ALSO BY SEBASTIAN FAULKS

The Girl at the Lion D'Or
A Fool's Alphabet
Birdsong
The Fatal Englishman: Three Short Lives
Charlotte Gray
On Green Dolphin Street

THE VINTAGE BOOK OF WAR STORIES

edited by

SEBASTIAN FAULKS
and
JÖRG HENSGEN

Published by Vintage 2005

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

First published in Great Britain by
Vintage 1999

Vintage
Random House, 20 Vauxhall Bridge Road, London SW1V 2SA

Random House Australia (Pty) Limited
20 Alfred Street, Milsons Point, Sydney,
New South Wales 2061, Australia

Random House New Zealand Limited
18 Poland Road, Glenfield,
Auckland 10, New Zealand

Random House (Pty) Limited
Endulini, 5a Jubilee Road, Parktown 2193,
South Africa

The Random House Group Limited Reg. No. 954009
www.randomhouse.co.uk/vintage

A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN 0 09 948346 7

Papers used by Random House are natural, recyclable products made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The manufacturing processes conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

Set in 10½/12 Sabon by SX Composing DTP, Rayleigh, Essex
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Cox & Wyman Ltd, Reading, Berkshire

CONTENTS

Introduction ix

BRUCE CHATWIN
Volunteers 1

LOUIS-FERDINAND CÉ LINE
Could I Be the Last Coward on Earth? 6

DAVID MALOUF
Invisible Enemies 17

ERICH MARIA REMARQUE
How Long It Takes For a Man to Die! 26

A.D. GRISTWOOD
The Wasteland 38

STRATIS MYRTVILIS
The Beauty of the Battlefield 49

ERNEST HEMINGWAY
Going Back 55

WILLIAM BOYD
Narrow Escapes 68

SIEGFRIED SASSOON
My Own Little Show 82

PAT BARKER
Finished with the War 91

SEBASTIEN JAPRISOT
The Woman on Loan 100

ISAAC BABEL
Treason 109

LAURIE LEE
Thank God for the War 115

ANDRE MALRAUX
Crash 126

HEINRICH BÖLL
The Postcard 132

KAY BOYLE
Defeat 142

JEAN-LOUIS CURTIS
The Forests of the Night 145

ELIZABETH BOWEN
Everybody in London Was in Love 150

ALISTAIR MACLEAN
Fire on the Water 157

ROBERT HARRIS
Enigma 164

LOUIS DE BERNIÈ RES
Send in the Clowns 177

JOH N FOWLES
Freedom 186

NORMAN MAILER
We You Coming-to-Get, Yank 194

JAMES JONES
No Choice 205

SHUSAKU ENDO
We Are About to Kill a Man 219

MARTIN BOOTH
Hiroshima Joe 230

Louis BEGLEY
Wartime Lies 241

ITALO CALVINO
Why Are the Men Fighting? 251

JOSEPH HELLER
They Were Trying to Kill *Me* 261

MICHAEL ONDAATJE
The Last Medieval War 266

JOHN HORNE BURNS
My Heart Finally Broke in Naples 270

WOLFGANG KOEPPEN
A Servant of Death 283

KURT VONNEGUT
A Nazi City Mourned at Some Profit 289

JAMES SALTER
The Hunters 292

TIM O'BRIEN
How to Tell a True War Story 306

PHILIP CAPUTO
Be Like the Forest 321

LARRY HEINEMANN
Paco's Story 328

CHRISTOPHER J. KOCH
Welcome to Saigon 340

BAO NINH
The Jungle of Screaming Souls 350

CHRISTOPHER JOHN FARLEY
My Favourite War 357

Biographical Notes 369
Select Bibliography 383
Acknowledgements 393

INTRODUCTION

THIS IS A book of extracts from works of fiction set in the wars of this century, and, when you come to think about it, the strangest thing about such books is that there are not more of them. Once the young literary form of the novel had decided, 250 years or so ago, that it would do more than tell stories, that it was uniquely suited by its access to inward psychological development and boundless narrative to explore 'human nature' and that that would be, for many writers and readers, its highest aim, then you would have thought that most ambitious novelists would have looked to see what conditions of existence offered them the most extreme and therefore, presumably, most rewarding circum• stances for their study. War, surely, would have been the answer. If the writing of fiction had been undertaken not by writers but by scientists, they would certainly have seized on the dramatic potential of armed conflict for their experiments. These, they would have argued, are the ideal laboratory conditions for this examination of humanity; only under these intense pressures, both on the battlefield and behind it, both in the generations that fought and in their children, would the transcendent or outer qualities of humankind become visible.

Artists, however, aren't like that. Writers write what they can; they write books about the stories or people that have moved them, without analysing, necessarily, the effects their work will have on their readers. They certainly don't view it as scientific enterprise in which the rewards are bestowed on those who work at the frontiers of knowledge. Perhaps they

should, but they don't; and the other deterrent fact about war as a subject or background for fiction is that it is so disgusting. Which writer would willingly immerse himself for two or three years in this drab world of units and numbers, of industrial metal and meaningless death, without women or children or costume or domestic drama or even interesting food and drink? Laboratory of souls maybe, they would reply, but what a repellent and austere one.

Well, there are ways round that problem; in fact there are more ways of disarming a reader's natural disinclination to read about such things than of overcoming the writer's reluctance to write about them. I remember the reactions of friends and colleagues who asked me what I was writing in the early 1990s when I told them it was a novel set in the First World War. They thought I was insane. No one (or no one they could think of) had written a novel in England about this war since .. . well, since Robert Graves – or perhaps that wasn't a novel. Anyway, it would be impossible to improve on the great books of the 1920s; war was a subject for decrepit old men in Aldershot bungalows; and, outside the British Legion library, it would have no sale at all. Oddly enough when the novel, *Birdsong,* came out in 1993 and met with some success, many of the same people assured me it was because I had 'jumped on a First World War bandwagon'.

It does seem that war has to some extent come back into play as a background or setting for serious fiction, though writers today are unlikely to follow the direct course to the Front of Erich Maria Remarque or even the twisting paths of Evelyn Waugh, whose *Sword of Honour* trilogy fully digested a personal experience of combat before setting it in a social context. They will look for different angles. The fall-out, the repercussions, the social eddies that begin from the hideous collisions of metal and flesh; the historical, post-Freudian, even the comic or ironic dimensions: these are likely to be of interest to modern writers, especially as the century nears its end and the rolling numbers of the millennial clock induce a spasm of last-minute retrospect. How did we get here? Has ever there been such a century for killing? What did it mean?

Have we really thought it through?

Pat Barker, Sebastien Japrisot, William Boyd, Louis de Berniè res and others have recently used war for their own fic• tional ends; it serves a purpose in a wider artistic scheme. But one of the first things that will strike readers of this anthology is the high proportion of novelists who are drawing on their own experiences, recycled or recrafted to varying degrees, and the low proportion who have gone in with the pure, dis• interested eye of fiction. Many writers have used the form of the novel as little more than a convenience for what is at heart a documentary account of what happened to them. We have tried, on the whole, to favour full-blown fiction over lightly fictionalised autobiography, though there were instances of fact-based fiction where the writing itself was so compelling (Sassoon, Tim O'Brien), so successfully transformed (Heming• way, Norman Mailer) or else dealt with an experience or a conflict that would otherwise have been unrepresented (Malraux) that we were glad not to be inflexible.

There seems little doubt that the main impulse of a writer such as A.D. Grisrwood was a documentary one. He wanted to get down on paper what the Great War was like, and if that meant inventing a perfunctory story and changing a few names, so be it. Later generations have been thankful for what he did, and such purpose can give real power to the writing, as it did to the overtly political novel *Under Fire,* which its author, Henri Barbusse, hoped would help to stop the fighting. Witnessing what no human being had ever seen before, how• ever – the slaughter of ten million men for no apparent reason – proved an experience difficult to transmute into fiction, and there are not many outstanding novels to emerge from 1914– 18. Exceptions include books by Henry Williamson, Frederic Manning, R.H. Mottram and Richard Aldington; unfortunately, Ford Madox Ford's Tietjens tetralogy, the most highly esteemed of all, defeated our attempts to find an extract that was both representative and self-contained.

