workmen as to satisfy his curiosity Wallace followed the path beside the lawn to where the greenhouse stood. From there he could see the state of the house’s roof. There were beams visible where the slates had fallen away, weeds growing thick in the guttering, a thick springy sprig of something green bedding in fifty feet off the ground at the top of the house. From this angle the whole dwelling looked condemnable. Beside the greenhouse there was a narrow gap and Wallace, not quite knowing what he hoped to find, pushed through. He was unsure now whether he was still in the garden
of the sisters. Maybe it was common land. Maybe it was the far end of the their
neighbour’s garden.

In the clearing there was a bonfire burning. Bright flames crackling, rising out of
the leaves. A few yards away there was a tall man, wearing trousers that had been
patched at the knees and a canvas apron. The man gave the impression he had been
dressed by someone other than himself, his clothes sitting awkwardly on him.
Wallace watched him bending to load a pile of cuttings into his wheelbarrow.
Strange, Wallace thought, the sisters should employ a man for the garden when the
roof was falling down on top them, if of course this was their garden. He did not
allow his thoughts to travel beyond this. The man was leaning on the rake he had
been using to gather the cuttings, looking down into the fire. After a few moments he
sensed he was being watched he turned to Wallace. The two men looked at each
other for a long time. Then Wallace turned and looked back up the roof of the house
to where the tiles had come away and the rafters were showing through.

‘Wants fixing, don’t it?’ he said, turning sideways to the man, and making a peak
against the brightening sky with the flat of his hand.

‘It does, yes,’ the man said flatly.

‘Not sure the place will see another winter if that roof isn’t fixed.’

Wallace heard the birdsong from in the bushes and the smell of thin, new smoke
rising from the bonfire, as it snapped and spat.

‘Say,’ Wallace asked ‘what bird is that?’

The man listened, inclining his head, his jaw working slowly side to side as if
crunching.

‘Chaffinch’ he said.

‘Chaffinch’ Wallace repeated.
‘And that one?’ Wallace felt like he was coaxing an awkward child into conversation.

‘Song thrush. Throstles we called them’ the man said, his jaw still working away in a slow grinding motion he seemed unable to control.

‘Throstles, that is a swell name. I’ll be sure to remember that one.’

The man in the canvas apron stood still he barely moved his body, only his eyes, occasionally glancing down at Wallace’s shoes as if they posed some kind of threat to him. Wallace put down his suitcase. He dropped to one knee and opened the latch. Wrapped carefully inside a jumper and inside covered in paper, was the plate with the picture of the bridge with the three blue figures on it that once belonged to his mother and which Frazier at the home for delinquents in Louisville had let him take from those things in the trunk he said had once belonged to her. Wallace thought it might be right to return it. He stood with the plate wrapped in the jumper then handed the makeshift parcel to the man in the canvas apron.

‘Say, do me a favour would you?’ Wallace asked.

‘Give this to the ladies inside and thank them for their hospitality this afternoon.’

The man nodded. Then Wallace shook his hand and thanked him. For a moment he wanted to hug him, to take the old man in the canvas apron by the bonfire in his arms, to pull him as tightly as he could against him. But he did not and the man turned away and walked towards the wheelbarrow, where he set down the package on a pile of leaves.

As Wallace left the garden he stopped and scooped a handful of soil. He fed it through the funnel of his hand into his empty hip flask, to take back with him. He had begun to miss life in Caddo more deeply than he thought he ever could. The Haskell’s, Burl Cobb, Lige, McKenzie Getchell and his boasting, Lana dressed up on
the forecourt of her father’s filling station waiting for some farm boy or furloughed solider, to come and pick her up. As handful of soil filled the hipflask he thought about the sisters, their lovers who never made it to war let alone home, and the plate he had returned to them; of the Reverend who had been so resolute in the address being where he said it was, of the new houses they were putting up around it with those bare strips of gardens. It was good, Wallace supposed, to see where his people had come from. He had some stories now for Lana, he would tell her about the women on the boat, might even tell her how one night he saved one from jumping into the ocean or he might keep that to himself. Wallace imagined it would not be long until that steam shovel came rolling towards the house. He wondered if his mother’s letters were inside, crumbling in the attic or unopened in one of the rooms on the upper floors but for the second time that afternoon he stopped his thoughts going too far. He would like to be back in the Tourer now on that stretch of road where the sun was dropping west across the cardboard coloured scrub and briefly burning out on those little bodies of water, driving to collect Lana and take her to a movie in Durant. Lana on the forecourt of her father’s filling station in an outfit from the pages of a pattern book, contorting her face into the shape of some starlet from Play Bill as she waited for him to collect her, her fine hair sprayed and combed out to look the best it could. Sounding the horn of that wreck he nursed back from scrap, then leaning over and opening the passenger side door.
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