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University of Sussex

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Critical Writing**

**Isle of Dogs: Brexit, Its Causes and Conditions: A
Creative and Critical Thesis**

September 2019

Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been, and will not be, submitted in whole or in part to another university for the award of any other degree.

Signed:

University of Sussex

Julian Beecroft – PhD in Creative and Critical Writing

Isle of Dogs: Brexit, Its Causes and Conditions: A Creative and Critical Thesis

The vote by the UK electorate to leave the European Union was the biggest shock in British politics in living memory. Among its greatest effects have been not only the rejection of the existing political and economic order, and the seismic shift it will mean in our future relationship with Europe, but the need it has forced upon us to rethink the past – both recent and more distant – to make sense of the vote. That so many millions of people in the UK, and especially in England, could so decisively have rejected an apparently settled relationship with our closest geographical neighbours meant asking what were the factors that persuaded them to do so. *Isle of Dogs* begins by accepting the now well-established view that those factors had grown in significance over decades but were not taken seriously by a political and cultural establishment comfortable with an increasingly globalised economic order which had undermined the politics and cultures of sovereign nation states, a strategy in which the EU was seen as complicit. But among the English a widely acknowledged democratic deficit in the EU was exacerbated by the political status of England within the UK, in particular since the other home nations took back significant control of their political and cultural destiny following the handing of powers to devolved administrations two decades ago.

Adopting a dual, creative and critical approach, this thesis explores the lived experience of people residing in the kinds of English communities that voted by often large majorities to leave. The creative component, *The Season of the Boar*, is a novella set in a small Kent village during the referendum campaign, in which a series of attacks on local dogs are wrongly blamed on the local resident population of wild boar. Its main story of a hunt by a group of men to kill a creature seen as a migrant animal, but which was once a symbol of Old England, is framed in the context of shaping events from the past four decades, the neoliberal era – the Miners' Strike, Big Bang, Black Monday, the Iraq War and the Great Recession – as these have affected the lives of individual characters. The critical component, *The Everlasting Animal*, examines the same lived experience through critical analysis of key works of contemporary English literature (multiple novels and one play) written since the dawn of British Euroscepticism after the signing of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, as well as several more from different eras of the twentieth century, alongside numerous critical sources from a wide range of disciplines. The first of its two chapters considers the future of the nation state in the light of the Brexit vote, while the second looks at the suppressed cultural and political identity of England, revealing strains of exceptionalism and aggrievement with both deep-lying historical precedents and contemporary causes, whose effects manifest in British politics at both national and local levels.

As my study has found, in addition to a growing body of fiction, there have been countless non-fiction responses to the epochal problem of Brexit. But this thesis is likely to be the first to come at it from both creative and critical angles, with one discipline informing the response of the other, a symbiotic process of invention and analysis embedding each component in the lives of the people affected, offering an intimate awareness of a traumatic national event, the most vexing issue in UK politics in more than half a century.

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General Introduction

The vote by the UK electorate to leave the European Union has provoked a welter of writing across a wide range of disciplines, attempting to explain the decision, implicitly, to those who did not vote for it and could not understand how it had come to pass. I was as confounded by the result as the main character in Ali Smith's *Autumn* (2016), the novel with whose analysis I begin *The Everlasting Animal*, the initial, critical component of this thesis; in *The Season of the Boar*, the novella that comprises its creative, second half, I set out to record both that same sense of shock and also the reckless sense of evil that seemed to stalk the land during the campaign itself, which found material expression in the killing of Jo Cox MP, to whose memory my thesis is dedicated.

The novella's first iteration was a long short story around half its current length, but even at that extent I had already begun pulling in material from all areas of British public life over the past forty years – from the Miners' Strike to 9/11 to the Great Recession and the Migrant Crisis – which seemed to have contributed to the deep disillusionment with the status quo that led to Brexit. Over the next couple of years, the list of grievances and anxieties that drove the vote, uniquely admixed in each individual, grew ever longer, and some of these elements found their way into the story as my understanding of the histories and motivations of each character continued to deepen. At the same time, in formulating a fictional response based on the lived experience of a group of characters in a small village near Ashford in Kent – a county region already examined by Nicola Barker in *Darkmans* (2007) and the other novels in her Thames Gateway trilogy, and more apocalyptically by Russell Hoban in *Riddley Walker* (1980); also the county of Nigel Farage, described by Julian Barnes in *England, England* (1998) as 'pointing its finger or its nose out at the Continent in warning' (Barnes 1998: 5) – I began to see the outlines of a critical inquiry that would address the same crisis through a diverse field of writing that collectively offers ample evidence of a storm which had been gathering over several decades, the forty-year period I refer to as the neoliberal age. In particular, I saw the potential for Brexit's epochal shift of values in a range of specifically English fiction – that is, fiction concerned with England and English experience – written over the same period, coming into sharp focus in the quarter century since Euroscepticism in the UK had first emerged as a political force after the

signing of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992 and the creation of the Single Market, with its four freedoms, the following year.

My reading of both fictional and non-fictional texts over the past three years has deepened my understanding of the social, cultural and economic forces that play upon the lives of my characters, just as the complexities of the mental and moral environment in which each one lives has softened the boundaries between the disciplines in which I have read, revealing a network of contextual links among numerous fields of inquiry that might appear to be circumstantial but are in fact causal or at least reactive; not so much the volitional ‘only connect’ of E. M. Forster’s formulation as the observation of George’s mother Carol in Ali Smith’s *How to Be Both* (2014) that ‘nothing’s not connected’ (Smith 2014: 106), whether or not we choose to see it.

I began by asking basic questions, such as what caused Brexit to happen, but also why almost no one with any institutional power saw it coming. But while reading the likes of David Goodhart’s *The Road to Somewhere* (2017), Roger Eatwell and Matthew Goodwin’s *National Populism* (2018) and Paul Stocker’s *English Uprising* (2017) added a helpful social and political analysis, it was clear that books of this kind couldn’t begin to delineate the complex coding of often conflicting motivations that was bubbling up through the consciousness of my characters as I wrote *The Season of the Boar*. It was only as I turned to a number of works of English fiction – and one play, Jez Butterworth’s *Jerusalem* (2009) – written over the two decades or so between the Maastricht Treaty and the referendum campaign that all the resentments, both petty and high-minded, that persuaded so many to want to leave emerged from the minds and mouths of some of the characters in these very distinctive works.

Indeed, taking a long view of the phenomenon I found evidence of English insularity and exceptionalism going back a century to the height of empire in E. M. Forster’s *Howards End* (1910), in the form of the businessmen Henry and Charles Wilcox, both recognisable Eurosceptics *avant la lettre*; as well as the individualist’s (if not libertarian’s) hatred of centralised bureaucracy in Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932), even more grimly configured in George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949); not to mention a Virgilian nostalgia for an idealised English rural life which, as Raymond Williams identified in *The Country and the City* (1973), runs through English literature like a slogan through a stick of rock, from its earliest period to the present day. All three of these themes were observable features of the two Leave campaigns and thus likely pull or push factors in the minds of many of those who voted to leave, perhaps

especially among shire Tories who had long been suspicious of the EU project and whose antipathy towards it had driven the growing success of UKIP since the turn of the century. But the contemporary English novels I read for this study – in particular those by Jim Crace, Nicola Barker and the brace by Paul Kingsnorth – as well as Butterworth's play, I believe go to the heart of a marginalised Middle England, speaking to the experience of people who are not often motivated to vote at all, whose disenchantment found a voice in the referendum of 2016 and whose votes tipped the balance in what, after all, was a fairly close result.

Sensing a deep neglect of communities of people I recognised from my own local area of Hastings and St Leonards – such as I had met while writing and editing a local magazine in the late 2000s, or have talked to at the gates of the primary school my children attended, both acquaintances and friends – I turned to a critical literature which had already examined the same socio-cultural, specifically English malaise. Books by Raymond Williams, Tom Nairn, Ian Baucom, Krishan Kumar, Paul Gilroy, Michael Gardiner and others greatly expanded my frame of reference, and helped to broaden my analysis of the novels I have looked at for the critical component of this thesis. The questions surrounding Englishness which lie at the heart of several of these works, and are the concern of the second chapter of my own critical study, have been the subject of a significant amount of more general cultural and historical writing during the same period as the novels I have chosen, and books by Roger Scruton, Peter Ackroyd, Billy Bragg, Paul Kingsnorth and Jeremy Black, as well as Orwell's seminal essay 'England Your England' (1940), represent a wide field of scholarship and opinion which is nonetheless remarkably in agreement in a number of key areas.

But Brexit is taking place in the broader context of populist uprisings in most of the world's democracies, including most of the EU's major nations, and in this regard tracing the history of the nation state and its uneasy relationship with universalist projects like the EU was a central preparation for the first chapter of my critical study. In that regard, a wide literature on nations and nationalism (and on the EU) including books by Benedict Anderson, Ernest Gellner, Eric Hobsbawm, Tony Judt, Roger Scruton and Yoram Hazony, as well as essays by Terry Eagleton and Seamus Deane at one political pole and the autobiography of Nigel Farage at the other, has been essential reading. Moreover, given the scale of disruption over the past three years, and the civilisational shift it seems to represent, books by Pankaj Mishra and John Gray have helped to locate these national rebellions against the status quo – and especially against

the progressive idea of social organisation which has become dominant since the Enlightenment – within the troubled hearts and minds of individual men and women, in a way that is borne out in the novels I have chosen to examine in the course of the critical component of this thesis and in the novella, *The Season of the Boar*.

This growth of a wider nationalist international in western democracies such as Trump's America and Salvini's Italy is what persuaded me to place a study on the English nationalism at the heart of Brexit, the subject of chapter 2, in the context of a discussion, in chapter 1, about the fightback of the nation state against placeless globalisation, for which Brexit Britain was an electoral outrider. These two areas of investigation – the nation state in the context of the global forces or bodies which undermine its autonomy (or underpin its economic and political security and guarantee the rights of individuals, depending on your point of view); and the politically slumbering nation of England in the context of a dominant British state – play out to differing extents through the lives of characters in the novels (and the one play) of contemporary English experience upon which my critical analysis is largely based, and even in the historical novels, specifically Jim Crace's *Harvest* (2013) and Paul Kingsnorth's *The Wake* (2014), in which the historical and mythological patterns that informed so much Brexit feeling can be clearly observed. Our current trauma is not entirely new, despite the political event of Brexit being unparalleled in our recent history.

Moreover, the same disruptions of the present and the decades that led up to it also form the core of the personal histories through which the lives of the characters in *The Season of the Boar* are woven, while a longer historical context going right back to Palaeolithic prehistory haunts the interior reflections of its first-person narrator. With so many historical phantoms being summoned – some of them quite recklessly – by politicians during the campaign itself and then commentators trying to make sense of it in the aftermath, in writing the novella I felt a need to bring as many of these elements into the story as I could. So the narrator of *The Season of the Boar* is hemmed in not only by his own latent misanthropy, in way that echoes the work of Michel Houellebecq, but by a melancholic past – his own as well as the presence of a wider cast of tremulous apparitions from history, of the kind encountered in the drifting narrative consciousness of works by W. G. Sebald such as *The Rings of Saturn* (1995).

In fact, the same sense in my novella of a man inhibited by the demands of modern livelihood, but also by his own fears, draws on the twentieth-century American tradition

of everyman novels by writers including Sinclair Lewis, Saul Bellow, John Updike and Philip Roth – especially novellas of male failure and regret such as Bellow’s *Seize the Day* (1956) and Roth’s *Everyman* (2006) – and, specifically in this case, on Joseph Heller’s *Something Happened* (1974), whose profoundly disillusioned narrator was in the back of my mind as I started to write my novella (as, too, were the ‘dirty realist’ protagonists of the stories of Raymond Carver). But it also channels the thread of irrational European fiction that leads from Dostoevsky – *Notes from Underground* (1864) is hinted at in my novella in Mo’s reference to the ‘crystal palace of perfect transparency’ – through Franz Kafka, especially his story ‘The Burrow’ (1931) – to Albert Camus’s *The Outsider* (*The Stranger*) (1942) and Heinrich Böll’s unsettling stories set amid the *Wirtschaftswunder* of post-war Germany. The novella’s basic narrative template is also firmly rooted in the ancient tradition of tales about beasts threatening communities, from *Beowulf* and ‘Little Red Riding Hood’ to Arthur Conan Doyle’s *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1902) and the popular fiction of Peter Benchley’s *Jaws* (1974), as well as, most recently, to Paul Kingsnorth’s *Beast* (2016), whose publication more or less coincided with the EU referendum during which the events of my own novella are set. It also directly references William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* (1954), the actual novel, within the story itself, as well as in the use of a wild boar as central symbol and plot device, and in the general sense of social breakdown which attended the referendum and has never entirely gone away ever since. Indeed, intentional symbolism occurs throughout the story, but many of these symbols are ambiguous and ironic – qualities we sorely need in our politics at the moment – most of all the boar itself, a modern interloper from the Continent which was also once, at a time long passed, an indigenous “‘Royal Beast of the Chase’” (Goulding 2011).

Almost certainly influenced in places by the nature wonder of Ernest Hemingway’s early Nick Adams stories, such as the pair of ‘Big Two-Hearted River’ stories (1925), but also existing in the contemporary context of British nature writing by Robert Macfarlane, Helen Macdonald and Melissa Harrison, among many other examples, the novella abounds in descriptions of animals and the natural world, as reference to another reality of which humans were once an integral, component part (and not, as now, the master switch); a sense of our place in the world to which we must return not just for the sake of our planet but for our own physical and spiritual survival. But the animal whose presence pervades the story throughout, across numerous different breeds as well as in constant simile and metaphor, is one whose often dismal fate – as, for instance, in

Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* (1937), Tobias Wolff's short story 'Hunters in the Snow' (1981) or Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* (2003) – has long stood for the wretchedness of the human condition. Indeed, the deaths and the nasty, brutish and brief lives of dogs are evoked in the final images of three of the most significant novels of the twentieth century – Kafka's *The Trial* (1925), Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano* (1947) and Giuseppe di Lampedusa's *The Leopard* (1958) – as proxies for human or civilisational impermanence, while in one of the most unflinching depictions of modern brutishness, J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999), the ultimate powerlessness of dogs, their innate savagery notwithstanding, again stands for those same pervasive realities for people, both black and white, in a brutalised post-apartheid South Africa. Indeed, one scene in my novella features a pair of colonial hunting dogs whose unchained exuberance and aggression is their ultimate downfall, an episode which, though based partly on authorial memory, evokes the black dogs of Ian McEwan's eponymous novel from 1992 – symbols of evil in that case, symbols of the self-defeating futility of violence in this. The incident is just one of the many metaphorical functions that dogs are entrusted with in *The Season of the Boar* – for instance, as a symbol of desire in the case of the border collie referred to by the character of Heloise (the lost spiritual and physical paramour of the narrator, who at one point we learn is called Abe, a diminutive of the medieval Heloise's lover, the monastic philosopher Peter Abelard, an avatar of the kind of man the narrator might have become); of fidelity in the case of Trudy, the narrator's golden retriever, which he comes to see as a proxy for himself; and, in the case of the Anglo-American pit bull–mastiff towards the end of the story, of how the dog-eat-dog cruelty of neoliberal economics turns civilised people into feral belligerents driven to cannibalise their own kind simply in order to survive. (It must be stated that such explanations are rationalised after the fact and did not occur to me with such instrumental clarity as the story developed and specific passages were written.)