In compiling this anthology we were aware of the attraction of good writing for its own sake but also of the need to be to some extent representative – to vary the contents by

nationality of author, by conflict, by type of combat (by air and sea as well as by land), but above all by tone. There is no shortage of novels that describe bullet wounds and bombard• ments; there are not so many that talk about what was going on elsewhere. For this reason we were particularly pleased to include extracts from Elizabeth Bowen, Jean-Louis Curtis and John Horne Burns. Where it seemed possible, we looked to include humorous writing (Louis de Berniè res, Laurie Lee, Christopher John Farley), or incidents that illuminated peripheral or contigent aspects of war – Wolfgang Koeppen's Nazi on the loose in Rome, for instance, Stratis Myrivilis's unashamed description of the beauty of firepower or Kurt Vonnegut's wry account of literary profiteering.

With Vonnegut and Joseph Heller, we have cheated. We wanted to include them both out of admiration for their writing and because the theatres of war they wrote about (Dresden and the US airforce in the Mediterranean, respec• tively) were intriguing. However, we feared to bore readers with writing that would be too familiar to them, so in these two instances (only) we have taken extracts from the writers' accounts of their novels rather than from the novels them• selves.

Traditionally, the art of the anthologist is one of com• promise, of steering a course between the Scylla of over-familiarity and the Charybdis of too many unknowns. It is something like that of the music promoter who will use his star attractions to 'break' new acts and who will also make sure that while the main act plays songs from their new album they also include their greatest hits. Our rule of thumb was that if the Rolling Stones were going to play, they should give it all they've got; and if your curiosity does not flare up at the sight of Hemingway's name, I hope at least you won't deny yourself the intense pleasure of re-reading the extract in question.

The novelists' techniques evolved as the wars themselves become different, and to some extent the literary style was affected by the military circumstances. Many English novelists of the Great War were acting as auxiliary reporters: 'Look,' they were saying, 'no one really told you before what it was

like' – and their ambitions were essentially journalistic. Those who went artistically further found what they could do con• strained by the static nature of trench warfare. It is not sur• prising that, not only surveying an unprecedented human holocaust but watching it from the hole in the ground for months on end, these men produced such introspective books.

The Second World War brought, superficially, a completely different set of problems and responses. The combatants were unillusioned from the start. They knew how gruesome war would be, they knew that they had been dropped into it by inept politicians, but in place of the innocent patriotism of their fathers they had a proper moral cause to fight for; or at the very least, they were defending their homes. This was an inter-continental war fought in the jungle, the desert, by sea and by air. There was much less problem here about getting word home of what was going on; the difficulty was more that there was so much happening on so many different fronts that many voices and their stories were in danger of going unheard. To novelists, however, this multiplicity was an advantage, and made this the easiest war to write about. In the 1950s Alistair MacLean chose the Atlantic Convoys, in the 1960s John Fowles the German occupation of a Greek island; as late as 1995 Robert Harris found secret dramas at Bletchley. The growth of air war, of radar and the improvement of commu• nications made this, frankly, more exciting than the trenches; and all novelists from Allied countries could approach the sub• ject with a certain moral ease denied to Heinrich Bö ll or Shusaku Endo.

Writing from Vietnam became different again. Like the First World War, this proved a difficult experience to digest, and it was some time before American film-makers, in particular, were able to approach the subject. The amount of information had increased and so had access to it, particularly by television camera; but the combat was contained, peculiar and morally doubtful: drafted young civilians fighting a guerrilla war from helicopter gunships with napalm in a country they had never heard of . . . this was not Normandy or Iwo Jima. American writers eventually seemed to agree a strategy to deal with it,

and it seems to have been by recourse to what you might call a rock'n'roll style. When you read American accounts of Vietnam, it is very hard not to hear in them the tones of Haight Ashbury, of Jerry Rubin and the Yippies and the entire fusion of high and popular culture that was taking place in America at the time. The results are both shocking and poignant. It was as though Wyoming and Georgia, so reluctantly transplanted to the undergrowth of Vietnam, decided on its return that from now on it would speak its own demotic; that if Washington had sent them there, from now on Washington would hear about it in their way, in their language. The literary craft of Larry Heinemann and Philip Caputo is far subtler than that, of course; but there is something insistently democratic in the way these people wrote which is analogous to the low-key yet haunting inscriptions of the Vietnam Memorial itself.

What will come from Bosnia or Kosovo? The rhetoric of American commanders has become infected by the language of Nintendo. When General Norman Schwarzkopf declared of the Iraqi army in 1991 that he was going to 'cut it off, then kill it', he may have been making a reference to Hannibal's action at Cannae, but his private soldiers ignorantly used the language of the video game, while the Nato commanders in the Kosovo conflict seemed to believe that war could actually be waged as at a games console, safe from harm, with only the enemy targets open to damage. It is possible to envisage on the ground in bombed Belgrade or mutilated Kosovo the dramatically complex circumstances that might give rise to fiction in due course, but you feel it would be certain to come from those countries and not from the ranks of the arm's length Nato air forces. Perhaps that is unfair. The story of a troubled pilot who has inadvertently bombed the refugees he is meant to help, attacked the liberation army who are his allies or destroyed the embassy of a non-engaged enemy country is not without potential.

As I write these words at the end of May 1999, it is completely impossible to predict what will happen in the Balkans. There could be a belated Nato ground invasion in the summer;

bombing alone might eventually cause Milosevic to surrender; there could be a diplomatic compromise; the fighting could disastrously spill over into neighbouring countries. All these possible outcomes have their expert backers in the press and the sheer unknowability of it all suggests another reason why war has attracted novelists.

As serious fiction has moved further from plot and incident, the reader's hunger for books that impose an artistic and com• forting pattern on the random events of life is less often satis• fied. War can still deal with big events, while violent accidents or sudden reversals are considered melodramatic in ordinary fiction. Only in a war novel can you respectably kill off your main character with a stray sniper's bullet, yet such deaths are in some way emblematic, in extreme form, of the inexplicable randomness of life events as we experience them from day to day in peace. A parent who has lost a child in a car accident may find greater affinity with the narrative emergencies of people in a wartime novel than in one that deals with a mar• ried woman's failed love affair or a sensitive young man's sexual awakening.

It still seems to me strange, when I come to think of it, that there are not more war books.

The bulk of the hard work that has gone into this anthology has been done by my co-editor Jö rg Hensgen; his reading, researching, editing and organising have been prodigious. While I am happy to accept the blame for any shortcomings, the credit for any strengths this book may have is more likely to be his. I confess that occasionally during our collaboration I salved my guilt at the inequity of our contributions by reflect• ing that I was the first male member of my family for more than 100 years who, when confronted by a German of the same generation, had at least not tried to kill him.

Sebastian Faulks
May 1999

Bruce Chatwin

VOLUNTEERS

When the First World War broke out in August 1914, both the volunteers who marched through the streets of Paris, London and Berlin, and the crowds who cheered them believed that the war would be over by Christmas. The 'Spirit of 1914' was still powerful four months later when the war reached the small Welsh village of Rhulen, as described here by Bruce Chatwin in his novel On the Black Hill *(1982).*

THEN THE WAR came.

For years, the tradesmen in Rhulen had said there was going to be war with Germany, though nobody knew what war would mean. There had been no real war since Waterloo, and everyone agreed that with railways and modern guns this war would either be very terrible, or over very quickly.

On the 7th of August 1914, Amos Jones and his sons were scything thistles when a man called over the hedge that the Germans had marched into Belgium, and rejected England's ultimatum. A recruiting office, he said, had opened in the Town Hall. About twenty local lads had joined.