The novella is also a double story – a tradition that includes Dostoevsky's novella *The Double* (1846) as well as more recent fiction like Carver's story 'Neighbours' (1971), Hans-Ulrich Treichel's novel *Lost* (1998) and Smith's *How to Be Both* – as we can see in the relationship of the narrator to his dog, but also in the 'tap on the shoulder' he fears at the outset, which stalks him like a predatory animal throughout – like the savage lord of Golding's novel or the big cat of *Beast* – and emerges under extreme duress as a dark embodiment of his own thwarted potential self. This alter ego, a

Jungian shadow, also assumes a civilisational aspect, as the narrator, Abe – short also, we assume, for Abraham; even his name has a double meaning – is also haunted by visions of a young Muslim man named Ibrahim, the partner of the daughter of Barry, with whose apparently devout religious faith he also strongly identifies, without ever knowing why. The narrator's suppressed need for ecstasy and transcendence, and his desire for monastic withdrawal, draws on a long literary lineage that encompasses the tradition of spiritual biographies which prefigured the European novel as well as the tradition of the novel itself in, for example, the spiritually afflicted Constantin Levin in Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (1878), Harry Haller in Hermann Hesse's *Steppenwolf* (1927) – a novel whose one-time importance to the narrator is hinted at in my novella – and, in recent years, the civilisational exhaustion of the jaded academic François, the narrator of Houellebecq's *Submission* (2015); a specifically English tradition of characters afflicted by negative capability including Septimus Warren Smith in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), John the Savage in Huxley's *Brave New World* and, in more quotidian, nostalgic form, George Bowling in Orwell's *Coming Up for Air* (1939); and similar characters in some of the contemporary novels I have examined over the course of the critical component: in particular, the narrators of both novels by Kingsnorth, not to mention, as a model of societal retreat akin to the Brexit process itself, the neo-agrarian Anglia in Julian Barnes's *England, England*. More specifically, in choosing the position of insurance manager as the professional role of my narrator, I have placed the novel in another minor tradition of the modern English novel featuring similar characters from within that industry – including insurance agent George Bowling in *Coming Up For Air* and insurance clerk Leonard Bast in Forster's *Howards End* (though again these coincidences didn't occur to me until much later, as I chose the insurance profession, among other reasons, to explore the theme of risk). In common with my narrator, Bowling and Bast as younger men had each aspired to some kind of creative or intellectual distinction or individuation, only to be crushed by the functional banality of the modern economy, merging with 'the thousands who have lost the life of the body and failed to reach the life of the spirit' (Forster 1956: 121).

In that regard, the Brexit vote undoubtedly reflects the ongoing spiritual crisis at the heart of modernity, which over the past four decades of neoliberal hegemony has deepened into a morbid, apocalyptic pathology, particularly among white men whose cultural and political pre-eminence they sense is under threat. This economic, social and spiritual alienation has been a main driver of political upheaval in the West since the

Industrial Revolution, as a long list of Jeremiahs have persisted in pointing out, from Ruskin, Marx and William Morris (cf. Beecroft 2019) to John Gray and Pankaj Mishra. But even as he sides with the posse of white male vigilantes who go out to hunt the boar, in an echo of Houellebecq's afore-mentioned novel the narrator of my story is being drawn unconsciously into a different kind of male solidarity, a form of spiritual brotherhood with the imagined Ibrahim, his Abrahamic double, longing for faith in some kind of deliverance from his emotional and spiritual imprisonment, and in that sense embodying the myriad pent-up tensions that drove the country to vote for Brexit; frustrations which in their spiritual origins stem from the same places in the mind as the springs of fundamentalism which have driven young western Muslims into the arms of ISIS.

In that sense, as Mishra has shown, Brexit is part of a much wider restlessness that's enveloping the entire planet, driven by inequality within and between countries and regions and the inevitable economic dislocation those disparities cause; as well as the explosion of information available to increasing numbers of people, which fuels our discontent, and the mass migration which has flowed from all these factors; and above all, as the novella makes clear in the children's story of Samuel the migrant, an ever-deepening climate crisis that before long will dwarf every other challenge we face. These are problems to which many, like the story's narrator, would like to block their ears and close their eyes. But as he finds, there is still a noise in your head and images in your mind, no matter how dark or how quiet the room you lie down in. The world will not go away because the world is inside us, whether we like it or not.

The Everlasting Animal: The Origins of Brexit and the Idea of England in English Literature of the Neoliberal Age

Introduction: What Rough Beast?

In William Golding's novel *Lord of the Flies*, published less than a decade after the end of the most destructive war in history, a band of prepubescent schoolboys find themselves marooned on a small Pacific island with abundant sources of food and no apparent predatory threat. These paradisiacal conditions notwithstanding, they realise that the key to their long-term survival lies in keeping up the smoke signal that would guide any passing ship to rescue them. But their resolve to persist in the task does not last for long, with both external and internal distractions deflecting them from the rational course of action they know is their main hope of escape. Their ordeal has hardly begun, indeed, when one of the smallest boys articulates the childish fear which to differing degrees already haunts them all. Easily dismissed at this stage, the boy with the mulberry-coloured birthmark speaks of a 'snake-thing', the 'beastie' (Golding 1954: 34) that he imagines will come in the middle of the night and eat him up – an apprehension that, by way of mishap and malice, becomes an ever-more menacing presence as the novel unfolds.

Lord of the Flies has been a set text at GCSE level in Britain for decades and, as such, is a work that Libby, the eldest daughter of the narrator of my novella, *The Season of the Boar*, is studying for that exam. I am not the only writer to have pointed (cf. Hyde 2018), as I do in the story, to the Pythonesque parody of *Lord of the Flies* that the Brexit melodrama has often appeared; for many, the novel's cast of overprivileged public schoolboys, with their arrogant assumptions of English superiority, encapsulated in Jack's statement that 'We're English; and the English are best at everything' (Golding 1954: 42), perfectly sums up the Eton mess – at times farcical, at others quite frightening – in which the UK has found itself over the past three years. My novella repurposes some of the key narrative elements in *Lord of the Flies* – not only the wild boar and the hunt to kill it, but the sense of a shadow beast, inchoate and thus more terrifying than any real animal could ever be. At the same time, early on in my research, I detected a similar, equally shapeless creature lurking at the back of my mind as I

began thinking about and reading towards the critical study that follows. At the start of that process, I came across a phrase at the end of George Orwell's wartime essay 'England Your England', in which he describes the country as an 'everlasting animal stretching into the future and the past' (Orwell 1957: 90). While according to John Brannigan, Orwell was later 'circumspect' about the essay's literary value (Brannigan 2003: 1), in this evocation of an archetypal beast I immediately recognised the predatory creature from *The Season of the Boar*, which in this critical study is given new significance, conveying a sense that I and many others have had throughout the Brexit process that there was something more at stake in the demand to 'Take Back Control' than simply the desire to leave a 43-year-old political union – something which, having been invited to speak, had decided to shout and scream and roar and howl, and would not be silenced until it got exactly what it wanted, even if it couldn't say with any clarity what it did actually want.

Given the shock of the result even to those who had schemed to achieve it, in asking why the British people voted the way they did in 2016 it became clear to me both from the electoral statistics and the mood in the country that Brexit was above all an English phenomenon – in effect, a plain and simple Exit that would be anything *but* plain and simple if the true ramifications of the wish to enact it were ever to be faced and which, for the same reason, was a political taboo among politicians of both left and right. In that regard, I wanted to see if the same signs of disquiet that were informing the writing of my novella also appeared in the English novel – that is, novels concerning England and English experience – (and a single English play) written during the quarter century leading up to 2016. It's a period that includes a number of major events which collectively contributed to the vote to leave: principally, the financial crisis and the economic and increasingly ideological doctrine of austerity which flowed from it; the devolution of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland further back, which helped to nurture a widely felt if largely suppressed sense among the English of being politically left behind; and, ultimately, the signing of the Maastricht Treaty that gave rise to the rash of Eurosceptic parties which have campaigned so aggressively and with increasing success over the period, reflecting a slowly shifting attitude that more than two decades later delivered the Brexit vote. But the more I read, the more I realised that beyond the familiar suite of fears and frustrations, what drove – what is still driving – the Brexit phenomenon, was a presence that was keenly felt but far less easily perceived, and in that sense bears resemblance to the metaphysical beast of Orwell's fantasy. In the

darkest hours of the Second World War, when Orwell was writing his essay, it is clear that he saw the creature he had conjured as a kind of saviour – a spirit of cultural continuity from which every English man and woman individually could draw the strength they needed collectively to prevail. In the wake of that conflict, in which humankind had discovered a seemingly boundless capacity for destruction, culminating in the doomsday weapon which had brought the war so abruptly to an end and as Golding surmised in *Lord of the Flies* would define the next one, that spirit beast is seen to be anything but benign. Whether the animal spirit of Brexit is one or the other depends, of course, on our attitudes to Brexit, but also on how we view the fundamental questions at the heart of this and the other populist rebellions rampaging through the world's democracies at the present moment.

Principally, these are questions about the shape of democracy itself and the place of the nation state in an increasingly globalised world – questions which the first chapter of this critical component attempts to address. In the case of Brexit, or more properly Exit, this question has a particular character that not only goes to the heart of an economic and political order – the neoliberal order – which now has global reach while at the same time paying dividends to an ever smaller number of people; it also points to the failings of an uncoded British constitution and the complaints of an ancient nation content for three centuries – but not anymore, it seems – to speak through an instrumental and opportunist proxy state. It is only now, as the longer second chapter contends, and for a wide range of more or less material reasons that have all played their part, that England has demanded to be heard. But while in the press and news media the many causes of English aggrievement have been endlessly explored, there remains something still very difficult to understand which is best articulated through the narrative voices, the lived experience and the intimate awareness of fiction. As I will show in the study that follows, it can certainly be found, watching us warily, skulking in the undergrowth of the English novel of the past quarter century of British Eurosceptic feeling, its sense of security and belonging shattered by four more or less unbroken decades of an unforgiving politics of dog-eat-dog and every man for himself.

Chapter 1. The State of the Nation State

The decision of the British electorate to leave the European Union was the first of the two big political shocks in the West in 2016 – a decision which few on either side of the argument truly expected and one with which many on the Remain side still have great difficulty in coming to terms. It is also one which could and perhaps should have been foreseen. As I intend to show, it was also anticipated in various ways in some of the most significant works of English literature – that is, works written by English (as opposed to Scottish, Welsh or Northern Irish) writers about English experience – of the past 30 years. Despite this gift of foresight, the literary establishment, like people in the arts as a whole, was as shocked as anyone at the result, having given almost universal backing to the Remain campaign. British/English writers as significant as Kazuo Ishiguro and Ian McEwan were among the most prominent voices warning of the dire, even dangerous consequences of the victory for Leave – especially so given the way in which it was secured – in the days, weeks and months that followed the vote.

Like those eminent writers, I regard myself as an internationalist and a European and was comfortable, perhaps unthinkingly, that for most of my adult life, since the signing of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, British national sovereignty to a certain extent (admittedly, to a growing extent) had been qualified under the principle of subsidiarity by membership of the European Union, just as English nationhood had long been subsidiary to that of the instrumental state of Great Britain (latterly, the United Kingdom) it had itself chosen to create in 1707. But it was clear from polls taken during the referendum campaign, and from those whose opinions I knew personally or had heard about, that large numbers of people either had never or no longer felt that way. Sensing what I then believed would be the cultural, political and economic folly of a vote to leave, though not a member of any political party myself, I went out with Labour activists on 23rd June, polling day, to try to encourage Labour voters in Hastings and St Leonards to cast their ballot. This activity was based on the assumption that Labour voters would naturally back the Remain side, as officially the Labour party had thrown their weight behind the Remain campaign, even if the strength and sincerity of that support from the party leader, Jeremy Corbyn, seemed lukewarm at best. But it was clear to me speaking to people that day – especially those from what I would describe as

the white English working class, though not exclusively that cohort – that for a variety of reasons Labour had failed to take large swathes of their natural voter base with them. As we tramped from one address to another, my fellow canvasser and I agreed that a vote to leave made no sense at all, that almost no one stood to benefit by it, and that many of those who already had so little would end up with even less if the vote went the way our impromptu vox pop was pointing. Faced with many who declared their intention to vote Leave or gave cogent indications that they were contemplating such a vote, we did our best to set out the opposite case, where a debate was possible. But at the end of my stint, I had a strong sense of foreboding that the more passionate, seemingly irrational argument embraced by both the official and unofficial Leave campaigns would win the day, and so it proved. Hastings and St Leonards, like most provincial towns and districts across the country, voted to leave by a margin somewhat larger (54.9:45.1%) than that of the aggregated national vote (*BBC* 2016a).

Slouching towards Sunderland

My brief campaign experience notwithstanding, like millions who saw the EU, despite its increasingly obvious flaws, as a source of economic opportunities, a guardian of social freedoms, and a unique symbol of international cooperation that needed to be cherished, the sense of loss and disbelief I experienced on the morning of the 24th was nothing less than profound – like a personal bereavement whose period of grieving endured far longer than I would ever have imagined possible. Among the hardest things to accept was a sense that so many people could have been swayed by Leave campaigns – both official and unofficial – that were the most toxic and mendacious in living memory. How could people such as those at the count in Sunderland – the first constituency to come out so decisively for Leave – be so deliriously happy about a result founded on demonisation of immigrants and experts alike – both groups characterised as class or national enemies – and whose lasting symbol seemed likely to be the cold-blooded murder of Jo Cox MP just a week before the vote? What had we become as a nation that so many could have thrown in their lot with such a shamelessly ignorant campaign, one which the rest of the world found hard to square with the Britain they thought they knew – the country in which, surely, the majority of its citizens believed they lived?

In an attempt to understand what had happened, in the weeks after the vote, at the start of a long period of reading and reflection that preceded the writing of this critical

study, I began writing the first draft of the creative part of this thesis, my novella *The Season of the Boar*, whose further drafts and revisions have been shaped by that reading and by the writing of the critical component which grew and developed alongside it. I was not alone in turning to fiction as a way to comprehend what was and will always remain a dark moment in recent British history; aside from anything else, I was determined that the vituperative atmosphere of that horrible summer should not be forgotten. Among the published fictive responses from a number of writers in the months that followed the vote, the most significant was Ali Smith's *Autumn*, which in numerous overt or subtle ways conveys the sense of menace that seemed to stalk the land in the latter part of 2016. The book is a passionate defence of common decency, a value and a quality most British people like to think of as an inherent attribute of the national character – bizarrely, and with telling insularity, as if it was something unique to Britain – but one which seemed to have gone missing both during the campaign and in the period that followed, without anyone seeming terribly concerned about its loss. Licence had been given to speak whatever lies seemed politically expedient, delivered by and large with a divisive rhetoric dressed up as a dose of plain speaking that was long overdue. A few months later, notorious parts of keynote speeches at the Tory party conference that autumn – such as then Home Secretary (and Hastings and Rye MP) Amber Rudd's demand that UK companies keep a register of names of EU nationals they employed, a speech later recorded by police as a hate incident (Travis 2017); or now-former Prime Minister Theresa May's claim that 'If you believe you are citizen of the world, you're a citizen of nowhere' (May 2016), a choice of words with chilling echoes of anti-Semitic Nazi propaganda – showed an authoritarian lurch to the right and the emergence of a kind of nationalism that has no precedent in the politics of a British governing party in the modern era; though it's one which, as Paul Gilroy has insisted, has been a clandestine aspect of British domestic statecraft in both Tory and New Labour administrations over many decades (Gilroy 2002: xxvii).