'More fool them,' Amos shrugged, and glared downhill into Herefordshire.

All three went on with their scything, but the boys looked very jittery when they came in for supper.

Mary had been pickling beetroot, and her apron was streaked with purple stains.

'Don't worry,' she said. 'You're far too young to fight. Besides, it'll probably be over by Christmas.'

Winter came, and there was no end to the war. Mr Gomer Davies started preaching patriotic sermons and, one Friday, sent word to The Vision, bidding them to a lantern lecture, at five o'clock, in the Congregation Hall.

The sky was deepening from crimson to gunmetal. Two limousines were parked in the lane; and a crowd of farm boys, all in their Sunday best, were chatting to the chauffeurs or peering through the windows at the fur rugs and leather upholstery. The boys had never seen such automobiles at close quarters. In a nearby shed, an electric generator was purring.

Mr Gomer Davies stood in the vestibule, welcoming all comers with a handshake and muddy smile. The war, he said, was a Crusade for Christ.

Inside the Hall, a coke stove was burning and the windows had misted up. A line of electric bulbs spread a film of yellow light over the planked and varnished walls. There were plenty of Union Jacks strung up, and a picture of Lord Kitchener.

The magic lantern stood in the middle of the aisle. A white sheet had been tacked up to serve as a screen; and a khaki-clad Major, one arm in a sling, was confiding his box of glass slides to the lady projectionist.

Veiled in cigar smoke, the principal speaker, Colonel Bickerton, had already taken his seat on the stage and was having a jaw with a Boer War veteran. He extended his game leg to the audience. A silk hat sat on the green baize tablecloth, beside a water-carafe and a tumbler.

Various ministers of God – all of whom had sunk their differences in a blaze of patriotism – went up to pay their respects to the squire, and show concern for his comfort.

'No, I'm quite comfortable, thank you.' The Colonel enunciated every syllable to perfection. 'Thank you for looking after me so well. Pretty good turn-out, I see. Most encouraging, what?'

The hall was full. Lads with fresh, weatherbeaten faces crammed the benches or elbowed forward to get a better look

at the Bickertons' daughter, Miss Isobel – a brunette with moist red lips and moist hazel eyes, who sat below the platform, composed and smiling, in a silver fox-fur cape. From her dainty hat there spurted a grey-pink glycerined ostrich plume. At her elbow crouched a young man with carroty hair and mouth agape.

It was Jim the Rock.

The Joneses took their seats on a bench at the back. Mary could feel her husband, tense and angry beside her. She was afraid he was going to make a scene.

The vicar of Rhulen opened the session by proposing a vote of thanks to Mr Gomer Davies for the use of the Hall, and electricity.

Rumbles of 'Hear! Hear!' sounded round the room. He went on to sketch the origins of the war.

Few of the hill-farmers understood why the murder of an Archduke in the Balkans should have triggered off the invasion of Belgium; but when the vicar spoke of the 'peril to our beloved Empire' people began to sit up.

'There can be no rest,' he raised his voice, 'until this cancer has been ripped out of European society. The Germans will squeal like every bully when cornered. But there must be no compromise, no shaking hands with the devil. It is useless to moralize with an alligator. Kill it!'

The audience clapped and the clergyman sat down.

Next in turn was the Major, who had been wounded, he said, at Mons. He began with a joke about 'making the Rhine whine' – whereupon the Colonel perked up and said, 'Never cared for Rhine wines myself. Too fruity, what?'

The Major then lifted his swagger stick.

'Lights!' he called, and the lights went off.

One by one, a sequence of blurred images flashed across the screen – of Tommies in camp, Tommies on parade, Tommies on the cross-Channel ferry; Tommies in a French cafe; Tommies in trenches; Tommies fixing bayonets, and Tommies 'going over the top'. Some of the slides were so fuzzy it was hard to tell which was the shadow of Miss Isobel's plume, and which were shell-bursts.

The last slide showed an absurd goggle-eyed visage with crows' wings on its upper lip and a whole golden eagle on its helmet.

'That,' said the Major, 'is your enemy – Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany.'

There were shouts of 'String 'im up' and 'Shoot 'im to bloody bits!' – and the Major, also, sat down.

Colonel Bickerton then eased himself to his feet and apologized for the indisposition of his wife.

His own son, he said, was fighting in Flanders. And after the stirring scenes they'd just witnessed, he hoped there'd be few shirkers in the district.

'When this war is over,' he said, 'there will be two classes of persons in this country. There will be those who were qualified to join the Armed Forces and refrained from doing so . . .'

'Shame!' shrilled a woman in a blue hat.

'I'm the Number One!' a young man shouted and stuck up his hand.

But the Colonel raised his cufflinks to the crowd, and the crowd fell silent:

'.. . and there will be those who were so qualified and came forward to do their duty to their King, their country . . . and their womenfolk . . .'

'Yes! Yes!' Again the hands arose with fluid grace and, again, the crowd fell silent:

'The last-mentioned class, I need not add, will be the aristocracy of this country – indeed, the only true aristocracy of this country – who, in the evening of their days, will have the consolation of knowing that they have done what England expects of every man: namely, to do his duty . . .'

'What about Wales?' A sing-song voice sounded to the right of Miss Bickerton; but Jim was drowned in the general hullabaloo.

Volunteers rushed forward to press their names on the Major. There were shouts of 'Hip! Hip! Hurrah!' Other voices broke into song, 'For they are jolly good fellows . . .' The woman in the blue hat slapped her son over the face,

shrieking, 'Oh, yes, you will!' – and a look of childlike serenity had descended on the Colonel.

He continued, in thrilling tones: 'Now when Lord Kitchener says he needs you, he means YOU. For each one of you brave young fellows is unique and indispensable. A few moments ago, I heard a voice on my left calling, "What about Wales?"'

Suddenly, you could hear a pin drop.

'Believe you me, that cry, "What about Wales?" is a cry that goes straight to my heart. For in my veins Welsh blood and English blood course in equal quantities. And that . . . that is why my daughter and I have brought two automobiles here with us this evening. Those of you who wish to enlist in our beloved Herefordshire Regiment may drive with me . . . But those of you, loyal Welshmen, who would prefer to join that other, most gallant regiment, the South Wales Borderers, may go with my daughter and Major Llewellyn-Smythe to Brecon . . .'

This was how Jim the Rock went to war – for the sake of leaving home, and for a lady with moist red lips and moist hazel-coloured eyes.

Louis-Ferdinand Cé line

COULD I BE THE LAST COWARD ON EARTH?

The narrator of Cé line'snovel Journey to the End of the Night *(1932) too has volunteered to join the army after seeing soldiers and military bands parading through the streets of Paris. But his feelings of patriotism soon give way to the realization that he has made a big mistake: 'The music had stopped...* I *was about to clear out. Too late! They'd quietly shut the gate behind us civilians. We were caught like rats.'*

WHEN YOU'RE IN, you're in. They put us on horseback, and after we'd been on horseback for two months, they put us back on our feet. Maybe because of the expense. Anyway, one morning the colonel was looking for his horse, his orderly had made off with it, nobody knew where to, probably some quiet spot that bullets couldn't get to as easily as the middle of the road. Because that was exactly where the colonel and I had finally stationed ourselves, with me holding his orderly book while he wrote out his orders.

Down the road, away in the distance, as far as we could see, there were two black dots, plunk in the middle like us, but they were two Germans and they'd been busy shooting for the last fifteen or twenty minutes.

Maybe our colonel knew why they were shooting, maybe the Germans knew, but I, so help me, hadn't the vaguest idea. As far back as I could search my memory, I hadn't done a thing to the Germans, I'd always been polite and friendly with

them. I knew the Germans pretty well, I'd even gone to school in their country when I was little, near Hanover. I'd spoken their language. A bunch of loud-mouthed little halfwits, that's what they were, with pale, furtive eyes like wolves; we'd go out to the woods together after school to feel the girls up, or we'd fire pop-guns or pistols you could buy for four marks. And we drank sugary beer together. But from that to shooting at us right in the middle of the road, without so much as a word of introduction, was a long way, a very long way. If you asked me, they were going too far.