In *Autumn*, the consequences of this new (in the sense of very public) permission to offend are manifold. The counter clerk at the Post Office, where the novel's main protagonist, 32-year-old university lecturer Elisabeth Demand, is attempting to renew her passport, is both sarcastic and officious, the spiteful embodiment of a Home Office then led by Theresa May, one of whose most important policy objectives was to create a 'hostile environment' for anyone who could not prove their right to be in the country through the copious, exhaustive evidence needed to back up that claim – a policy which,

as Petra Rau has asserted, ‘will make your own citizens feel equally unwelcome’ (Rau 2018: 40). In that regard, *Autumn* offers a textbook example of this abuse of state power. Elisabeth is a British citizen – native-born, white and middle class – but even her legitimacy is questioned by a sinister official suspicious of the unusual way she spells her name. ‘It’s people from other countries that spell it like that, generally, isn’t it, the man says’ (Smith 2016: 22). Indeed, the official seems determined to find a reason to reject her application and alights on one, gleefully, in discovering that the head in the passport photo she has taken in a photobooth is outside the specified range for the identity document – literally that her face doesn’t fit. By way of confirmation, we are later told that her very surname, Demand, probably derives from the French ‘de monde’, making her, as Kristian Shaw has also noted (Shaw 2018: 21), a nominal ‘citizen of the world’, while her profession of university lecturer – a group usually characterised as internationalist, liberal and free-thinking, and one that strongly backed remaining in the EU – might indeed put her in the very category of placeless citizenry so shamelessly attacked by Prime Minister May in her 2016 party conference speech.

Go Home

The most characteristic motto of Mrs May’s time at the Home Office – one which, despite her low-key support for Remain, contributed to the nativist poison of the Leave campaign – was the ‘Go Home’ slogan emblazoned on advertising vans deployed around London in October 2013 (Stocker 2017: 127). A tactic intended to intimidate illegal immigrants into voluntarily returning to their countries of origin, it had the effect – once magnified by a supportive right-wing press – of intimidating a much wider group of legal immigrants and their descendants and further emboldening an increasingly confident group of campaigners to the right of the Tory party, whose principal strategist and spokesman, then-UKIP leader Nigel Farage, spooked the Conservatives into ever-more reactionary gesture politics throughout the early 2010s, the more so after UKIP’s astounding success in the European elections of 2014 (*BBC* 2014). In a pointed example of both this hostile imperative and the new freedom to despise and to insult that seemed to follow the Brexit vote, Elisabeth passes a house in her mother’s village with the same Home Office mantra daubed in big black letters on the front window (Smith 2016: 53), a policy of harassment whose official status has legitimised this personalised message of hate. That in Smith’s formulation the transition from policy to personal insult is so

seamless, so unlikely to invite legal censure – the distance between the two so apparently negligible – says much about the intended political subtext of the original.

Elisabeth's main reason for the weekly visits to her mother's home that she has recently begun making is to visit a venerable centenarian, now living (though close to death) in a care home in the town where she grew up, not far from the village in East Anglia where her mother has since moved. As a child, she had struck up a friendship with this man, who even then was approaching eighty years old, after a school project in which she is supposed 'to talk to a neighbour about what it means to be a neighbour' (43). And as if Smith's intended message was not clear enough already, the gentleman concerned, Daniel Gluck, is a Jewish immigrant granted leave to remain in Britain with his father in the years before the Second World War. We later learn that his brilliant younger sister, Hannah, for some reason was refused the same right, an exclusion which for a European Jew living in those times meant the difference between living and dying: marooned in Nice, in Vichy France, and eventually rounded up, Daniel never heard from her again, and we are led to assume that she was murdered in one of the Nazi death camps. Furnished with tragic knowledge of the human capacity for cruelty and barbarism, but also blessed with innate gentleness and humanity, Gluck (whose German name means both 'happiness' and 'luck', reflecting his own optimistic outlook on art and life) is the literal embodiment of decency – someone who, in the first of several delirious reveries he experiences throughout the novel, is reminded again of what it takes to be decent, but also what its benefits are for those with the patience, the discipline and the awareness of others to embrace it, the physicality involved 'in not wanting to offend' flooding him with a sweet feeling of decency, one that is 'surprisingly like you imagine it would be to drink nectar' (8).

The Closed Society

The country we encounter in *Autumn* is a place where common land is still being enclosed (cf. Crace 2013), even today, by security fences topped by razor wire (55, 139) concealing activities, carried out for profit by private concerns in the name of the public good, by which the public might be appalled if only we knew what they were.

Elisabeth's mother voted Remain in the referendum and despairs of the result, but, prematurely retired, she spends much of her time watching antiques programmes on daytime TV, whose nostalgic appeal to a rose-tinted past – a time before modern cultural and political entanglements like the EU – was clearly part of the affective

pathology, what Raymond Williams would have called the ‘structure of feeling’, behind the vote to leave. Ironically, her involvement as a participant on ‘The Golden Gavel’, one of her favourites among this kind of show, at one point in the novel leads to a lesbian relationship that opens up this rather unadventurous woman to her own potential agency in the wider world. Having been upset by the sinister and secretive compound on the edge of her village, patrolled by goons in blacked-out SUVs working for a company called SA4A (or *safer*) – a typically disingenuous modern business acronym – she is now emboldened to stage her own form of protest (Smith 2016: 255) in resisting the closed world that the new illiberal order seems determined to impose.

Smith’s novel was written at great speed during the summer of 2016 and it reads above all as a passionate, urgent defence of those liberal values of kindness and tolerance and curiosity about other human beings which seemed so endangered by the hostile environment that Britain had become during that period; though as I will show, and as Michael Gardiner has pointed out, these values have been threatened over a much longer period by a British state ‘relying less on overt physical force than on a complicity between state, finance and surveillance’ (Gardiner 2012: 49), as demonstrated by the history of outsourced state functions such as security stretching back as far as the 1980s – a loss of accountability and control which fed into the mistrust and anomie that drove the vote to leave.

As an emblem of the liberal values whose defence is the main purpose of *Autumn*, Smith settles on the remarkable real-life figure of Pauline Boty, a Pop Art painter of the 1960s, whose few completed pictures show evidence of a great talent that was cruelly cut short by cancer at the age of just twenty-eight. Elisabeth had come across Boty’s work as a student (Smith 2016: 149), quite by chance, when browsing one of the bookshops in the Charing Cross Road at a previous moment of political crisis; this was the day in February 2003 when millions of people in cities across the country marched in protest at Tony Blair’s determination to take Britain to war with Saddam Hussein’s Iraq – like Brexit another huge national moment that was founded at least partly on a lie. It turns out that Boty was the one true love of Daniel’s life; more than twenty years younger, she was also about to marry another man and did not return his love. But his memories of her are anything but bitter, and it is clearly Boty’s paintings that Daniel had in mind when he told the child Elisabeth, with typical playfulness, what her ambition to go to college really entails. ‘Collage,’ he says, deliberately mispronouncing the word, ‘is an institute of education where all the rules can be thrown into the air, and

size and space and time and foreground and background all become relative, and because of these skills everything you think you know gets made into something new and strange' (71–2) (though if this description is intended to evoke the positive, cultural openness of the 1960s, it could just as easily be describing the negative, fragmented politics of our own period).

Daniel is a writer of popular songs, whose heyday was the Sixties, and the creative exuberance of that period is what Smith wants us to contemplate and contrast with contemporary Brexit Britain (notwithstanding that the 1960s was also the time of Enoch Powell's 'Rivers of Blood' speech in Birmingham in April 1968 and Tory MP Peter Griffiths's successful 'nigger for a neighbour' election campaign in nearby Smethwick four years earlier [Jeffries 2014]). Elisabeth later paraphrases Boty's own words in briefly describing the artist's life to her mother's new lover, Zoe; the painter had spelled out her own values in interviews she gave as her star began to rise, briefly, in the years before she died. Boty apparently talked of the 'nostalgia of NOW' (Smith 2016: 246) that was the spirit of her own time, a clear contrast with the nostalgia for a lost past – what Robert Eaglestone calls a 'cruel nostalgia' (Eaglestone 2018: 92) – that seemed to drive the Brexit vote.

The Othering of Leave

Of course, looking from the opposite side of our current divide, in her longing for a world like that of the Swinging Sixties, Smith could also be said to be indulging in nostalgia of a different kind – for a period she is too young remember, much like the Brexiters and their reverence for the memory of the Second World War – while at the same time feigning a dispassionate detachment that disowns politics when it happens to deliver an unpleasant surprise. At several points in the novel, she adopts the panoramic perspective of an omniscient narrator, a kind of narrative expert, in lengthy digressions in which we are told what is happening 'all across the country'. The most significant of these rhetorical jeremiads (Smith 2016: 59–61) looks down on the chaos and division and effectively questions what the point of it all was, given that nothing will change, and that 'All across the country, the usual tiny per cent of the people made their money out of the usual huge per cent of the people' (61). This may be true, of course, but the attempt to paint what she sees as a bad choice as simply no choice at all is the understandable reaction of a committed social liberal still smarting at what was, after all, a democratic result, no matter how dishonestly achieved. And when we examine the

cast of characters in her book, aside from the hostile officials Elisabeth encounters at the Post Office and in a doctor's surgery at which she tries unsuccessfully to register (104), all the others are either sympathetic foreign care workers in the home where Daniel Gluck is a resident, or the narrow social class represented by Daniel, Elisabeth, her mother and her mother's lover – all of them genteel, middle-class lovers of the arts and listeners to Radio 4 – thoroughly decent people in the way that was previously, and perhaps rather narrowly, described.

The Leave side of the argument is never represented, other than to be characterised in absentia by its worst elements, massing like malevolent spirits at the edges of the same genteel lives to which the writer has given us access – spirits which only become embodied in the novel as the nameless thugs who daub the window of that village home, or anonymously abuse a Spanish couple waiting in a taxi queue at the station (130), or march outside the window of Elisabeth's London flat, sing-shouting an overtly racist version of 'Rule, Britannia' so that anyone within earshot can hear (197). Smith takes the risk of quoting Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1611) in defence of the world she would like to see (18), but her cast of characters have a gentle Ariel sweetness, intimidated by an isle cacophonous with noises, while the Calibans of her story, unlike the original, are never allowed to explain themselves, reduced to the role of aggressive noises off, a rabble 17.4 million-strong knowing only how to curse.

Instances such as the public vituperations in *Autumn* did indeed occur all across the country in the weeks that followed the Brexit vote, and similar incidents based on fact are mentioned in my own novella, *The Season of the Boar*. Given the time and the circumstance in which this book was written, Smith's approach is not at all surprising, and in fact her novel *Winter* (2017), published a year later, takes a more balanced view, at least giving the Leave side its own voice in the form of Sophia, the former businesswoman with a naïve trust in the powers-that-be, the authoritarian sympathies that in fact have been found to be a more prevalent personality trait among those who voted Leave (MacKenzie 2018). But in claiming that the political choice the country has made will not change a thing, in effectively disowning politics, in *Autumn* Smith is surely being disingenuous about a struggle in which it is clear she is actively engaged – not least because her portrait of a nation in this book is so pointedly one-sided.

One of the books Elisabeth is reading in the course of the events of the novel, both to herself and to Daniel on his deathbed, is Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (Smith 2016: 17), and at the point in that book where she reaches the passage from *The*

Tempest from which the novel gets its title, Elisabeth is sitting in a queue at the Post Office, waiting for the hostile counter clerk to pick holes in her passport application. The disjuncture of Miranda's speech of wonderment and the context in which she is reading those lines is not lost on Elisabeth. But Smith seems to be forgetting the irony of Huxley's use of the same material, the naivety of John the Savage in believing his visitors from the Other Place his mother has always spoken of come from a world that is indeed brave (in the sense of both splendid and courageous) as well as new.

The warning against utopias in Huxley's book begins in the disaffection of two Alpha Plus inhabitants of his suffocating London of the future – the frustrated but heroic emotional engineer Helmholtz Watson and especially the anti-heroic, alienated psychologist Bernard Marx – in the year A.F. (the year of Our Ford) 632. For different reasons, both men long to escape the life of enforced communitarianism decreed by the benevolent dictatorship of this imagined World State, but both are also prevented by their conditioning and the lack of access to historical or other ideas from gaining full understanding of their true predicament. It takes the encounter of John the Savage with the reality of the world he has long dreamed of seeing to show us what the control of the future global state, with its motto 'COMMUNITY, IDENTITY, STABILITY' (Huxley 1994: 1), would mean for the free and sovereign individual, of the kind exemplified in the works of Shakespeare from which John has constructed his view of the possibilities of human life.

The Prince of Brexit

It may seem a bit of a stretch (and too much of an unintended compliment!) to link this to the aims of the principal advocates of Brexit, particularly as even three years later so many of those aims still seem so nebulous, without any coherent plan – both disruptive to, or even destructive of, the fabric of British society and therefore the lives of those 'real people ... ordinary people ... decent people' (BBC 2016b) in whose name they purported to campaign and for whom victory was claimed the morning after the result. But to counter one's opponent effectively one must first understand him, and in that regard the following passage, quoted at length, could be taken as indicating a major ideological reason why there is so much antipathy to supranational organisations such as the EU, whose logical – and, some now say, inevitable – extension into a single superstate begins to resemble the stifling future World State envisaged in *Brave New World*:

In 1971 a whimsical little ditty called 'Imagine' appeared. It preached the hateful message of globalisation by imperialistic homogenisation. 'If we can get everyone to feel the same thing and feel no loyalties, wouldn't life be sweet?' was its Victorian missionary's message.

No matter that, if someone had penned a song called 'Let's get rid of all species except rabbits' or 'Who needs any food but McDonalds or any language but English?' it would have been quite properly derided, this song was to become a universal mission-statement to a war-weary world.

You know the one. It begins quite promisingly. The piano goes 'gurdle gurdle gurdle gurdle dum'. Then the dirge-like singing starts and the sugar-coated imperialism kicks in.

Get rid of all your diverse human ambitions and passions (and so, presumably, art and personal loves and standards). Get rid of all your nations, possessions, faiths and loyalties (and so, presumably, families, languages and diversity in habitat, custom and culture), get rid, in short, of your identities and of everything that makes you human, and everything will suddenly be oh, so simple and lovely.

The man might just as well have said, 'Why not kill yourselves while you're at it? That way you can be sure of peace.'

The scattergun rhetoric and the latent despair, culminating in the nihilism of the final ironic exhortation, are typical features of the strident lucidity of the author of this passage, Nigel Farage MEP, which is taken from his book *Flying Free* (Farage 2011: 10). But if Farage's view represents an extremely paranoid vision of the globalised world and its direction of travel, which for him is politically and metaphorically embodied in the European Union, it is one with considerable traction, as shown by the Brexit vote, in the minds of a great many Britons, however they may have come to see things as they do. And in taking aim at John Lennon's 'Imagine' (1971), a late, anthemic summation of the purpose of the counterculture of the 1960s, a period which for Ali Smith is such a nonpareil, it seeks to puncture what people such as Farage see as the fatal illusion of the liberal consensus which has given us 'globalisation by imperialistic homogenisation'.

Eight years ago, when his book was published, even at the height of the Eurozone crisis this seemed an extreme position to adopt, and the 'progressive' contingent among the British establishment blithely dismissed it – a collective response summed up in David Cameron's characterisation of Farage's then party, UKIP, in 2006 as a bunch of 'fruitcakes, loonies and closet racists' (*BBC* 2006); it was a strategy of ridicule and attempted marginalisation later identified as foolish by Simon Heffer in the *Daily Mail* (Heffer 2012) in the wake of Tory defeat in the Corby by-election in November 2012.