This war, in fact, made no sense at all. It couldn't go on.

Had something weird got into these people? Something I didn't feel at all? I suppose I hadn't noticed it . . .

Anyway, my feelings toward them hadn't changed. In spite of everything. I'd have liked to understand their brutality, but what I wanted still more, enormously, with all my heart, was to get out of there, because suddenly the whole business looked to me like a great big mistake.

'In a mess like this,' I said to myself, 'there's nothing to be done, all you can do is clear out. . .'

Over our heads, two millimetres, maybe one millimetre from our temples, those long searching lines of steel, that bullets make when they're out to kill you, were whistling through the hot summer air.

I'd never felt so useless as I did amidst all those bullets in the sunlight. A vast and universal mockery.

I was only twenty at the time. Deserted farms in the distance, empty wide-open churches, as if the peasants had gone out for the day to attend a fair at the other end of the district, leaving everything they owned with us for safe• keeping, their countryside, their carts with the shafts in the air, their fields, their barn yards, the roads, the trees, even the cows, a chained dog, the works. Leaving us free to do as we pleased while they were gone. Nice of them, in a way. 'Still,' I said to myself, 'if they hadn't gone somewhere else, if there were still somebody here, I'm sure we wouldn't be behaving so badly! So disgustingly! We wouldn't dare in front of them!' But there wasn't a soul to watch us! Nobody but us, like

newlyweds that get down to the dirty business when all the people have gone home.

And another thought I had (behind a tree) was that I wished Dé roulè de* – the one I'd heard so much about – had been there to describe his reactions when a bullet tore open his guts.

Those Germans squatting on the road, shooting so obstinately, were rotten shots, but they seemed to have ammunition to burn, whole warehouses full or so it seemed to me. Nobody could say this war was over! I have to hand it to the colonel, his bravery was remarkable. He roamed around in the middle of the road, up and down and back and forth in the midst of the bullets as calmly as if he'd been waiting for a friend on a station platform, except just a tiny bit impatient.

One thing I'd better tell you right away, I'd never been able to stomach the country, I'd always found it dreary, those endless fields of mud, those houses where nobody's ever home, those roads that don't go anywhere. And if to all that you add a war, it's completely unbearable. A sudden wind had come up on both sides of the road, the clattering leaves of the poplars mingled with the little dry crackle aimed at us from down the road. Those unknown soldiers missed us every time, but they spun a thousand deaths around us, so close they seemed to clothe us. I was afraid to move.

That colonel, I could see, was a monster. Now I knew it for sure, he was worse than a dog, he couldn't conceive of his own death. At the same time I realized that there must be plenty of brave men like him in our army, and just as many no doubt in the army facing us. How many, I wondered. One or two million, say several millions in all? The thought turned my fear to panic. With such people this infernal lunacy could go on for ever .. . Why would they stop? Never had the world seemed so implacably doomed.

Could I, I thought, be the last coward on earth? How terrifying! . . . All alone with two million stark raving heroic madmen, armed to the eyeballs? With and without helmets,

* Paul Dé roulè de (1847– 1914). Writer and politician. Extreme nationalist, supporter of General Boulanger and founder of the League of Patriots.

without horses, on motorcycles, bellowing, in cars, screeching, shooting, plotting, flying, kneeling, digging, taking cover, bounding over trails, bombarding, shut up on earth as if it were a loony bin, ready to demolish everything on it, Germany, France, whole continents, everything that breathes, destroy, destroy, madder than mad dogs, worshipping their madness (which dogs don't), a hundred, a thousand times madder than a thousand dogs, and a lot more vicious! A pretty mess we were in! No doubt about it, this crusade I'd let myself in for was the apocalypse!

You can be a virgin in horror the same as in sex. How, when I left the Place Clichy, could I have imagined such horror? Who could have suspected, before getting really into the war, all the ingredients that go to make up the rotten, heroic, good-for-nothing soul of man? And there I was, caught up in a mass flight into collective murder, into the fiery furnace . . . Something had come up from the depths, and it was happening now.

The colonel was still as cool as a cucumber, I watched him as he stood on the embankment, taking little messages sent by the general, reading them without haste as the bullets flew all around him, and tearing them into little pieces. Did none of those messages include an order to put an immediate stop to this abomination? Did no top brass tell him there had been a misunderstanding? A horrible mistake? A misdeal? That somebody's got it all wrong, that the plan had been for manœuvres, a sham battle, not a massacre! Not at all! 'Keep it up, colonel! You're doing fine!' That's what General des Entrayes,* the head of our division and commander over us all, must have written in those notes that were being brought every five minutes by a courier, who looked greener and more shitless each time. I could have palled up with that boy, we'd have been scared together. But we had no time to fraternize.

So there was no mistake? So there was no law against people shooting at people they couldn't even see! It was one of the things you could do without anybody reading you the

* Entrayes derives from *entrailles,* entrails ('blood and guts').

riot act. In fact, it was recognized and probably encouraged by upstanding citizens, like the draft, or marriage, or hunting! . . . No two ways about it. I was suddenly on the most intimate terms with war. I'd lost my virginity. You've got to be pretty much alone with her as I was then to get a good look at her, the slut, full face and profile. A war had been switched on between us and the other side, and now it was burning! Like the current between the two carbons of an arc lamp! And this lamp was in no hurry to go out! It would get us all, the colonel and everyone else, he looked pretty spiffy now, but he wouldn't roast up any bigger than me when the current from the other side got him between the shoulders.

There are different ways of being condemned to death. Oh! What wouldn't I have given to be in prison instead of here! What a fool I'd been! If only I had had a little foresight and stolen something or other when it would have been so easy and there was still time. I never think of anything. You come out of prison alive, you don't out of a war! The rest is blarney.

If only I'd had time, but I didn't. There was nothing left to steal. How pleasant it would be in a cosy little cell, I said to myself, where the bullets couldn't get in. Where they never got in! I knew of one that was ready and waiting, all sunny and warm! I saw it in my dreams, the prison of Saint-Germain to be exact, right near the forest. I knew it well, I'd often passed that way. How a man changes! I was a child in those days, and that prison frightened me. Because I didn't know what men are like. Never again will I believe what they say or what they think. Men are the thing to be afraid of, always, men and nothing else.

How much longer would this madness have to go on before these monsters dropped with exhaustion? How long could a convulsion like this last? Months? Years? How many? Maybe till the whole world's dead, and all these madmen? Every last one of them? And seeing that events were taking such a desperate turn, I decided to stake everything on one throw, to make one last try, to see if I couldn't stop the war, just me, all by myself! At least in this one spot where I happened to be.

The colonel was only two steps away from me, pacing. I'd 10

talk to him. Something I'd never done. This was a time for daring. The way things stood, there was practically nothing to lose. 'What is it?' he'd ask me, startled, I imagined, at my bold interruption. Then I'd explain the situation as I saw it, and we'd see what he thought. The essential is to talk things over. Two heads are better than one.

I was about to take the decisive step when, at that very moment, who should arrive at the double but a dismounted cavalryman (as we said in those days), exhausted, shaky in the joints, holding his helmet upside-down in one hand like Belisarius,* trembling, all covered with mud, his face even greener than the courier I mentioned before. He stammered and gulped. You'd have thought he was struggling to climb out of a tomb, and it had made him sick to his stomach. Could it be that this spook didn't like bullets any more than I did? That he saw them coming like me?

'What is it?' Disturbed, brutally, the colonel stopped him short; flinging at him a glance that might have been steel.

It made our colonel very angry to see that wretched cavalryman so incorrectly clad and shitting in his pants with fright. The colonel had no use for fear, that was a sure thing. And especially that helmet held in the hand like a bowler was really too much in a combat regiment like ours that was just getting into the war. It was as if this dismounted cavalryman had seen the war and taken his hat off in greeting.

Under the colonel's withering look the wobbly messenger snapped to attention, pressing his little finger to the seam of his trousers as the occasion demanded. And so he stood on the embankment, stiff as a board, swaying, the sweat running down his chin strap; his jaws were trembling so hard that little abortive cries kept coming out of him, like a little dog dreaming. You couldn't make out whether he wanted to speak to us or whether he was crying.

Our Germans squatting at the end of the road had just

* Byzantine general (500– 565) who, according to legend, was blinded by order of Emperor Justinian. Numerous paintings show him as a beggar, holding out his reversed helmet for alms.

changed weaponry. Now they were having their fun with a machine gun, sputtering like handfuls of matches, and all around us flew swarms of angry bullets, as hostile as wasps.

The man finally managed to articulate a few words:

'Colonel, sir, Sergeant Barousse has been killed.'

'So what?'

'He was on his way to meet the bread wagon on the Etrapes road, sir.'

'So what?'

'He was blown up by a shell!'

'So what, dammit!'

'That's what, colonel, sir.'

'Is that all?'

'Yes, sir, that's all, colonel sir.'

'What about the bread?' the colonel asked.

That was the end of the dialogue, because, I remember distinctly, he barely had time to say 'What about the bread?' That was all. After that there was nothing but flame and noise. But the kinds of noise you wouldn't have thought possible. Our eyes, ears, nose and mouth were so full of that noise that I thought it was all over and I'd turned into noise and flame myself.

After a while the flame went away, the noise stayed in my head, and my arms and legs trembled as if somebody were shaking me from behind. My limbs seemed to be leaving me, but then in the end they stayed on. The smoke stung my eyes for a long time, and the prickly smell of powder and sulphur hung on, strong enough to kill all the fleas and bedbugs in the whole world.

I thought of Sergeant Barousse, who had just gone up in smoke as the man had told us. That was good news. Great, I thought to myself. That makes one less stinker in the regiment! He wanted to have me court-martialled for a tin of meat. 'It's an ill wind,' I said to myself. In that respect, you can't deny it, the war seemed to serve a purpose now and then! I knew of three or four more in the regiment, real scum, that I'd have gladly helped to make the acquaintance of a shell, like Barousse.

As for the colonel, I didn't wish him any harm. But he was dead too. At first I didn't see him. The blast had carried him up an embankment and laid him down on his side, right in the arms of the dismounted cavalryman, the courier, who was finished too. They were embracing each other for the moment and for all eternity, but the cavalryman's head was gone, all he had was an opening at the top of the neck, with blood in it bubbling and glugging like jam in a pan. The colonel's belly was wide open and he was making a nasty face about it. It must have hurt when it happened. So much the worse for him! If he'd got out when the shooting started, it wouldn't have happened.

All that tangled meat was bleeding profusely.

Shells were still bursting to the right and left of the scene.

I'd had enough, I was glad to have such a good pretext for clearing out. I even hummed a tune, and reeled like when you've been rowing a long way and your legs are wobbly. 'Just one shell!' I said to myself. 'Amazing how quick just one shell can clean things up. Could you believe it?' I kept saying to myself. 'Could you believe it!'

There was nobody left at the end of the road. The Germans were gone. But that little episode had taught me a quick lesson, to keep to the cover of the trees. I was in a hurry to get back to our command post, to see if anyone else in our regiment had been killed on reconnaissance. There must be some good dodges, I said to myself, for getting taken prisoner .. . Here and there in the fields a few puffs of smoke still clung to the ground. 'Maybe they're all dead,' I thought. 'Seeing they refuse to understand anything whatsoever, the best solution would be for them all to get killed instantly . . . The war would be over, and we'd go home .. . Maybe we'd march across the Place Clichy in triumph . . . Just one or two survivors . . . In my dream . . . Strapping good fellows marching behind the general, all the rest would be dead like the colonel . . . Like Barousse . . . like Vanaille (another bastard) . . . etc. They'd shower us with decorations and flowers, we'd march through the Arc de Triomphe. We'd go to a restaurant, they'd serve us free of charge, we'd never pay

for anything any more, never as long as we lived! We're heroes! we'd say when they brought the bill . . . defenders of the *Patrie*! That would do it! . . . We'd pay with little French flags! . . . The lady at the cash desk would refuse to take money from heroes, she'd even give us some, with kisses thrown in, as we filed out. Life would be worth living.'

As I was running, I noticed my arm was bleeding, just a little though, a far from satisfactory wound, a scratch. I'd have to start all over.

It was raining again, the fields of Flanders oozed with dirty water. For a long time I didn't meet a soul, only the wind and a little later the sun. From time to time, I couldn't tell from where, a bullet would come flying merrily through the air and sunshine, looking for me, intent on killing me, there in the wilderness. Why? Never again, not if I lived another hundred years, would I go walking in the country. A solemn oath.

Walking along, I remembered the ceremony of the day before. It had taken place in a meadow, at the foot of a hill; the colonel had harangued the regiment in his booming voice: 'Keep your courage up!' he had cried. 'Keep your courage up! and *Vive la France*!' When you have no imagination, dying is small beer; when you do have imagination, dying is too much. That's my opinion. My understanding had never taken in so many things at once.

The colonel had never had any imagination. That was the source of all his trouble, especially ours. Was I the only man in that regiment with an imagination about death? I preferred my own kind of death, the kind that comes late .. . in twenty years . . . thirty . . . maybe more .. . to this death they were trying to deal me right away . . . eating Flanders mud, my whole mouth full of it, fuller than full, split to the ears by a shell fragment. A man's entitled to an opinion about his own death. But which way, if that was the case, should I go? Straight ahead? My back to the enemy. If the MPs were to catch me roaming around I knew my goose was cooked. They'd give me a slapdash trial that same afternoon in some deserted classroom . . . There were lots of empty classrooms wherever we went. They'd play court martial with me the way

kids play when the teacher isn't there. The noncoms seated on the platform, me standing in handcuffs in front of the little desks. In the morning they'd shoot me: twelve bullets plus one. So what was the answer?

And I thought of the colonel again, such a brave man with his breastplate and his helmet and his moustaches, if they had exhibited him in a music hall, walking as I saw him under the bullets and shellfire, he'd have filled the Alhambra, he'd have outshone Fragson,* and he was a big star at the time I'm telling you about. Keep your courage down! That's what I was thinking.

After hours and hours of cautious, furtive walking, I finally caught sight of our men near a clump of farmhouses. That was one of our advance posts. It belonged to a squadron that was billeted nearby. Nobody killed, they told me. Every last one of them alive! I was the one with the big news: 'The colonel's dead,' I shouted, as soon as I was near enough. 'Plenty more colonels where he came from.' That was the snappy comeback of Corporal Pistil, who was on duty just then, what's more, he was organizing details.

'All right, you jerk, until they find a replacement for the colonel, you can be picking up meat with Empouille and Kerdoncuff here, take two sacks each. The distribution point is behind the church . . . the one you see over there . . . Don't let them give you a lot of bones like yesterday, and try and get back before nightfall, you lugs!'

So I hit the road again with the other two.

That pissed me off. 'I'll never tell them anything after this,' I said to myself. I could see it was no use talking to those slobs, a tragedy like I'd just seen was wasted on such swine! It had happened too long ago to capture their interest. And to think that a week earlier they'd have given me four columns and my picture in the papers for the death of a colonel the way I'd seen it. A bunch of halfwits.

The meat for the whole regiment was being distributed in a summery field, shaded by cherry trees and parched by the

* Popular cabaret singer early in the century.