By this point there was also a growing and well-established body of criticism of the European project which had emerged over the previous quarter century from writers of all political persuasions; not just the passionate and tendentious nationalist arguments of the likes of Farage and Roger Scruton, but the cautionary reflections of far more nuanced, liberal thinkers. These included Tony Judt who in his short book *A Grand Illusion?* (1996), long before the accession of post-Communist Eastern European nations to the EU or even the creation of the euro, asserted that even though the established idea of being a European was ‘a real and significant achievement of the European Union’ (Judt 1996: 72), nonetheless, ‘Europe’ as a geopolitical entity was ‘too large and too nebulous a concept around which to forge any convincing human community’ (118). Identifying the ‘Bosnian imbroglio’ as having revealed ‘the sheer emptiness of the “European” construct, its obsession with fiscal rectitude and commercial advantage’ (138), Judt concluded with what now seems a prescient warning: ‘If we look to the European Union as a solution for everything,’ he wrote, ‘chanting “Europe” like a mantra, waving the banner of “Europe” in the face of recalcitrant “nationalist” heretics ... we shall wake up one day to find that far from solving the problems of our continent, the myth of “Europe” has become an impediment to our recognizing them’ (140).

Never Again

The main reason for establishing the European Coal and Steel Community in 1951 had been to solve the problem of nationalism that was seen as having led to one world war, to Nazism and then to another war even more global and destructive than the first. It would, and did, achieve this by entwining the economies of the two long-standing combatant nations, France and Germany, so symbiotically that any renewal of conflict would fatally undermine their mutual self-interest, thereby enshrining the memorial mantra of ‘Never again’ in the economic structures of the future and, following the Treaty of Rome in 1957, the political structures, too. The same goals of peace and stability that led to the creation of the European Economic Community are the core message of Mustapha Mond, the World Controller for Western Europe, in his dialogue with John the Savage towards the end of *Brave New World*, about the course of history that brought about the creation of the World State. Following the end of the Nine Years’ War which began in A.F. 141 (ominously, as soon as 2049 in the Gregorian calendar and 141 years after the making of the first Model T), Mond recounts that, ‘People were

ready to have even their appetites controlled then. Anything for a quiet life. We've gone on controlling ever since. It hasn't been very good for truth, of course. But it's been very good for happiness' (Huxley 1994: 201).

Something like this suffocating vision of dystopian superstate control haunts the waking nightmares of swashbuckling advocates of Brexit such as Farage, who makes an explicit reference to Huxley's novel in his own autobiography (Farage 2011: 212), and for whom the rules and compromises of international cooperation demand too high a price – whereas war, it seems, does not – of the national freedom in which he invests his dreams of individual freedom and the dreams of those 'little people' for whom he claims to speak. It's a libertarian complaint of long vintage, a hawkish vision that has been around since at least the first decade of the last century – for example, in William James's essay 'The Moral Equivalent of War' (1906), with its dreary evocation of a pre-war 'world of clerks and teachers, of co-education and zo-ophily, of "consumer's leagues" and "associated charities," of industrialism unlimited, and feminism unabashed' (James 1906: n.p.). This is echoed a century later in the 'long-range, one-size-fits-all colonialism' (Farage 2011: 55), the 'new puritanism' of 'conformity in accordance with safety regulations and an apocryphal ecological gospel' (227), which Farage ascribes to the EU – all the more so after the democratically rejected EU Constitution, with its further erosion of national autonomy in the laudable interest of greater cooperation, had been smuggled into EU law by the Treaty of Lisbon in 2009 (196, 214).

Again, Mustapha Mond in *Brave New World* – a technocratic Grand Inquisitor, an embodiment of the deep state of right-wing fantasy – puts the bureaucratic hegemon's argument with which the Leave side so successfully caricatured the EU during the referendum campaign, telling John the Savage that 'civilization has absolutely no need of nobility or heroism. These things are symptoms of political inefficiency. In a properly organized society like ours, nobody has any opportunities for being noble or heroic. Conditions have to be thoroughly unstable before the occasion can arise. Where there are wars, where there are divided allegiances, where there are temptations to be resisted, objects of love to be fought for or defended – there, obviously, nobility and heroism have some sense. But there aren't any wars nowadays' (Huxley 1994: 209).

For Farage, the peace which the EU and its earlier incarnations are said to have preserved for more than sixty years takes an unconscionable toll on national freedom, leading to the 'sheep's paradise' which William James tells us in his day was the

common insult thrown by militaristic types at the idea that war might be a phase in human evolution that we will one day outgrow. James, an avowed pacifist, died in 1910, but had he lived another forty years, he would no doubt have been pleased to see the emergence of the new world order drawn up at the Bretton Woods conference of 1944, and the establishment of the UN the following year – cooperative arrangements which for at least a quarter of a century tied Western nation states into economic and political structures that sought stability as a primary goal, in much the same way as the EU professes to even now. But he would also have worried at the loss of ‘martial virtues’ in men, which the new ‘pleasure-economy’ (James 1906: n.p.) had simply no use for. James felt strongly that these masculine attributes needed an outlet; and a sheep’s paradise could not possibly satisfy the majority of men, whose ‘pugnacity and love of glory’ (James 1906: n.p.) was seemingly a fact of evolutionary psychology. This need for glory has surely reappeared everywhere in the westernised world of recent decades – i.e. not just the developed, Western portion of it – in the increasing anger and alienation of a large cohort whom Pankaj Mishra describes as ‘insulted and injured men’ (Mishra 2017: 49) – those who, like the narrator in *The Season of the Boar*, are keenly aware that they have never been tested by war or by any plausible moral equivalent, and are unable to resign themselves to ‘a world of soul-killing mediocrity, cowardice, opportunism and immoral deal-making’ (49–50). To restore their lost honour and pride, a good number of them have turned instead, in Mishra’s example, to revolutionary causes such as ISIS or, in the case of post-Christian Western white men, to the racist narratives of provocateurs like Donald Trump or Jair Bolsonaro or Viktor Orbán. These demagogues stridently assert the primacy of specifically national values (and specifically Christian ones; almost as if Christianity were solely the white man’s religion rather than a now universal creed of Levantine origin) in defiance of a cooperative and, as they see it, corrupting international order that increasingly undermines not only national economies and cultures but the psychological integrity of individual citizens, and especially male ones.

Jobs for the Boys

Farage’s libertarian message is a similar cry to let boys be boys, ““wrong but wromantic”” as opposed to ““right but repulsive”” (Farage 2011: 37), as he puts it in lamenting the changing codes of behaviour among traders in the City of London during his time there in the 1980s. But his view of the nation state, ‘a sustainable unit which

makes sense and commands the loyalty and identification of its inhabitants' (289), is congruent with that of Judt, that the nation may well be 'the only remaining, as well as the best-adapted source of collective and communal identification' (Judt 1996: 119–20) – a permanent human achievement that needs no refinement and no further evolution to any higher 'state'. As we saw in the long quote from *Flying Free*, for those of the same mind as the serial leader of UKIP and now CEO of his own Brexit party – including Edmund Burke (Burke 1968: 118), with whom in other respects, such as the merits of direct versus representative democracy, he is in fierce disagreement – nations are fundamental, heritable markers of human identity, along with faiths, loyalties, habitats, customs and cultures; qualities the EU and other umbrella organisations such as the UN, which try to impose international standards of behaviour and cooperation that have held since the end of the Second World War, in their minds have done too much to undermine. In this prescription, there are no universal human values, a concept which is simply a euphemism for 'globalisation by imperialistic homogenisation'; there are only local values and cultural conditions, a sense of being tied meaningfully to some of our fellow human beings but not to all – even with the potential for conflict that this brings with it. For Farage, this sense of innate loyalty, even partiality, toward our fellow nationals – my country right or wrong – is an essential component of any meaningful human life, and a quality which in his own formulation, trumps any notion of the rights of the individual (i.e. human rights) which the concept of universal rights was established to defend.

Of course, the universalising tendency of the EU has also had unintended consequences which call into question the practicality, never mind the sincerity, of that impulse. The surrender of so many national currencies, those bastions of national independence, in favour of the supposed efficiency of the single currency produced, within little more than a decade following its introduction, not the universal prosperity that was promised but economic immiseration for multiple polities across the Continent following the Eurozone crisis that began in 2010. For many Leavers on the British left (of which Jeremy Corbyn was a leading voice prior to his surprising elevation to leadership of the Labour party in 2015), this was all the proof they needed that the EU was the bosses' and bankers' club they had always suspected it to be. It's an attitude with which Farage's description of 'globalisation by imperialistic homogenisation' would chime surprisingly well, and it's not as if the anti-imperial left did not have legitimate grievance; for instance, in the increasingly corporation-friendly judgments of

the European Court of Justice, such as the Viking Line case (Ornstein & Smith, n.d.), or in EU laws like the posted workers' directive whose undermining of local wage structures was a longstanding problem (though it is worth noting that they were finally reformed at the behest of Emmanuel Macron, of all people, in the wake of Britain's decision to leave the EU [Barbière 2017]). Indeed, the transnational solidarity on which the EU is supposedly based has been shown to be a sham, the result not just of the faulty architecture of the euro and the political and unprecedented fiscal bullying of aberrant Eurozone nations like Greece (Varoufakis 2017), but, as we have seen with the refugee crisis, owing to the persistence of national traditions and political attitudes that put constituent nations at odds with each other at the level of basic moral principles and supposedly shared 'European' values, and even, in the case of suspended Schengen arrangements after 2015, in breach of commitments made under EU law.

The Roots of Lexit

The British left have long been the most trenchant critics of the EU and what they see as its corporatist agenda, installed by the same succession of treaties to which Nigel Farage objects, which locks national electorates into transnational arrangements agreed to by states whose peoples may know little about them and understand even less. With these forces in mind, even before Maastricht, in his 1988 essay 'Nationalism: Irony and Commitment' Terry Eagleton paints the nation, like social class, as a necessary evil – a bulwark against less accountable and thus more powerful entities – in a way that echoes the more reasonable themes among the combative arguments of Farage. 'To wish class or nation away ... is to play into the hands of the oppressor' (Eagleton 1990: 23), he asserts. In doing so, in a way that echoes the erupting psychological conflicts of the narrator in *The Season of the Boar*, he offers a Freudian justification of the Brexiters' sheer lack of a plan for what they would do if they won, claiming that 'Subjects, national or otherwise, do indeed experience needs that are repressed but demand realization; it is just that one ironic effect of such repression is to render us radically uncertain of what our needs really are' (29). Indeed, in mooted the kind of disaster socialism which many now suspect is the Marxian revolutionary intention of the cabal around the hapless current leader of the Labour party, Eagleton goes so far as to defend the chaos that ensues from radical action. 'As long as we can adequately describe the transformations our political actions intend,' he writes, 'we have failed by that token to advance beyond reformism' (29).

Seamus Deane in his 'Introduction' (1990) to the same volume in which Eagleton's essay appears, also writes scathingly of another of the Brexit players, the Republic of Ireland, who joined the European Economic Community at the same time as the UK in 1973. In the cause of development, he claims, his country has 'surrendered the notion of identity altogether as a monotonous and barren anachronism' (Deane 1990: 13–14), and rushed instead 'to embrace all of those corporate "international" opportunities offered by the European Economic Community and the tax-free visitations of international cartels' (14). He sees the 'naming or renaming of a race, a region, a person' (18) as 'an act of possession' (18) vital to the identity and integrity of those same realities, an autochthonous rite (and a right to autonomy) which modern Ireland has chosen willingly but unthinkingly to sublimate in the modern pursuit of economic growth. For this reason, he concludes, Ireland has passed 'from one kind of colonizing experience into another. For such pluralism refuses the idea of naming; it plays with diversity and makes a mystique of it; it is the concealed imperialism of the multinational, the infinite compatibility of all cultures with one another envisaged in terms of the ultimate capacity of computers to read one another' (19).

Eagleton's and Deane's essays were written at the moment of Western triumph at the end of the Cold War, the false dawn beyond which, until the financial crisis of 2008, capitalism would be seen to have won. The mainstream British left was thrown off balance by the collapse of a comforting dualism, admitting defeat in the ultimate gesture of humiliation: by assuming the victor's codes. Tony Blair's removal of Clause IV of the Labour party constitution, the further constraints he imposed on the unions whose members were the Labour party's core electoral base and main source of funding, and his embrace of Thatcherite neoliberal economics, represented New Labour's obeisance to capital in exchange for power, window-dressed as pragmatism and sold to supporters with the sweeteners of state-funded compensation to the humiliated losers of post-industrial decline, such as Barry in *The Season of the Boar* – social handouts which only served to humiliate them further.

This intellectual surrender – understandable after eighteen years out of office but a kind of auto-lobotomy all the same – manifested most obviously in the very managerial competence which helped New Labour sustain its hold on power for more than a decade, a phenomenon embodied in the cloned versions of the leader himself, both male and female, who increasingly came to occupy senior positions, spouting New Labour platitudes that they never quite seemed to believe or even to understand – an

anaesthetising of language that Michael Gardiner describes as ‘the market management of the present’ (Gardiner 2018: 114) – and in white-elephant projects like the Millennium Dome, whose placeless corporate-sponsored content, in the minds of its devisers, could be flatteringly described in Eagleton’s phrase as drawing on ‘that abstract universalism that is taken to be the very mark of modernity’ (Eagleton 1988: 33). Dreamt up largely by politicians and marketing men, the postmodern vacuity of the Dome – a structure Iain Sinclair once described as ‘a blob of congealed correction fluid, a flick of Tipp-Ex to revise the mistakes of 19th-century industrialists’ (Sinclair 1999: 12) – epitomised the separation of political vision from the lived experience of the electorate. And as Jeremy Black argues, such Millennial projects were poor relations to the cultural achievements of the past they sought to ape – contentless symbols whose lack of cultural particularity made one question their sincerity; comparing the Millennium Dome with the Great Exhibition, he writes, ‘was to be aware of a more brittle and questionable optimism about the future’ (Black 2018: 142). This tactical emptiness of modern centrist political creeds, based on a structure of feeling that was widely felt to be fragile, even fake, led to a counterfeit national culture and the politics of a Potemkin village – phenomena that are clearly articulated in two novels published just a few years either side of that year of zeros: Julian Barnes’s *England, England*, discussed in the next chapter, and Jonathan Coe’s *The Closed Circle* (2004), which spotted something hollow and cynical – a want of real transformative vision – at the heart of the Blairite project. Unsurprisingly, New Labour’s principal legacy has been to steer whole swathes of the electorate away from the normal political process toward more radical alternatives that speak to the cultural and political needs it ignored.