August sun. On sacks and tent cloths spread out on the grass there were pounds and pounds of guts, chunks of white and yellow fat, disembowelled sheep with their organs scattered every which way, oozing intricate little rivulets into the grass round about, a whole ox, split down the middle, hanging on a tree, and the four regimental butchers all hacking away at it, cursing and swearing and pulling off choice morsels. The squadrons were fighting tooth and nail over the innards, especially the kidneys, and all around them swarms of flies the like of which one sees only on such occasions, as self-important and musical as little birds.

Blood and more blood, everywhere, all over the grass, in sluggish confluent puddles, looking for a congenial slope. A few steps further on, the last pig was being killed. Four men and a butcher were already fighting over some of the prospective cuts.

'You crook, you! You're the one that made off with the tenderloin yesterday!'

Leaning against a tree, I had barely time enough to honour that alimentary dispute with two or three glances, before being overcome by an enormous urge to vomit, which I did so hard that I passed out.

They carried me back to the outfit on a stretcher. Naturally they swiped my two oilcloth sacks, the chance was too good to miss.

I woke to one of the corporal's harangues. The war wasn't over.

David Malouf

INVISIBLE ENEMIES

When Jim Saddler, the protagonist of David Malouf's novel Fly Away Peter *(1982), leaves rural Australia for the trenches of France, he is at first proud to have become part of history and fascinated by 'vast numbers of men engaged in an endeavour that was clearly equal in scale to anything the Pharaohs had imagined'. But he soon learns that he has instead become part of the bizarre machine of trench warfare where death can come at any moment and the enemy can't even be seen.*

OFTEN, AS JIM later discovered, you entered the war through an ordinary looking gap in a hedge. One minute you were in a ploughed field, with snowy troughs between ridges that marked old furrows and peasants off at the edge of it digging turnips or winter greens, and the next you were through the hedge and on duckboards, and although you could look back and still see farmers at work, or sullenly watching as the soldiers passed over their land and went slowly below ground, there was all the difference in the world between your state and theirs. They were in a field and very nearly at home. You were in the trench system that led to the war.

But at Armentiè res, on that first occasion, you came to the war from the centre of town. Crossing Half-past Eleven Square (it was called that because the Town Hall clock had

stopped at that hour during an early bombardment; every• thing here had been renamed and then named again, as places and streets, a copse, a farmhouse, yielded up their old history and entered the new) you turned left and went on across Barbed-wire Square till you came to a big red building called the Gum-boot Store. There, after being fitted out with rubber boots that went all the way to mid-thigh, and tramping about for a few minutes to get used to the things, you were led away into the grounds of another, larger building, this time of brick, that was an Asylum; and from there, via Lunatic Lane, into the lines. Lunatic Lane began as a cobbled street, then became dirt, and before you quite knew it you were on planks. From this point the duckboards, for all their twisting and turning, led straight to the war.

They began to move up just at dusk, and by the time night fell and the first flares became visible, throwing their yellow glare on the underside of clouds and falling at times in a shower of brilliant stars, they were in the support line, stumbling in the dark through a maze of communication trenches, round firebays and traverses, jostling water-bottles, messtins, entrenching tools, grunting with the effort of trying to keep up, and quite blind except for the warning passed back from man to man of a hole up ahead in the greasy duckboards – *But where? How far? Am I almost on it?* – or a wire obstacle overhead.

The deeper they went the worse it got. In places where seepage was bad the duckboards were a foot under water. Once a whole earthwall had fallen and the passage was so narrow they could barely squeeze through: the place had been hit by a 'minnie'. They met two stretcher bearers moving in the opposite direction with a man who screamed, and some of the moisture, Jim thought, as they brushed in passing, must be blood. They hurried to keep up with the man in front and were soon breathless and sweating, partly because of the cracking pace that was being set – the men up front must actually have been running – but also because they were so keyed-up and eager to get there at last and see what it was. Everything here was so new, and they didn't know what

might happen next, and when it did happen, how they would meet it. There was no stopping. If a man paused to adjust his pack or got his rifle caught in an overhead entanglement the whole troop might take a wrong turning and be lost in the dark.

The smell too got worse as they pushed further towards it. It was the smell of damp earthwalls and rotting planks, of mud impregnated with gas, of decaying corpses that had fallen in earlier battles and been incorporated now into the system itself, occasionally pushing out a hand or a booted foot, all ragged and black, not quite ingested; of rat-droppings, and piss, and the unwashed bodies of the men they were relieving, who also smelled like corpses, and were, in their heavy-eyed weariness as they came out, quite unrecog• nizable, though many of them were known to Jim by sight and some of them even by name; the war seemed immediately to have transformed them. They had occupied these trenches for eleven days. 'It's not so bad,' some of them mumbled, and others, with more bravado, claimed it was a cake-walk. But they looked beaten just the same.

They stayed eleven days themselves, and though the smell did not lessen, they ceased to notice it; it was their own. They were no longer the 'Eggs a-cook' of the easy taunt: 'Verra nice, verra sweet, verra clean. Two for one.' They were soldiers like the rest. They were men.

For eleven days they dug in and maintained the position. That is, they bailed out foul water, relaid duckboards, filled and carried sandbags to repair the parapet, stood to for a few minutes just before dawn with their rifles at the ready, crouched on the firestep, waiting – the day's one recognition of the reality of battle – then stood down again and had breakfast. Some days it rained and they simply sat in the rain and slept afterwards in mud. Other days it was fine. Men dozed on the firestep, read, played pontoon, or hunted for lice in their shirts. They were always cold and they never got enough sleep. They saw planes passing over in twos and threes, and occasionally caught the edge of a dogfight. Big black cannisters appeared in the sky overhead, rolling over

and over, very slowly, then taking a downward path; the earth shook. You got used to that, and to the din.

Jim never saw a German, though they were there alright. Snipers. One fellow, too cocky, had looked over the parapet twice, being dared, and had his head shot off. His name was Stan Mackay, and it worried Jim that he couldn't fit a face to the name even when Clancy described the man. He felt he ought to be able to do that at least. A fellow he had talked to more than once oughtn't to just go out like that without a face.

Snipers. Also machine-gunners.

One of them, who must have had a sense of humour, could produce all sorts of jazz rhythms and odd syncopations as he 'played' the parapet. They got to know his touch. Parapet Joe he was called. He had managed, that fellow, to break through and establish himself as something more than the enemy. He had become an individual, who had then of course to have a name. Did he know he was called Parapet Joe? Jim wondered about this, and wondered, because of the name, what the fellow looked like. But it would have been fatal to try and find out.

One night, for several hours, there was a bombardment that had them all huddled together with their arms around their heads, not just trying to stop the noise but pretending, as children might, to be invisible.

But the real enemy, the one that challenged them day and night and kept them permanently weary, was the stinking water that seeped endlessly out of the walls and rose up round their boots as if the whole trench system in this part of the country were slowly going under. Occasionally it created cave-ins, bringing old horrors back into the light. The dead seemed close then; they had to stop their noses. Once, in heavy rain, a hand reached out and touched Jim on the back of the neck. 'Cut it out, Clancy,' he had protested, hunching closer to the wall; and was touched again. It was the earth behind him, quietly moving. Suddenly it collapsed, and a whole corpse lurched out of the wall and hurled itself upon him. He had to disguise his tendency to shake then, though

the other fellows made a joke of it; and two or three times afterwards, when he dozed off, even in sunlight, he felt the same hand brush his neck with its long curling nail, and his scalp bristled. Once again the dead man turned in his sleep.

Water was the real enemy, endlessly sweating from the walls and gleaming between the duckboard-slats, or falling steadily as rain. It rotted and dislodged A-frames, it made the trench a muddy trough. They fought the water that made their feet rot, and the earth that refused to keep its shape or stay still, each day destroying what they had just repaired; they fought sleeplessness and the dull despair that came from that, and from their being, for the first time, grimily unwashed, and having body lice that bred in the seams of their clothes, and bit and itched and infected when you scratched; and rats in the same field-grey as the invisible enemy, that were as big as cats and utterly fearless, skittering over your face in the dark, leaping out of knapsacks, darting in to take the very crusts from under your nose. The rats were fat because they fed on corpses, burrowing right into a man's guts or tumbling about in dozens in the bellies of horses. They fed. Then they skittered over your face in the dark. The guns, Jim felt, he would get used to; and the snipers' bullets that buried themselves regularly in the mud of the parapet walls. They meant you were opposed to other men, much like yourself, and suffering the same hardships. But the rats were another species. And for him they were familiars of death, creatures of the underworld, as birds were of life and the air. To come to terms with the rats, and his deep disgust for them, he would have had to turn his whole world upside down.

All that first time up the line was like some crazy camping trip under nightmare conditions, not like a war. There was no fight. They weren't called upon in any way to have a go.

But even an invisible enemy could kill.

It happened out of the lines, when they went back into support. Their section of D company had spent a long afternoon unloading ammunition-boxes and carrying them up. They had removed their tunics, despite the cold, and scattered about in groups in the thin sunlight, relaxed in their

shirtsleeves, were preparing for tea. Jim sat astride a blasted trunk and was buttering slabs of bread, dreamily spreading them thick with golden-green melon and lemon jam. His favourite. He was waiting for Clancy to come up with water, and had just glanced up and seen Clancy, with the billy in one hand and a couple of mugs hooked from the other, dancing along in his bow-legged way about ten yards off. Jim dipped his knife in the tin and dreamily spread jam, enjoying the way it went over the butter, almost transparent, and the promise of thick, golden-green sweetness.

Suddenly the breath was knocked out of him. He was lifted bodily into the air, as if the stump he was astride had bucked like an angry steer, and flung hard upon the earth. Wet clods and buttered bread rained all about him. He had seen and heard nothing. When he managed at last to sit up, drawing new breath into his lungs, his skin burned and the effect in his ear-drums was intolerable. He might have been halfway down a giant pipe that some fellow, some maniac, was belting over and over with a sledge hammer. *Thung. Thung. Thung.*

The ringing died away in time and he heard, from far off, but from very far off, a sound of screaming, and was surprised to see Eric Sawney, who had been nowhere in sight the moment before, not three yards away. His mouth was open and both his legs were off, one just above the knee, the other not far above the boot, which was lying on its own a little to the left. A pale fellow at any time, Eric was now the colour of butcher's paper, and the screams Jim could hear were coming from the hole of his mouth.

He became aware then of blood. He was lying in a pool of it. It must, he thought, be Eric's. It was very red, and when he put his hands down to raise himself from his half-sitting position, very sticky and warm.

Screams continued to come out of Eric, and when Jim got to his feet at last, unsteady but whole (his first thought was to stop Eric making that noise; only a second later did it occur to him that he should go to the boy's aid) he found that he was entirely covered with blood – his uniform, his face, his hair – he was drenched in it, it couldn't all be Eric's; and if it was his

own he must be dead, and this standing up whole an illusion or the beginning of another life. The body's wholeness, he saw, was an image a man carried in his head. It might persist after the fact. He couldn't, in his stunned condition, puzzle this out. If it was the next life why could he hear Eric screaming out of the last one? And where was Clancy?

The truth hit him then with a force that was greater even than the breath from the 'minnie'. He tried to cry out but no sound came. It was hammered right back into his lungs and he thought he might choke on it.

Clancy had been blasted out of existence. It was Clancy's blood that covered him, and the strange slime that was all over him had nothing to do with being born into another life but was what had been scattered when Clancy was turned inside out.

He fell to his knees in the dirt and his screams came up without sound as a rush of vomit, and through it all he kept trying to cry out, till at last, after a few bubbly failures, his voice returned. He was still screaming when the others ran up. He was ashamed then to have it revealed that he was quite unharmed, while Eric, who was merely dead white now and whimpering, had lost both his legs.

That was how the war first touched him. It was a month after they came over, a Saturday in February. He could never speak of it. And the hosing off never, in his own mind, left him clean. He woke from nightmares drenched in a wetness that dried and stuck and was more than his own sweat.

A few days later he went to sit with Eric at the hospital. He had never thought of Eric as anything but a nuisance, and remembered, a little regretfully now, how he and Clancy had tried to shake him off and how persistent he had been. But Clancy, behind a show of tolerant exasperation, had been fond of the boy, and Jim decided he ought, for Clancy's sake, to pay him a visit. He took a bar of chocolate. Eric accepted it meekly but without enthusiasm and hid it away under his pillow.

They talked about Clancy – there was nothing else – and he tried not to look at the place under the blanket where Eric's

feet should have been, or at his pinched face. Eric looked scared, as if he were afraid of what might be done to him. *Isn't it done already?* Jim asked himself. *What more}*

'One thing I'm sorry about,' Eric said plaintively. 'I never learned to ride a bike.' He lay still with the pale sweat gathering on his upper lip. Then said abruptly: 'Listen, Jim, who's gunna look after me?'

'What?'

'When I get outa here. At home 'n all. I got no one. Just the fellers in the company, and none of 'em 'ave come to see me except you. I got nobody, not even an auntie. I'm an orfing. Who's gonna look after me, *back there}'*

The question was monstrous. Its largeness in the cramped space behind the screen, the way it lowered and made Eric sweat, the smallness of the boy's voice, as if even daring to ask might call down the wrath of unseen powers, put Jim into a panic. He didn't know the answer any more than Eric did and the question scared him. Faced with his losses, Eric had hit upon something fundamental. It was a question about the structure of the world they lived in and where they belonged in it, about who had power over them and what responsibility those agencies could be expected to assume. For all his childish petulance Eric had never been as helpless as he looked. His whining had been a weapon, and he had known how to make use of it. It was true that nobody paid any attention to him unless he wheedled and insisted and made a nuisance of himself, but the orphan had learned how to get what he needed: if not affection then at least a measure of tolerant regard. What scared him now was that people might simply walk off and forget him altogether. His view of things had been limited to those who stood in immediate relation to him, the matron at the orphanage, the sergeant and sergeant major, the sisters who ran the ward according to their own or the army's rules. Now he wanted to know what lay beyond.

'Who?' he insisted. The tip of his tongue appeared and passed very quickly over the dry lips.

Jim made a gesture. It was vague. 'Oh, they'll look after you alright Eric. They're bound to.'

But Eric was not convinced and Jim knew that his own hot panic had invaded the room. He wished Clancy was here. It was the sort of question Clancy might have been able to tackle; he had knocked about in the world and would have been bold enough to ask, and Jim saw that it was this capacity in Clancy that had constituted for Eric, as it had for him, the man's chief attraction: he knew his rights, he knew the ropes. 'I can't even stand up to take a piss,' Eric was telling him. The problem in Eric's mind was the number of years that might lie before him – sixty even. All those mornings when he would have to be helped into a chair.

'No,' Jim asserted, speaking now for the charity of their people, 'they'll look after you alright.' He stood, preparing to leave.

'Y' reckon?'

'Of course they will.'

Eric shook his head. 'I don't know.'

'Wilya come again, Jim?' A fine line of sweat drops on the boy's upper lip gave him a phantom moustache. 'Wilya, Jim?' His voice sounded thin and far away.

Jim promised he would and meant it, but knew guiltily that he would not. It was Eric's questions he would be unable to face.

As he walked away the voice continued to call after him, aggrieved, insistent, 'Wilya, Jim?' It was at first the voice of a child, and then, with hardly a change of tone, it was the voice of a querulous old man, who had asked for little and been given less and spent his whole life demanding his due.

Outside, for the first time since he was a kid, Jim cried, pushing his fists hard into his eye-sockets and trying to control his breath, and being startled – it was as if he had been taken over by some impersonal force that was weeping through him – by the harshness of his own sobs.