Nowhere Men

A more contextualised version of Farage’s nationalist argument, backed up by considerable statistical evidence, was first published less than a year after the 2016 referendum and has become a key measure of why the British public voted the way they did. David Goodhart’s *The Road to Somewhere* critiques liberals in a similar, if more reasoned, way to Theresa May’s 2016 ‘citizens of nowhere’ conference speech. Defending the nation state, like Farage, Judt *et al.*, on the basis that, ‘As the power centre closest to where people live and have their attachments, it is only the nation state that can confer legitimacy and accountability on global bodies and thus prevent the emergence of the kinds of global behemoths imagined in Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-*

Four' (Goodhart 2017: 109), he examines how national law has been gradually underpinned (or perhaps undermined) by EU law, culminating 'in the creation of the legal category of "EU citizen" in the Maastricht Treaty of 1992, which entrenched the principle of non-discrimination' (103). He describes how for the British left (and by implication all Western progressives), 'A narrative of progress, shaped by the history of civil rights reforms in the past few generations, saw the abolition of slavery and the emancipation of women and minorities, as a prelude to the transcending of all exclusive communities — including the nation state' (105). Witheringly, he also insists that this liberal 'Post-nationalism has turned out to have some of the same group-think qualities as nationalism itself only wrapped in moral self-regard' (105). Of course, it is a ridiculous generalisation to paint everyone who believes in a potential human future that moves beyond the historical contingency of the nation state as a vain virtue-signaller. As we see from *Brave New World* and from the circumstances that led to the creation of the international organisations of the post-war period, there are very urgent reasons for believing that only such close international cooperation will enable the human species to confront the multiple existential challenges it is likely to face in the very near future, chief among them the threat of climate catastrophe. But for Goodhart, as for Orwell, it is only nation states which, at least for the moment, have the political agency and legitimacy to cooperate in this way, even if they are not doing it very well.

As someone for whom the potential loss of the rights and identity of EU citizen was one of the most bitter pills to have to swallow in the months after the Brexit vote, I find Goodhart's diagnosis a difficult read, and at times, as in the instance cited, his typecasting of one side or another is excessively and unhelpfully crude, backed up by statistical surveys that, while convincing in their own terms, cannot begin to offer the subtle experiential understanding we gain from even the most rudimentary literary enquiry, a point that Robert Eaglestone has also made (Eaglestone 2018: 93). Certainly, the desire for an identity that transcends the national can come about for a variety of reasons and not just the political goals of a liberal elite which, in Goodhart's view, is bent on dismantling national identities which in the past, in Europe and elsewhere, have been instrumentalised in the cause of war. In my own case, the thought of being reduced to being merely British felt like a direct attack on a cultural and political identity — citizenship of the EU — which, since being bestowed like magic dust on me and hundreds of millions of others early in my adult life, had offered a plausibly coherent notion of who I was and where I was from, if also one that was politically ill-defined,

shallow-rooted and, in the end, as Eva Aldea has articulated so poignantly, illusory too (Aldea 2018: 154).

The Nature of Nations

My embrace of this identity, essentially a cultural one, was motivated by a wish for what I might describe, only semi-seriously, as ‘enlargement’ – the desire to belong to something bigger, less geographically and culturally constrained, than the national context into which I was born. Like many modern Britons with multi-ethnic or, in my case, polynational backgrounds, I felt this larger entity reflected the complex sense of origins which tempers my sense of being British or English, as well as being some kind of transnational validation of the wider birthright of the mind to which everyone is entitled. Of course, the nature of national belonging has been variously defined in numerous studies over recent decades, during the same period in which the nation state has become increasingly challenged by the growing power of multinational corporate or government entities.

On the one hand there was Eric Hobsbawm’s internationalist view, which despite being written as the Soviet Empire was beginning to disintegrate, stated with confidence that nationalism was ‘no longer a major vector of historical development’ (Hobsbawm 1990: 163), and that late 20th-century nationalisms were ‘reactions of weakness and fear, attempts to erect barricades to keep at bay the forces of the modern world’ (164) – a claim that certainly resonates today. This account was preceded by Ernest Gellner’s assertion that notions of loyalty to the nation state, itself a historical contingency (Gellner 1983: 6), are inculcated dispassionately – a contestable claim – by structures of education whose purpose is the dissemination of a national culture (36), but that, despite having prevailed for the previous two centuries, the nation state was far from being a law of nature. Perhaps most apposite to the intimate awareness of individual lives to which fiction gives us access is the imagined ‘community in anonymity’ of Benedict Anderson (Anderson 2006: 35), which echoes the early insight of Enoch Powell with which my novella is prefaced. Anderson also makes fruitful historical links between the rise of 19th-century nationalism and the rise of the novel to cultural pre-eminence during the same period (25), concomitant with the growth of the industrial market economy and the gradual extension of suffrage to all sections of the adult population. Indeed, it may not be a fanciful experiment to imagine how the dynamic form of the novel as an examination of the hidden awareness of individual experience might have developed in

a world without nation states and the industrial-capitalist economy that made them necessary, given the atomising, alienating social effects of that economy as well as the countervailing force of gradually widening participation in the democratic and market structures around which modern states have been built. For contemporary cheerleaders of the nation state, such thought experiments are akin to sacrilege. Indeed, Yoram Hazony sees it as the societal paradigm Goldilocks would have favoured – ideally situated between ‘anarchic’ tribal societies and the totalitarianism of the imperial state – though his own polemic is also a clear apologia for Israeli national policy in defiance of what he calls the ‘great imperialist project’ (Hazony 2018: 3) of the EU, with its irritating habit of taking a dim view of the provocative territorial expansion of the Israeli state.

These and other competing ideas of national and especially local belonging, or its loss, give some idea of the internal conflicts plaguing the minds of the increasing number of Britons who have been obliged to define, or to redefine, themselves in the wake of the Brexit vote, and similar debates inform many of the works of literature considered in this study, in particular those which emerged during the twenty-odd years from the signing of the Maastricht Treaty up until Ali Smith’s *Autumn*, written during the season of discontent in which the vote took place. With ever fewer Britons hailing from the monocultural context implied by the traditional bastions of nationhood, such as those itemised by Roger Scruton in *England: an elegy* (2000), in years to come the complex multicultural identity which is still a minority experience will surely become more not less representative of the population as a whole – a demographic make-up which will necessarily change, as it has already, the nature of the imagined community of the British nation or nations, as well as any common culture disseminated through the system of national education.

Nonetheless, the upsurge in symbolic national feeling since the referendum has not come from nowhere, and Goodhart’s characterisation of the contemporary British left as seeing ‘working class national sentiment’ (Goodhart 2017: 105) as ‘merely false consciousness’ (105) also rings true, with EU identity for many so-called progressives being a way of unconsciously shucking off the shameful legacy of British imperial history. (For similar reasons, though more seriously examined by a general population more collectively obligated to be cognisant of the past, western Germans of my wife’s generation feel much the same way about being European.) But the Jungian shadow cast by the Brexit vote has confronted me again with the problem I had perhaps sheltered

from for too long under the umbrella of EU citizenship: the issue of belonging that is rooted in the immediate physical, political and cultural context in which I live, forcing me to acknowledge the needs of fellow citizens with whom for various reasons I might feel I have less in common than with certain nationals of other countries whose cultural affiliations and general worldview are closer to my own.

No End of History

Goodhart's prescriptions for a new national settlement, a spectre that has haunted the UK since the end of empire half a century ago (cf. Nairn 1977), which the Brexit vote has now made a matter of urgent necessity, are a direct challenge to the political and economic orthodoxy of the liberal world order which has prevailed since the fall of the Berlin Wall. That dismantling of barriers, of *the* ideological and physical barrier of the post-war world, was seen at the time as the direction of the future as well as the end of history diagnosed by Francis Fukuyama (cf. Fukuyama 2012), a thesis which has since become emblematic of the hubris of the West at the turn of the Millennium. But if the West had won for the then-foreseeable future, the neoliberal model it followed and then imposed on so many post-communist countries meant that the real winners were few in number. Even in the West itself, with the collapse of the communist alternative, national polities which had been deflected from Soviet-style socialism by the generous welfare provision of European social democracy were now at the mercy of the very market forces whose triumph they were supposed to applaud, a model of disruption in the cause of capital which has since been exported across the globe.

When New Labour came to power in 1997, the effects of the cultural and economic damage inflicted by the government of Mrs Thatcher in Britain's industrial towns were dealt with only in the most superficial way by a modernised party whose sympathies and personnel were increasingly metropolitan, with material deprivation in former mining or manufacturing areas mitigated by the new system of credit welfare, while the cultural wounds engendered by the loss of meaningful employment were left to fester. For Goodhart, given the 'unhistorical understanding of people and societies' (Goodhart 2017: 13) of the British centre left during its years in power – and, in a manner that was equally disingenuous but far more cruel, the Cameroonian right in the years running up to the referendum – the Brexit vote is symptomatic of the broken social contract at the heart of the current economic and political model, and the fundamental cultural divide which has grown ever wider in the absence of sincere political representation – a divide

whose different parties can hardly stand to be in each other's company. 'For middle class radicals,' he writes, 'in search of non-economic justifications for their radicalism—in gender politics or refugee support or environmentalism—the Somewhere voters have become an embarrassing historical legacy: the annoying, unsophisticated relatives one wishes one did not have to invite to family occasions' (79).

At the heart of that unsophisticated worldview is Farage's prescription for the discreteness of national identity and belonging, rooted in an idea of exclusion – of rights and entitlements conferred solely by citizenship and therefore inaccessible to non-citizens – an idea which for secular liberals is akin to a thought crime. In Goodhart's formulation, 'Orthodox liberalism's stress on choice and autonomy makes it uncomfortable with forms of identity and experience which are not chosen. It likes the idea of community in theory but does not see that a meaningful one excludes as well as includes' (13). And, of course, in the past few years the hypocrisy of the inclusive identity of EU citizenship has been exposed for the sham it is, as millions of non-EU migrants have found the old analogy of Fortress Europe still holds true, the more so the higher the numbers trying to get in. Indeed, one of the disingenuous though still plausible arguments made by those on the Leave side, such as Boris Johnson, during the referendum campaign revolved around the notion of a global Britain that would welcome all-comers (Gove *et al.* 2016), not just those it was obliged to admit from the EU club; it was a pledge made almost in the same breath as both Farage and Johnson himself were warning of the 80 million people from Turkey, a non-EU country, who would 'swamp' our shores after the country had gained entry to the EU (Perring 2016), despite Turkey's admission being an arrangement that neither Turkey nor the EU any longer desired by then. Such an egregious example of playing the race card both ways is a big reason why the campaign was as toxic and divisive, and effective, as it proved.

Their Charms Are All O'erthrown

Still today, advocates of a second referendum continue to bemoan the irrationality and potential for economic calamity of the original Leave vote, as if economic calculation played any significant part in why most Leavers voted the way they did. The high-minded warnings of Remainers about the economic damage of leaving the Single Market or the Customs Union are an echo of the calm certainties of neoliberal economists over many decades that in their economic decisions people are rational

actors concerned with their own self-interest, and as a result markets were efficient and could be left to regulate themselves (Ha-Joon Chang 2014: 125). But then the orthodox clerisy of modern capitalism, who helped turn the finance industry into ‘an item of faith, of near-mystical belief’ (13), *would* tend to think that economics was the uppermost concern in most people’s minds, wouldn’t they? It’s the ‘economy, stupid’ argument that for years they’ve been drumming into the heads of the leaders of all persuasions – especially those on the left who should have been suspicious but were too desperate for power to think through the long-term effects of the liberalising agenda. Through them, sections of the electorate who had resisted the obvious cupidity of the Thatcher/Reagan prospectus were persuaded by the apparent synthesis of Clinton and Blair’s Third Way, and the sound credentials of its champions, to follow the yellow brick road – at the end of which, they were told, was a bona fide Emerald City. But it is clear that for those who voted for Brexit the rational cautions of the Remain argument cut little ice – constructed as they were by George Osborne, the bankers’ champion who more did more than anyone to protect from legal sanction ‘the class of priests and magicians’ (Lanchester 2010: 13) responsible for the financial crisis of 2008 (Titus 2017), and to punish the most vulnerable in their place. In this context, a result which re-asserted the primacy of politics above economics in fact seems entirely rational, though Remainers have continued to harangue the Leave side with warnings of economic folly, despite the crisis and its lasting effects having exploded the credibility of economic nostrums like the efficient markets hypothesis among Leavers and Remainers alike. To the millions whose wages had been suppressed for years or for whom a secure, well-paid job was no more than folk memory, the wizard’s staff in the context of the global financial tempest was not so much a wand willingly broken as it was a useless (and also reckless) financial instrument, shown up for the fraud (in both literal and figurative senses) that perhaps it always was: not so much Prospero as Oz.

Given the years of economic injustice that followed the crash in the form of austerity, it is hardly surprising that large numbers of people stopped listening to the wisdom of established experts or have taken advantage of the alternative prescriptions now available through new media to form their own opinions, as Barry seems to have done in *The Season of the Boar*. And as this critical study will show, the resistance had been brewing for decades, both in the fictive analysis we find in the contemporary English novel and among critics such as Eagleton, who claims, somewhat cynically but even then not without good reason, that the ‘true soothsayers and clairvoyants are the

technical experts hired by international capitalism to peer into the entrails of the system and assure its rulers that their profits are safe for another twenty years' (Eagleton 1988: 26). Against this backdrop, it is not hard to see why the equally cynical, if reckless insistence of Leave campaigner Michael Gove (eight years on from the financial crisis and twenty-eight years since Eagleton's essay) that 'people in this country have had enough of experts' (Deacon 2016) found a large and ready audience, especially amongst a populace with Google and Facebook tailored newsfeeds at their fingertips to reassure them with alternative facts.

Return of the Native

In this important regard, Brexit is a fight for something more fundamental and potentially more reliable than the instability and duplicity of the economic realm – something which many on the Leave side have understood for decades, a cause of whose merits the leaders of those campaigns managed quite brilliantly to persuade many millions who may not have cared all that much before the referendum campaign began. But even the most devious of these self-styled patriots may not have been entirely clear in their own minds about the constituency among whom their message of freedom resonated the most, and even now it is my sense that the underlying malaise remains politically and culturally under-addressed. Indeed, notwithstanding a very public statement on the English question by David Cameron following the Scottish independence referendum in 2014 (Wintour 2014), in the public sphere it is barely diagnosed; and this despite the many books published on the subject in recent decades, both academic studies across the spectrum of culture and more popular appeals across the range of political opinion, from Roger Scruton, Billy Bragg *et al.* For while the United Kingdom may be the nation state that is leaving the European Union (or trying to without coming apart at the seams), the nation (though, crucially, not a state) which delivered that historic result was England – Orwell's 'everlasting animal stretching into the future and the past' (Orwell 1957: 91); a country neglectful (of its own history, of its fellow UK nations) and also neglected; one that 'needs to be constantly, anxiously represented, and reminded of its existence' (Brannigan 2003: 3), as John Brannigan has written of Orwell's own appeal to the English in wartime. In this context, reading fictional and non-fictional sources from the past thirty years, and further back still, it should not at all surprise us that the English should have seized the opportunity of

Brexit (as so many saw it), and by a margin that was larger (53.4 to 46.6%) than that of the overall vote.

At one point in *Autumn* we are fully introduced to Daniel's astonishingly precocious younger sister, who will die at the hands of the Nazis by the time she is twenty-one. As an eighteen-year-old nursing her mother in a place that would soon fall under Nazi rule, she sets out in a letter addressed to her brother in England the problem confronting liberal thinkers and writers in any period of civil unrest such as the late 1930s or indeed our own. The challenge is one of realistic hope, which is '*a matter of how to deal with the negative acts towards human beings by other human beings in the world, remembering that they and we are all human, that nothing human is alien to us, the foul and the fair*' (Smith 2016: 190). Indeed so. Such dispassion – the forbearance with which, in Auden's words, to 'Dully put up with all the wrongs of Man' (Auden 1966: 125) – is fundamental to the *modus operandi* of any serious novelist and also a principal task of any cultural critic or politician with a genuine desire to see the world as it is, not as they would like it to be. In that vein, examining the origins of 'Brexit's apparent rejection of civilized values' (Gardiner 2018: 114) in the sources that follow, I will address the disembodied spirits evoked in Smith's novel, casting them in the common forms of the needs, frustrations and longing for meaning of the people who collectively placed the country in the predicament we now face.