Erich Maria Remarque

How LONG IT TAKES FOR A MAN TO DIE!

Published in 1929, All Quiet on the Western Front *is arguably the most famous war novel of the century. Its impact is mainly due to the fact that it crossed the national boundaries of friend and foe and described the universal human tragedy of war. Through the eyes of the nineteen-year-old German soldier Paul Bä umer, Erich Maria Remarque portrays a 'generation that was destroyed by the war – even those of it who survived the shelling'. In the following extract, Bä umer is sent on reconnaissance patrol into no man's land where, for the first time, he encounters the enemy at close quarters.*

I SLIP WARILY over the edge, and snake forwards. I creep along on all fours; things are going well, I fix the direction, look about me and take note of the pattern of artillery fire so that I can find my way back. Then I try to make contact with the others.

I am still afraid, but now it is a rational fear, which is just an extraordinarily enhanced cautiousness. It is a windy night, and the shadows move back and forth in the sudden flashes from the gunfire. By this light you can see too much and too little. Often I freeze suddenly, but there is never anything there. In this way I get quite a long distance forward, and then turn back in a curve. I haven't made contact. Every few feet closer to our trench makes me more confident, but I still move as fast as I can. It wouldn't be too good to stop one just at this moment.

And then I get another shock. I'm no longer able to make out the exact direction. Silently I crouch in a shell hole and try and get my bearings. It has happened more than once that a man has jumped cheerfully into a trench, and only then found out that it was the wrong side.

After a while I listen again. I still haven't sorted out where I am. The wilderness of shell holes seems so confusing that in my agitated state I no longer have any idea which way to go. Maybe I am crawling parallel with the trenches, and I could go on for ever doing that. So I make another turn.

These damned Verey lights! It feels as if they last for an hour, and you can't make a move, or things soon start whistling round you.

It's no use, I've got to get out. By fits and starts I work my way along. I crawl crabwise across the ground and tear my hands to pieces on ragged bits of shrapnel as sharp as razorblades. Often I get the impression that the sky is becoming lighter on the horizon, but that could just be my imagination. Gradually I realize that I am crawling for my life.

A shell hits. Then straight away two more. And then it really starts. A barrage. Machine-guns chatter. Now there is nothing in the world that I can do except lie low. It seems to be an offensive. Light-rockets go up everywhere. Incessantly.

I'm lying bent double in a big shell hole in water up to my waist. When the offensive starts I'll drop into the water as far as I can without drowning and put my face in the mud. I'll have to play dead.

Suddenly I hear their shellfire give way. Straight away I slip down into the water at the bottom of the shell hole, my helmet right on the back of my neck and my mouth only sufficiently above water to let me breathe.

Then I remain motionless – because somewhere there is a clinking noise, something is coming closer, moving along and stamping; every nerve in my body tenses up and freezes. The clinking noise moves on over me, the first wave of soldiers is past. All that I had in my head was the one explosive thought: what will you do if someone jumps into your shell hole? Now

I quickly pull out my small dagger, grip it tight and hide it by keeping my hand downwards in the mud. The idea keeps pounding in my brain that if anyone jumps in I'll stab him immediately, stick the knife into his throat at once, so that he can't shout out, there's no other way, he'll be as frightened as I am, and we'll attack each other purely out of fear, so I have to get there first.

Now our gun batteries are firing. There is an impact near me. That makes me furiously angry, that's all I need, to be hit by our own gunfire; I curse into the mud and grind my teeth, it's an outburst of rage, and in the end all I can do is groan and plead.

The crash of shells pounds against my ears. If our men launch a counter-offensive, I'm free. I press my head against the earth and I can hear the dull thunder like distant explosions in a mine – then I lift my head to listen to the noises above me.

The machine-guns are rattling away. I know that our barbed-wire entanglements are firm and pretty well undamaged; sections of them are electrified. The gunfire increases. They aren't getting through. They'll have to turn back.

I collapse into the shell hole again, tense almost to breaking point. Clattering, crawling, clinking – it all becomes audible, a single scream ringing out in the midst of it all. They're coming under fire, the attack has been held off.

It's got a little bit lighter. Footsteps hurry by me. The first few. Past me. Then some more. The rattle of the machine-guns becomes continuous. I am just about to turn round a bit when suddenly there is a noise and a body falls on to me in the shell hole, heavily and with a splash, then slips and lands on top of me –

I don't think at all, I make no decision – I just stab wildly and feel only how the body jerks, then goes limp and collapses. When I come to myself again, my hand is sticky and wet.

The other man makes a gurgling noise. To me it sounds as

if he is roaring, every breath is like a scream, like thunder – but it is only the blood in my own veins that is pounding so hard. I'd like to stop his mouth, to stuff earth into it, to stab again – he has to be quiet or he'll give me away; but I am so much myself again and suddenly feel so weak that I can't raise my hand against him any more.

So I crawl away into the furthest corner and stay there, my eyes fixed on him, gripping my knife, ready to go for him again if he moves – but he won't do anything again. I can hear that just from his gurgling.

I can only see him indistinctly. I have the one single desire – to get away. If I don't do so quickly it will be too light; it's already difficult. But the moment I try to raise my head I become aware that it is impossible. The machine-gun fire is so dense that I would be full of holes before I had gone a step.

I have another go, lifting up my helmet and pushing it forwards to gauge the height of fire. A moment later a bullet knocks it out of my hand. The gunfire is sweeping the ground at a very low level. I am not far enough away from the enemy trenches to escape being hit by one of the snipers the moment I tried to make a break for it.

It gets lighter and lighter. I wait desperately for an attack by our men. My knuckles are white because I am tensing my hands, praying for the firing to die down and for my mates to come.

The minutes trickle past one by one. I daren't look at the dark figure in the shell hole any more. With great effort I look past him, and wait, just wait. The bullets hiss, they are a mesh of steel, it won't stop, it won't stop.

Then I see my bloodied hand and suddenly I feel sick. I take some earth and rub it on to the skin, now at least my hand is dirty and you can't see the blood any more.

The gunfire still doesn't die down. It's just as strong now from both sides. Our lot have probably long since given me up for lost.

It is a light, grey, early morning. The gurgling still continues. I block my ears, but I quickly have to take my hands away

from them because otherwise I won't be able to hear anything else.

The figure opposite me moves. That startles me, and I look across at him, although I don't want to. Now my eyes are riveted on him. A man with a little moustache is lying there, his head hanging lopsidedly, one arm half-crooked and the head against it. The other hand is clasped to his chest. It has blood on it.

He's dead, I tell myself, he must be dead, he can't feel anything any more; that gurgling, it can only be the body. But the head tries to lift itself and for a moment the groaning gets louder, the forehead sinks back on to the arm. The man is not dead. He is dying, but he is not dead. I push myself forward, pause, prop myself on my hands, slip a bit further along, wait – further, a terrible journey of three yards, a long and fearsome journey. At last I am by his side.

Then he opens his eyes. He must have been able to hear me and he looks at me with an expression of absolute terror. His body doesn't move, but in his eyes there is such an incredible desire to get away that I can imagine for a moment that they might summon up enough strength to drag his body with them, carrying him hundreds of miles away, far, far away, at a single leap. The body is still, completely quiet, there is not a single sound, and even the gurgling has stopped, but the eyes are screaming, roaring, all his life has gathered in them and formed itself into an incredible urge to escape, into a terrible fear of death, a fear of me.

My legs give way and I fall down on to my elbows. 'No, no,' I whisper.

The eyes follow me. I am quite incapable of making any movement as long as they are watching me.

Then his hand falls slowly away from his chest, just a little way, dropping only an inch or two. But that movement breaks the spell of the eyes. I lean forward, shake my head and whisper, 'No, no, no' and lift up my hand – I have to show him that I want to help him, and I wipe his forehead.

The eyes flinched when my hand came close, but now they lose their fixed gaze, the eyelids sink deeper, the tension eases.