2. A Nation but Not a State

At one point in his autobiography, *Flying Free*, Nigel Farage tips his hat to Margaret Thatcher's infamous speech given to the College of Europe in Bruges in September 1988, citing the axiomatic statement which, repeated so often by Eurosceptics over the past thirty years, has assumed the status of a mantra: "'We have not rolled back the frontiers of the state in Britain only to see them reimposed at a European level'" (Thatcher in Farage 2011: 58). As the previous chapter demonstrated, the ideological objections to, or procedural reservations about, Europe from right and left respectively stem from a defence of the nation state that seems common to both. But as Thatcher's line reminds us, 'state', the second part of that composite noun, is a concept to which the neoliberal right are deeply hostile, whether at national or supranational level, while on the left, for the advocates of so-called Lexit, the ability of states to act in the interests of their own populations – unimpeded, for example, by constraints on the use of state aid in supporting key national industries – is a fundamental policy tool. Indeed, for Stuart Hall, under social democracy, 'the expansion of the state is understood as ... virtually synonymous with "socialism"' (Hall 1979: 18), and it is certainly true that the state's permission to act in the national interest stems from a willed civic identity with which the left is comfortable, which is subtly reconfigured in every democratic vote – a structure of conscious consent in whose universal extension the left was instrumental and whose further development still underpins progressive politics today. But as a form of unconscious, unchosen identity which the right has used time and again, as they are now internationally, to undermine class consciousness and the collective consciousnesses of more marginal groups, the irrational longings of the soft tissue of 'nation' are a far less comfortable fit, a condition of unease articulated by Billy Bragg, who has written of resenting 'the arbitrary power that patriotism claimed over my soul – the notion that because of my place of birth I should naturally share the same pride and prejudices as everyone else in my tribe' (Bragg 2006: 2).

Bragg's *The Progressive Patriot* (2006) is a thoughtful, even courageous examination of the meaning of Englishness, which at the time he wrote it raised eyebrows among friends on the internationalist left (5) – sincere anti-fascists suspicious of the exclusions and potential cruelties implicit in the clear boundaries of belonging, or of not being allowed to belong, to any given group. Such reactions exist on a spectrum

of left opinion that at one extreme includes the sniggering contempt with which George Orwell caricatured the English intelligentsia of the 1930s in 'England Your England', their apparent lack of compatriotism emboldening the forces of Fascism to imagine that they could shape the world with impunity (Orwell 1957: 86). Orwell's polemic was written in time of war, when fighting for one's country and fighting for freedom were literally synonymous, but even shorn of that context, it has a piquancy that goes right to the heart of the cultural divide Brexit has exposed not only in the country as a whole but, as I found in Hastings on the day of the referendum, in the core support for Britain's main party of the left. Exemplifying what Orwell saw as the intelligentsia's 'severance from the common culture of the country' (85) was the incident during the 2014 Rochester and Strood by-election campaign when current Shadow Foreign Secretary Emily Thornberry sneeringly tweeted a photo she had taken of a white van parked in the driveway of a house in north Kent, whose upstairs windows were draped with flags of St George (Donald 2014). More than just terrible politics, it was also a classic example of the attitude Orwell describes, the sense that in 'left-wing circles it is always felt that there is something slightly disgraceful in being an Englishman' (85).

Though politically a deliberately ambivalent figure, the narrator of *The Season of the Boar* feels a similar unease at the St George's flags being flown during the Euro 2016 football tournament that happened to coincide with the referendum campaign. Embarrassed by the tribalism that is, at times, a component of national belonging, and pointedly aware, given the toxic political moment, of where such a powerful unconscious force can lead – aware, though dimly, of where it might lead him – he squirms at reminders of an inner need to belong to something larger than himself, which for many people is embodied in an uncomplicated identification with representative institutions like the national football team. For the leftist intellectuals Orwell despises, such an identification could never be uncomplicated, embarrassed as they were in their own day by Britain's imperial hegemony, just as many on the left are still embarrassed, understandably, by that same history today. But Great Britain was itself a political construct, the first act in the creation of a global empire in which the English nation was in some ways as trampled upon as the occupied nations whose subsequent histories under empire gave them just cause to resent the imperial state; indeed Michael Gardiner goes so far as to refer to England as Britain's 'last colony' (Gardiner 2012: 163). At face value a bizarre, almost offensive moral equivalence, it gains traction by virtue of the fact that, unlike other postcolonial nations, until June 2016 (and certainly until the

Scottish referendum of two years earlier) the idea that the English might have any cause for grievance seemed absurd to mainstream political opinion, with English nationhood a taboo subject of importance only to those even further to the right than the ‘fruitcakes, loonies and closet racists’ of UKIP in David Cameron’s complacent formulation. Indeed, by the early 2010s the national had become a shameful subject, even among many Tories, leading Gardiner to suggest that England had become ‘lost inside and culturally underground’ (50) within a ‘state-nationalism [which] without its expansive mission [had] recreated the conditions of empire within the territory itself’ (163).

However, as the last three years have shown – and recent polling of Tory party members has put it in stark numbers (Smith 2019) – no matter what internationalists of the left might hope, the nation is not only an idea that cannot be wished away, but has recently reassumed an almost totemic significance as an object of faith and devotion among many thousands of otherwise rational individuals living in one of the most secular national polities in the whole of human history. Just as Nigel Farage has personally lost seven Westminster by-elections over a twenty-year period, yet time and again has risen from the dead to triumph in successive EU polls before playing perhaps the crucial role in 2016 in delivering the most seismic political outcome in modern UK history, so the nation – specifically, as those poll numbers show, the English nation – rises up to haunt an official discourse that refuses to acknowledge it; a political zombie demanding its due. As we have seen, for Farage as for the millions who support him it is the nation that ‘makes sense of and commands the loyalty and identification of its inhabitants’ (Farage 2011: 289); that confers legitimacy on the state and not the other way around, an important distinction that even Goodhart fails to make clear, even if he implicitly understands it.

Although he does know the difference, Farage can also get in a muddle about the constituency for whom he speaks, frequently making the common conflation of the UK, Britain and England with one another that results from the constitutional confusion which has existed since 1707. Throughout his book, he sometimes refers to the United Kingdom or his ‘deep love for Britain’ (Farage 2011: 232) through the prism of the kind of Home Counties Englishness in which he was raised, with supposedly British archetypes – ‘symbols like cricket, warm beer, village churches and crumpets’ (232) – being in reality the stereotypical markers of a certain kind of middle-class, rural, southern Englishness which has been the dominant idea of cultural Englishness since at least the late 19th century (Kumar 2003: 211). This confusion of British and English – a

misidentification also made by John Major in defending Englishness following the signing of the Maastricht Treaty (226–7) – is the product of three centuries during which the constructed British ego has been obliged to suppress an English id that was compliant only as long as its needs were being met. But as Peter Kalliney reminds us, the process of decolonisation and the concomitant loss of ego brought with it psychic conflicts in the realms of politics and culture that ‘forced the English to turn inward, to perform a thorough inventory of Englishness in the absence of an expansive imperial imaginary’ (Kalliney 2006: 6). In the period of several decades since decolonisation, as Paul Gilroy has shown, Britain and also England, as the main carrier of Britishness, have experienced ‘bouts of racial and national anxiety’ arising from ‘melancholic responses to the loss of imperial pre-eminence and the painful demand to adjust the life of the national collective to a severely reduced sense of itself as a global power’ (Gilroy, xxxvii). In fact, given the amount of shrinkage, it is perhaps surprising how limited any nativist demands have been in the decades leading up to 2016, though clearly the state and a broadly supportive press have had a vested interest in suppressing the scale of the difficulties experienced by immigrants and British minority communities throughout the period of mass migration since 1948. Instead they have preferred to demonise extreme exceptions to prove an otherwise tolerant rule – reflecting a national identity which on the one hand has genuinely changed, and on the other is continually in danger of being dragged back to the past, as can be seen in the hostility toward immigrants and foreigners whipped up by both the Leave campaigns, whose legacy has been a rising incidence of hate crimes in the period since then. If this recidivist racial animus invokes a pattern of behaviour that had seemed increasingly to belong to the past, one nostalgic lesson to take from the entire Brexit phenomenon must be something like William Faulkner’s observation about the past being neither dead nor even past.

Certainly, the hostility to outsiders that erupted in 2016 did not come from nowhere. During the two decades after decolonisation, the main political expression of what at the time was widespread anti-immigrant sentiment came from Enoch Powell, the champion of political Englishness and Nigel Farage’s great hero since the time he had seen an unrepentant Powell, by then a political pariah, speak at Dulwich College in 1982 (Farage 2011: 25). Indeed, the rise of Faragism during the past two decades reflects Tom Nairn’s assessment of Powellism half a century ago – as a symptom of the declining legitimacy of Britain’s basic constitutional settlement, enabling us ‘to perceive just how advanced the rot has become’ (Nairn 1977: 286). In the course of his

argument, Nairn makes both prognoses as well as diagnoses, but his economic reading of the future and the place Powellian priorities would play in shaping it is well wide of the mark – indicating just how often the left underestimate the appeal of the individualist right to a large swathe of the population without fixed political sympathies; just as by a similar measure they also consistently overestimate the desire for socialism among the same group of ‘floating voters’ who tilt the result of any election either one way or another. Indeed, a few years after he was writing, viewing the causes of the rot as very different to those Nairn had perceived, Margaret Thatcher brought in the very ‘lunacies of Friedmannite [sic] monetary economics and an abstract reverence for pure capitalism’ (294) which Powell had long espoused and which Nairn uses to demonstrate his supposed irrelevance. And while the English nativism that Powell also stood for was contained during the following decades, given the increasing severity with which the issue of immigration that Powell had pursued into the political wilderness would be treated by both Conservative and future Labour governments, this only bears out Gilroy’s analysis and that of Stuart Hall at the dawn of the Thatcher decade that Powell had already won (Hall 1979: 19). It was in this period that the 1981 Nationality Act, an infamous piece of legislation among immigrant or former immigrant communities, passed into law. Two decades after the last of the major colonies had been handed back, and after several decades of discontent over immigration among white British communities, whipped up in large part by Powell himself, the 1981 Act, in reforming the British Nationality Act 1948, rescinded the status of ‘citizen of the United Kingdom and the colonies’ – a status which in any case Ian Baucom insists (and the recent Windrush scandal has borne out his assertion) was dangerously uncertain for some (Baucom 1999: 10). Essentially restricting citizenship to those born in Britain, the 1981 Act was a move which, in an echo of what EU citizens are currently going through (Rau 2018: 32), made immigrants from former colonies officially less welcome, though the political decision was made at state level – British not English – the only arena in which it could be enacted.

With the Scottish devolution referendum of 1979 having failed to support the proposed devolved assembly (though, significantly, for lack of turnout, not a majority among those who bothered to vote), the ‘rot’ Nairn refers to was not yet sufficiently advanced to awaken the English to the extent of their disenfranchisement. Britishness itself became the cultural and political territory most keenly contested over the following decades, encompassing everything from Cool Britannia to the BNP. As Peter

Boxall and Bryan Cheyette have pointed out (Boxall and Cheyette 2016: 8), in the field of literature this move had been announced as early as 1980, in Bill Buford's essay 'The End of the English Novel' in the third issue of *Granta* magazine, whose closing passage is a damning judgement not only on a certain kind of English literary production but on the same cultural conditions of imperial rise and fall which allowed it first to flourish and then, in Buford's view, to wither on the vine. Despairing of the parochialism and lack of adventure he saw in the contemporary English novel at the dawn of the Thatcher era, he pronounced judgment on English (though clearly not British) post-imperial presumption, describing the English novel as 'characterized by the self-depictions of its maker's dominance: the novel of sense and sensibility ... informed by the authority of belonging'; on the other hand, today he insisted, 'the imagination resides along the peripheries; it is spoken through a minority discourse, with the dominant tongue re-appropriated, re-commanded, and importantly re-invigorated. It is, at last, the end of the English novel and the beginning of the British one' (Buford 1980).

Something of the same confusion we have seen with Farage is also at work here, at least when looked at from the precarity of our current position. Dissatisfied with what he saw as the narrowness of English literary production, and perhaps succumbing to the what Jed Esty calls 'myths of a fallen heritage' (Esty 2004: 1) in a time of imperial contraction, in a move which resonated across the entire field of culture, like the politicians who drew up the Act of Union nearly three centuries earlier, Buford instrumentalised the postcolonial vagueness of British identity to invent a wholly new literary tradition embracing a wider field of more imaginative writing from 'the peripheries'. That there is no doubt that the emergence during the subsequent decade of a host of brilliant and ethnically non-English but culturally British writers such as Salman Rushdie, Kazuo Ishiguro and Timothy Mo – some though not all of them from former colonies of empire – greatly enriched the tradition that was supposed to have been replaced seemed to justify his decision. But at the heart of Buford's gambit is a latent despair with negative echoes of Powell's own prescription – that Englishness as an identity, as a historical condition, as a set of cultural codes, was irredeemably narrow and exclusive, notwithstanding that, as previously stated, the closing of doors which the 1981 Act makes manifest was the initiative of a British government and was passed by a British parliament to boot (cf. James 2016: 435–49).

The new category of British literature, in being so open to the postcolonial diaspora and its infinite territorial and cultural variety, was symptomatic of a time and a shift of

political sympathies that reclaimed the Union Jack from the National Front and the lingering post-imperial melancholia that throughout the 1960s and 1970s had provided Powell with such a ready audience. But in regaining a new, outwardly confident identity that was closely tied to the growing hegemony of cosmopolitan London and the resurgent power of finance – in which Britain’s capital city became once again the global hub as it had been at the height of empire – the English stamp on British identity receded from a place of pre-eminence that while officially unacknowledged was widely understood, leaving it in a cultural limbo which in some ways echoed what US Secretary of State Dean Acheson had said of Britain in 1962 in the immediate aftermath of decolonisation (Wheatcroft 2013).

But if England had not exactly lost an empire while not yet finding a role, its centrality in the defining tropes of Britishness was being challenged by the cultural vibrancy of postcolonial contributions to British national life, as well as the increasing determination of the Celtic fringe to distinguish itself from the ‘sense and sensibility’ of the English core. This drive of the smaller UK nations to claim more autonomy from the British state was of course recognised by the devolution referendums of 1997 and the establishment of the Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish assemblies two years later. The solicitude of the Blair government towards these countries – where, it must be said, much of Labour’s parliamentary power resided – along with its embrace of multicultural Britain, ticked various progressive boxes, even though in cultural undertakings such as the Millennium Dome, it became ever more apparent that, as Michael Gardiner put it in 2012, ‘the interpolated state culture that seems to belong to everyone increasingly belongs to no one’ (Gardiner 2012: 140). Moreover (and mostly from a sense that as the supposedly dominant partner it had no cause for complaint), England was neglected; the attempt some years later to establish regional assemblies was bound to fail because the functions devolved were next to meaningless – as John Denham, a minister in the Labour administration of the time, has since admitted (Denham 2018) – and were simply ‘a way of fending off the national threat’ (Gardiner 2012: 155). The rejection of these toothless bodies by the people for whom they were intended showed not that no one cared but that no one was fooled by these simulations of local power.

In the meantime, in a classical Freudian split, ‘the [English] national as an idea [went] on being described in threatening terms (the “far right”), even while British “banal nationalism” was being aggressively pushed in official discourse’ (140) – almost as if Englishness in being unconscionable must be somehow to blame for any injuries

suffered over time by the other component constituencies of Britishness. Reacting to this absence of the national, which as has Gardiner presciently observed, ‘will tend to reintervene as cultural and political action’ (11) if repressed, a welter of new writing on England emerged during that same devolutionary period. This included polemics by conservative commentators such as Roger Scruton, who in *The Need for Nations* (2004) pushes a paternalistic idea of England and Englishness for which there was still widespread sympathy among the English themselves, encapsulated in the view that ‘the British people can draw on a national identity that has shown itself more able to withstand shocks and acts of aggression than any other in Europe: the identity that is centred on England. To be British is to partake of that identity’ (Scruton 2004: 21). The alternative leftist argument advanced by Billy Bragg and Peter Ackroyd saw Englishness as a cultural and political identity that needed liberating from post-imperial self-importance, for which a progressive case needed to be made, lest reactionaries seize hold of it as indeed they have. Indeed, Ackroyd’s thesis, in attempting to take back from the Britain of Cool Britannia a plausible mongrel, multicultural English identity, insists, like Bragg, that ‘Englishness is the principle of diversity itself’ (Ackroyd 2002: 448); and this after a lengthy and convincing survey of historical English cultural plurality that ought to be helpful in drawing up a new constitutional and economic settlement to put the resurgent nativist narrative back in its box.

Before this can happen, however, more fundamental English grievances need to be faced. In that regard, and in the context of this study, among a body of critical writing on the place of English literature within a rapidly changing national dispensation, it is Gardiner’s *The Return of England in English Literature* (2012) that addresses most directly the loss of identity and purpose among the English that inflected many of the signature debates during the EU referendum. Insisting that ‘The claim that England is something unspeakable must be rejected’ (Gardiner 2012: 167), he enunciates the need, already described, ‘to address the disconnect between England the nation and English as a carrier of the needs of the British state’ (4), writing of ‘the beginnings of the re-creation of England as an affective nation’ (2), occasioned by the loss of empire over the course of the twentieth century and ‘eventually forced by the signs of the breakup of the British state’ (2). And while apparently accepting Buford’s diagnosis that the ‘loss’ of English literature may be part of the price that is paid as a result of this process, far from kicking England when it’s down, he sees crisis as opportunity: that ‘to lose

English literature may be to regain England' (8), allowing a neglected and almost forgotten country to emerge.

Selling England by the Pound

Something of the same narrative of national decline as a necessary precursor to subsequent renewal is the basic trajectory of Julian Barnes's *England, England*, published in 1998 in the midst of the devolutionary process that put England's missing identity into such sharp relief. It was around the same time, the turn of the millennium, that a rash of polemical writing on England emerged, expressing a similar despair across the political spectrum about the loss of England and the scale of the sell-out (and the sell-off) of the country by politicians of both left and right. Roger Scruton, a traditional shire Tory, was among the first to call out the betrayal in terms that would later be taken up by writers of the left such as Billy Bragg and Paul Kingsnorth, lambasting first his own party for pandering to 'the capitalists, the grandees and the landowners' (Scruton 2000: 256), leaving ordinary people like himself to 'live in the ruins of a country house whose squandered capital funded yachts in the Bahamas, grouse moors in Scotland and villas in Nice' (256), before turning his ire on 'the spectacle of a Labour Party committed to "globalisation", indifferent to the fate of rural England, and managed by smooth "consultants" who might next year be working for the other side, which is in fact the same side under another description' (257).

England, England, written through the juncture between the failing Thatcherite Tory administration of John Major and the young free-market social democratic pretender of New Labour, is alive to the political–corporate merger Scruton depicts, during a period notorious for the revolving doors that kept appearing not only between politics and big business but between a dominant political doctrine and another, more uncertain set of values which did little to question its basic assumptions. The novel is a bleak satire – Barnes's preferred term is 'semi-farce' (Barnes/*Observer* 1998) – on the potential of the new social democratic politics (the sheep's clothing to the wolf of neoliberal economics, enabling neoliberalism's ultimate capture of the full gamut of mainstream political opinion) to drain the meaning, the specificity, from a culture under the guise of economic development. Being an English writer Barnes settles on England for his scrutiny, and it's a subject that perhaps fits the English predicament more than most places. As the largest European nation without its own parliament, and as the one which had so willingly set the pattern of surrender to laissez-faire economics which has since

been followed around the globe, England is all the more plausible as the victim of the corporate tourist coup transacted in the novel by the tycoon Sir Jack Pitman, as well as the understandably aggrieved nation whose people, or at least those with a grudge the size of Brexit, could feel doubly denied, both at Westminster and in the EU.

The novel, which examines the question of authenticity that is central to the experience of neoliberal postmodernity, revolves around Sir Jack's scheme to buy and then politically secede the Isle of Wight from the UK, and economically from England. Having done so, he stocks it with replicas of English history and identity – quintessences of Englishness from cricket to Buckingham Palace to the White Cliffs of Dover – so that foreign tourists don't need to spend long hours traversing the real England to see Stonehenge, the Houses of Parliament, etc., but can view them all in replica form, inauthentically clustered together in the tight geographical space and modern leisure experience of the Island, as the Isle of Wight is referred to, but rebranded as England, England. (Intriguingly, the idea of the Isle of Wight seceding from the UK, though derived from an old adage [James 2016: 444], had already been floated, tongue-in-cheek but also somewhat naively, by Eric Hobsbawm [Hobsbawm 1990: 8] as a notional example of the ease with which nations can be created.) In place of the anonymous abstractions of the real-life Millennium Dome, stripped of even symbolic particularity, Pitman's insular creation is built on symbols shorn of context, an equally meaningless replacement for real experience and authentic culture. That England, England, filled exclusively with ersatz tokens of history and tradition, proves such a success – sucking in the majority of visitors who would once have gone to the mainland for their dose of Englishness but now neglect to bother – indicates how postmodern people have become so unmoored that they now overwhelmingly favour convenience over reality; 'that if given the option between an "inconvenient original" or a convenient replica, a high proportion of tourists would opt for the latter' (Barnes 1998: 181).

They also favour business efficiency over democracy. The Island's residents are more than happy with the prosperity that has flowed into what had been one of the poorest parts of the UK prior to its transformation, echoing the observation of Mark, Sir Jack's Project Manager, that 'In the modern world, stability and long-term economic prosperity are provided more effectively by the transnational corporation than by the old-style nation-state' (128). This echoes the settled opinion of Mustapha Mond in *Brave New World* and, given the way they behave toward both consumers and

sovereign governments, also that of the chief executives of many of today's giant tech companies, who constantly promote themselves as the consumer's friend while seeking to dodge the responsibilities they are obliged by those consumer-citizens' elected representatives to observe. It is also the opinion of the more extreme federal wing of the EU, if not in explicit statements then most certainly in the way it behaves towards nation states who break the rules, even if, as in the case of Greece in 2015, there is a clear majority willing to repudiate the holy writ of Brussels (cf. Varoufakis 2017).

In mitigation, the EU's social protections and regulations are the reason Sir Jack has no intention of taking his statelet into the union, fearful that 'The effects of their employment law and banking regulations, to name but two areas, would be disastrous' (Barnes 1998: 173). His tautologous England, where, 'in place of the traditional cold-fish English welcome, you will find international-style friendliness' (184) is a money-making monster, a European Singapore of so many Brexit fantasies; as a fictitious UBS analyst gushes to the Wall Street Journal, 'It's a pure market state. There's no interference from government because there is no government. So there's no foreign or domestic policy, only economic policy. It's a pure interface between buyers and sellers without the market being skewed by central government with its complex agendas and election promises' (183). What is being described could be any number of offshore international tax havens, and most of the real ones are British Overseas Territories, or even Crown dependencies not far from the English coast – treasure islands (cf. Shaxson 2012: 103–23) whose regulation by EU law Britain has consistently blocked (albeit that the EU tolerates similar, freebooting behaviour among its own member states) (cf. *Süddeutsche Zeitung* 2017). But this one being in the Solent and going by the name of England (and then again) begs unavoidable questions about the corporate capture of contemporary Britain, and especially nearby England – the real thing – going back to the 1980s when the surrender of economic control by government appalled even 'One Nation' Tories such as former PM Harold Macmillan (Jack 2013).

As the Brexit vote made clear, and as Barnes reminds us, this process of national prostitution has had consequences beyond the realm of economics. At an early stage in the development of Sir Jack's 'Project', a 'French intellectual' is hired to address its Coordinating Committee on the cultural and ethical parameters they need to take into account, citing Guy Debord from *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967) – 'All that was once directly lived has become mere representation' – and dismissing "as sentimental and inherently fraudulent all yearnings for what is dubiously termed the 'original'"

(Barnes 1998: 55). Of course, in a commercialised world, this is easier said than done, and having given his lecture, the French intellectual betrays the emotional fraudulence of his own argument by using his free time in London, before jetting off – via Frankfurt, naturally – to his next theoretical parley, to pick up some genuine, high-end British goods from some of the capital's most traditional retail outlets.

Nevertheless, in the hyper-marketised world of neoliberal postmodernity where everything has a price and anything can be sold (as the continuing privatisation of British state assets over more than three decades has shown), the contemporary focus on the customer – on the experience of the receiver – which the morality of the market makes an absolute virtue, threatens constantly to disturb the very emotion or set of cultural circumstances that have led the creator to want to carry out their activity, so that the act of creation is continually threatened by a loss of meaning that arises from giving too much mind to its reception, aborting the idea of authentic expression almost before conception let alone birth. But notwithstanding the deadening self-consciousness of postmodern cultural life, the need for truth and authenticity can never be completely crushed. Even in England, England, the replica for the original, where cultural ossification is the whole point, a persistent vegetative state built in to the business model, the actors hired to offer unchallenging versions of famous English figures begin inhabiting characters such as Dr Johnson or Robin Hood and His Merrie Men so completely that they end up going native, with all the vices as well of the virtues of the supposed originals; thus they revolt against their conditions of employment (209, 224) and – in the case of Robin Hood and his 'Band', as they are called – against the family-friendly version of freedom fighter they are paid to depict. As a metaphor for the populist revolution of Brexit, a repressed reality whose unconscious content an increasingly neurotic consensus can no longer hope to contain, it is parodically indicative of the pratfall politics of the past three years.

But unlike Brexit Britain, in the Brave New Olde Worlde of the Island these are manageable problems, and as the twice-named England's star goes on rising, inspiring 'a bright and modern patriotism' (202), Old England, its singular source material, 'had been in a state of free-fall, had become an economic and moral waste-pit' (202), having 'progressively shed power, territory, wealth, influence and population. Old England was to be compared disadvantageously to some backward province of Portugal or Turkey. Old England had cut its own throat and was lying in the gutter beneath a spectral gas-light, its only function as a dissuasive example to others' (251). It's a prescient insight,

given that any talk of Grexit, Frexit or Itexit over the past three years of Brexit humiliation has dried up in the mouths of those who once agitated for a similar national fate.

In *England, England* the catalyst for this calamitous decline seems to have been the rise of Sir Jack's tourist honey pot, which drains the old country of revenues in the one viable industry it still enjoys, though clearly there are deeper causes in Barnes's mind, most palpably a sense of exhaustion (as identified by Nairn, Gilroy *et al.*) after centuries in which England, bedecked in British armour, had punched well above its modest geodemographic weight. The king who follows Queen Elizabeth II into the top job is co-opted along with his family into the plastic pageantry of England, England, but even as monarch of the old kingdom, he had become painfully aware 'how small his realm was compared to that which his ancestors once ruled ... [having] shrunk back to the size it had been when Old King Alfred burnt the cakes' (160).

As Old England spirals into decline, at the mercy of currency speculators as well as the loss of tourist dollars, the former vassal states of Scotland and Wales experience an unexpected revival of the kind which has indeed transpired since devolution, while prime English properties are bought as second homes by wealthy Europeans (a process which in fact has happened in spades in the two decades since the novel was published, with the identity of the buyers being predominantly the new money of Russia and the Far East). Echoing the worst fears of ardent Brexiters, but confined specifically to the historical nation which in their own minds is synonymous with Britain, 'There were some who saw a conspiracy in Europe's attitude to a nation which had once contested the primacy of the continent; there was talk of historical revenge' (251). Indeed, Old England's demise and its treatment by an unforgiving EU is fully in line with the persecutory fantasies that drove ideologues like Farage to agitate for Brexit in the first place, there being 'enough documents leaking from Brussels and Strasbourg to confirm that many high officials regarded Old England less as a suitable case for emergency funding than as an economic and moral lesson' (251). If this idea of a punitive Brussels has some basis in reality, its legalistic stance toward Brexit over the past three years to some eyes an example not of procedural exactitude but of disingenuous pedantry designed to frustrate the British government into a disadvantageous compromise, it is also the image of the union which was pedalled by the right wing (principally through the mendacious 'journalism' of Boris Johnson) even at the height of British influence in Europe. This rather suggests that whether inside or outside the club, the spectre (or

perhaps Spectre in the sense Ian Fleming conceived it) of a bogeyman European Union will continue to haunt the most febrile minds whatever the future brings, a phobia or pathology which talking, rather than cure it, only further exacerbates. Perhaps the worst of the careless and self-deluded David Cameron's many calamitous errors was to believe that the fanatics on the Tory right would stop banging on about Europe if he gave them what they wanted, and even if they won.

Jeremy Black gives a sense of the role Europe plays in the political consciousness of so many who were so successfully persuaded by the Brexit cheerleaders to vote to leave the EU, seeing European integration as far more a cause of dislocation for many Britons than the loss of Empire which so many Baby Boomers who voted to leave, like Vic in *The Season of the Boar*, were nonetheless too young to have been affected by in real time (Black 2018: 16–17). Echoing the more reasonable of the Brexit arguments (and similar points being made at the turn of the century by Roger Scruton), he writes that 'a combination of the communitarian solutions pushed politically, the inroads of European federalism, and a lack of trust in the individual, has transformed the political and legal culture of the country. Parliamentary government was eroded, or at the very least altered, by the rise of European institutions, notably the European Parliament and courts, and by the incorporation of European law. Accountability changed' (16). In the British Isles, these changes were accepted by what in the years since devolution has become a quasi-federal state, the United Kingdom, whose initial marriage of convenience and subsequent growth in significant ways mirrored the construction and expansion of the European community of nations now known as the EU. This may be one major reason why Scotland, always a subservient partner within the UK and thus well used to having political and economic solutions imposed from on high without the power to shape them, voted so heavily to remain. But England is different. The English know themselves to be first among equals and in the case of Brexit have asserted that political primacy not only over the UK's component nations but against the very idea of a composite polity of four peoples, distinct but equal.

Black identifies the confusion of British and English in the minds of foreigners but also those of the English themselves, and differentiates between them by pointing to events such as Magna Carta, important to English law and pre-modern history, which have neither any constitutional status nor much cultural resonance for Scots (13). But one could also point to other emblems of historical identity evoked in the wake of Brexit, such as Henry VIII's divorce from the Church of Rome, which having taken

place before 1707 (and especially those from before 1603) are specifically English affairs and form the historical background to the myth of Merrie England that has fuelled so many Hollywood depictions and thus the expectations of tourists who come here. In Barnes's *England, England*, Old England is no longer a tourist magnet but has sunk back to a version of that erstwhile agrarian utopia precisely because of its economic and cultural decline. Indeed, in a telling inversion of the debates on immigration which have become so virulent and so mainstream since the novel was written, in Barnes's alternative history Englishmen are forced by their European neighbours to lie in the beds they have made, as 'the Old English were low on the list of desirable immigrants, being thought to bring with them the taint of failure. Europe, in a sub-clause of the Treaty of Verona, withdrew from the Old English the right to free movement within the Union' (Barnes 1998: 252), just as the Brexiters insist must apply to those coming from Europe to the UK after Brexit. The new restrictions notwithstanding, Martha Cochrane, her corporate career at an end after being ousted from the role of Chief Executive of the Island, a position which at one point she had prised by means of blackmail from the hands of Sir Jack Pitman, spends several years wandering the Continent, before returning to her now much-diminished homeland to find 'a culture of voluntary austerity' (256), 'the long-agreed goals of the nation – economic growth, political influence, military capacity and moral superiority ... now abandoned' (253).

Indeed, the new political leaders of Old England, renamed Anglia to reflect its regressed character and status, proclaim self-sufficiency as they 'extracted the country from the European Union – negotiating with such obstinate irrationality that they were eventually paid to depart' (253) – an autarchic dream scenario for the more romantic on the Leave side, were it ever to happen. In fact, the new isolation turns out to be unexpectedly splendid for anyone weary of the adventurism of English and subsequent British history since Drake, as the remodelled nation state 'declared a trade barrier against the rest of the world, forbade foreign ownership of either land or chattels within the territory, and disbanded the military' (253). Of course, such a vision is perhaps closer to a future envisioned by Jeremy Corbyn or even Caroline Lucas than to the buccaneering fantasies of the Brexit ultras, though something like it may end up being the net result of their own incompetent design.

Old England in Barnes's formulation is reduced to the status of a pre-industrial backwater, but life is better for the new localism and simplicity, as the infrastructure and

ambition of a modern state is supplanted by a reviving rural Eden. In echoes of Richard Jeffries's early post-apocalyptic novel *After London, or Wild England* (1885), and indeed of William Morris's neo-medieval Marxian utopia, the twenty-second-century post-revolutionary England depicted in his *News from Nowhere* (1890), Barnes evokes the idyllic pastoral wilderness re-emerging in a now-undermanaged countryside. Viewed from the cockpits of a cod Battle of Britain squadron flying over Anglia from nearby England, England, 'Life below seemed slow and small. Comfortably large fields had been redivided into narrow strips; wind-pumps turned industriously; a reclaimed canal offered up a reflection of painted traffic and straining barge-horses.... The pilots had seen what they wanted to see: quaintness, diminution, failure' (254–5).

It's the nightmare scenario evoked so often by many on the Remain side, but what follows in Barnes's longer description reveals one of the deeper motivations behind the Leave vote, especially for those on the affluent, rural right – though also one whose nostalgic localism, echoed in mid-twentieth-century novels such as Orwell's *Coming Up For Air* and autobiographical narratives such as Laurie Lee's *Cider with Rosie* (1959), chimes sympathetically with many on the anti-global, environmentalist left. Giving any committed globalist pause for thought, Barnes writes of those same gloating airmen that

Quieter changes evaded them. Over the years the seasons had returned to Anglia, and become pristine. Crops were once again the product of local land, not of air-freight: spring's first potatoes were exotic, autumn's quince and mulberry decadent ... The seasons, being untrustworthy, were more respected, and their beginnings marked by pious ceremonies ... Chemicals drained from the land, the colours grew gentler ... Hares multiplied; deer and boar were released into the woods from game farms ... Common land was re-established ... hedgerows were replanted. Butterflies again justified the thickness of the old butterfly books; migratory birds which for generations had passed swiftly over the toxic isle now stayed longer, and some decided to settle (255).

Country-cide

In the form of 'retrospect as aspiration' (Williams 1973: 42), as Raymond Williams reminds us, this radical evocation of a more equitable and settled rural past is a reaction to contemporary disruption and loss of control repeated by writers in every generation since the use and ownership of land has been at issue (9–12), a structure of feeling which can be seen to motivate two historical novels, Jim Crace's *Harvest* and Paul

Kingsnorth's *The Wake*, published in the years leading up to the 2016 referendum. So while the pastoral closing passages of *England, England* evince a visionary awareness (given that it was published more than twenty years ago) of the damage which had already been done to the English countryside by intensive agriculture since the commitment made by the Attlee government in the aftermath of war to be self-sufficient in food, the process of which this legislation was a part has been a continuing source of social anomie over the entire history not only of the UK and Great Britain but also its older component kingdoms.

Nonetheless, if the enduring nostalgia of the older pastoral literature of Thomas Hardy or William Cobbett lamented unjust social conditions and changing ways of life, the past almost half a century since the publication of Williams's *The Country and the City* have seen an assault on the English countryside that now threatens a more fundamental ecology which survived more or less intact into modern times. Certainly, by 1998 when *England, England* was published, the problem Barnes points to was both recognised and understood, as we shall see, by many who had observed changes in the countryside during the late twentieth century, while still being ignored by a New Labour administration as supportive of the needs of industrial farming as the Tories had been before them. It was only on the headline-grabbing cultural issue of fox-hunting that, reassured by a huge parliamentary majority, the Blair government felt confident enough to invoke the ire of rural voters in what were safe Tory seats, concluding that the hunting ban would play well with the urban liberals they needed to woo to maintain their broad electoral base. In reaction, those rural voters, normally among the least militant social groups, were sufficiently enraged to march through London in their hundreds of thousands in March 1998 (*BBC* 1998), and again in September 2002 (*BBC* 2002), under the banner of the Countryside Alliance, in protest at what they saw as the cultural arrogance of metropolitan New Labour. But the decimation of English ecology has continued apace, perpetrated by some of the same people who took up the cudgels to defend age-old practice and custom through the Countryside Alliance (Monbiot 2012).

Indeed, the damage done by industrial farming has been so disastrous that in the year of the referendum the UK – and especially England, that emblem of rural greenness and pleasantness – was identified in the RSPB's 2016 State of Nature report as one of the most nature-depleted countries on earth (189th out of 218 nations) (Harvey/Packham 2018) – depredations of the basic ecosystem by industrial farming which writers such as

George Monbiot have railed against for years. One of the most passionate of these jeremiads, *The Moth Snowstorm* (2015) by Michael McCarthy, paints an idyll of abundance that McCarthy recalls from his Birkenhead childhood in the 1950s (McCarthy 2015: 12–13), a richness of numbers as well as species diversity which he has seen disappear from landscapes all across the country over the past six decades of intensive farming, with more than half of all UK species having declined since 1970. And though the Common Agricultural Policy is only one factor among a number of reasons for this natural decline, its association with forces beyond our control is another unconscious proxy, in this case for capture of the countryside by a philosophy of corporate efficiency that eliminates particularity and local character.

In fact, McCarthy dates the beginning of the decimation of British wildlife and especially insect life to long before the UK joined the EEC – to the afore-mentioned Agriculture Act of 1947, the year he was born, which with its goal of self-sufficiency guaranteed farmers a minimum price for whatever they grew (95) and thus encouraged the creation and rapid expansion of the industrial farms of today, to the detriment of hedgerows and other wildlife habitats that were seen as wasteful uses of land that could otherwise be factored into the economic equation. This trammelling of the countryside was further exacerbated by the absurdity of the CAP, but as with so many things blamed on the EU over the years, the rot was well established and even today is exacerbated by the sovereign actions of the UK, quite unbidden by the EU. Fishing is a case in point, where the UK quota set by the Common Fisheries Policy is in the gift of the UK government to distribute to whomsoever it likes; yet the vast majority of it (61%) is hoovered up by a handful of giant trawlers owned by just three companies (McClenaghan & Boros 2016), with the rest of the domestic fleet having to survive on what is left. And in any case, despite much of the domestic catch being species unpopular in the UK which are thus sold into the EU Single Market (Canocchi 2016), in conversations I have had with fishermen in Hastings's famous beach-launched fleet of small boats they invariably blame the EU for the constraints imposed upon them. Even in the wake of the Leave vote in July 2016, while on holiday in North Wales, I was given an unprovoked lecture by a Brexit-supporting local fisherman on the betrayal of secessionist hopes he sensed was coming, his delight in the referendum result notwithstanding. In spite of his hatred of the EU, deep down he knew who was really to blame.

McCarthy chronicles the death of the English countryside by praising what has been lost but might still be revived, much as in Barnes's utopian vision of a postlapsarian England, the newly depopulated land of Anglia has shed all notions of progress and in doing so become a truly peaceable kingdom. Musing on the reasons why this has happened, Barnes informs us that questions along these lines were no longer debated by the ordinary citizens of Anglia, 'a sign perhaps that the country's fretful, psoriatic self-consciousness had finally come to an end' (257). But the optimism at the close of *England, England* arises precisely because this fictional version of the country seems to reverse a process of economic gain but social loss – what we lazily describe as progress – which has persisted for many hundreds of years. Today the loss can also assume unfamiliar, sometimes virtual forms (such as the monopolising of the internet by a few tech giants), but the core process – enclosure of the commons – is much the same as it has always been. We have already observed this phenomenon in Ali Smith's *Autumn* and we can also see it in *Harvest*, Jim Crace's novel of economic displacement in what might be 16th-century England (around the time when, tellingly, the last indigenous wild boar in England was killed), though neither time nor place are ever explicitly stated. Crace's choice of such a simple scenario brings a process which has caused far greater upheavals since then, and fuelled a longstanding resentment of the kind that delivered Brexit, into sharp focus. The villagers whose collective fate is the novel's main concern have lived for generations in tight familial insularity, an inefficient subsistence community of tenant farmers – such as Martha Cochrane finds when she returns to the agrarian Anglia in *England, England* – content to live by the turning of the seasons, no matter that in a bad year they might struggle to feed both themselves and their livestock through the winter. Theirs is a world of quotidian contingency, where the value of nature is utilitarian, not aesthetic – “‘Beer and bacon's all that matters here’” (Crace 2013: 75) – as reflected in the names in the novel, with the village known generically to everyone as 'just The Village' (79), as the narrator, Walter Thirsk, admits to the mapmaker who arrives to draw up a plan of the whole estate. Given their lack of contact with the outside world, and thus their lack of need for anything as abstract as a map, that name is indeed sufficient for them. They want for nothing – and no one – more than what nature allows them to grow or to rear from one year to the next.

But the wealth of medieval and Renaissance England was founded on wool, so the villagers' wishes count for naught with the new lord of the manor, Edmund Jordan, who is determined to replace their crops – and their 'slow-paced commonwealth of habit,

custom and routine, of wasting time and sauntering' (122) – with hundreds of sheep that will make his fortune. A duplicitous figure of the kind that became utterly typical of the capitalist society that was then emerging, with its 'utilitarian reduction of all social relationships to a crude moneyed order' (Williams 1973: 35), he paints his plan as a progressive move of wider social benefit, notwithstanding that his tenants face a bleak future under the new arrangements. "Do not blame me that I have an impulse to improve, a zeal for progress", he says. "We should not deceive ourselves that in a modern world a common system such as ours which only benefits commoners ... could earn the admiration of more rational observers for whom 'agriculture without coin' is absurd" (Crace 2013: 100–1).

Our sympathies toward the villagers, given the threat to their settled life of subsistence agriculture, are tempered by their intolerance towards outsiders; the chosen enclosure – the narrow circle of sympathy – of their own community is revealed at the outset in the confrontation with three 'newcomers' who have camped at the edge of the village in the hope of being able to stay, bearing out Williams's observation that 'the social order within which this agriculture was practised was as hard and brutal as anything later experienced' (Williams 1973: 37). The two men from that group are placed in the pillory – one of them later dies – and we learn that the newcomers are economic migrants from another village like their own which has already suffered a similar process of enclosure and displacement. After the killing of a horse, two women and a young girl from the village are arrested by Jordan and his henchmen, or sidemen – the women are raped by the sidemen – and Walter, once an outsider, a newcomer himself, is ostracised as the native-born villagers close ranks around their anger in a rhetoric that bears strong echoes of Brexit grievance and rage. 'We're the majority, they protest. We must be listened to' (Crace 2013: 145). But it doesn't help them, and when they rise as a mob to beat and mutilate Jordan's groom, they flee the village in haste before the new master can deliver the vengeance he has a right to mete out in what for the poor and landless was still a time of summary justice – forced into the same fugitive existence as the trio they treated so cruelly at the start of the novel – leaving the new lord to enact his plans without the hindrance of so many unproductive souls. "Their greatest sorcery," he says when they have gone, "has been to make the clock stand still. Their mischief is to shade my path. I'll not pardon them for that" (190).

Hollow Men

The historical fable of *Harvest* articulates the long-drawn-out corporate capture of Britain in cruel and archetypal terms, effective precisely because the story is timeless, repeated again and again through culture and history – specifically, English culture and history – right down to our own day. Its contemporary iteration is described in Paul Kingsnorth's *Real England: The Battle against the Bland* (2008), a work of non-fiction telling the same basic story across multiple spheres of cultural and economic activity, its narrative driven by an acute sense of what has been lost or stolen from ordinary experience by that process. Published on the eve of the financial crash, it seems to revive something of the spirit of 'England Your England', Orwell's wartime paean to Englishness, featuring ordinary English people who, like Kingsnorth himself, can sense the existential threat to the vernacular and idiosyncratic traditions of English culture posed by a rampant 'free' market then at the peak of its power.

In an eerie pre-echo of events since the referendum, the first chapter is entitled 'Citizens of Nowhere'; yet these are not the rootless globetrotters of Theresa May's sinister party conference speech of October 2016, but the people of England itself. These tens of millions, rootless in a different way because the soil is so degraded, are postmodern drifters by default through a land to which we hardly belong and whose physical reality we barely notice, reduced to the role of uncomprehending spectators of a culture and environment our ancestors had once known like the backs of their hands. Kingsnorth finds himself early in the book at Bluewater shopping centre in north Kent – disturbed by the controlled environment of the megamall, describing it as 'a total experience' or simply 'totalitarian' (Kingsnorth 2008: 5). The placeless temptations of this globalised, homogenised consumer culture – its bulldozing of 'the small, the ancient, the indefinable, the unprofitable, the meaningful, the interesting and the quirky' (7) – fills him with a deep disgust, as it does so many. 'Welcome to everywhere. Welcome to nowhere,' he writes. 'Welcome to the Pleasure Dome' (6).

Kingsnorth's despair is understandable given the neoliberal consensus that prevailed across the political spectrum at the time, a worldview both liberal and doctrinaire, epitomised in Tony Blair's keynote address to the Labour party conference of 2005. Having proved himself incapable of seeing beyond the solipsistic logic of neoliberal economics, Blair can't help but see the free market as akin to a force of nature. Echoing the Thatcherite mantra of 'TINA' (There is no alternative), in a tone of economic appeasement he might have been wise to consider politically in the case of the invasion

of Iraq two years earlier, Blair warned his docile flock, ‘I hear people say we have to stop and debate globalisation. You might as well debate whether autumn should follow summer’, before delivering the following alarming admonition: ‘The character of this changing world is indifferent to tradition. Unforgiving of frailty. No respecter of past reputations. It has no custom and practice. It is replete with opportunities, but they only go to those swift to adapt, slow to complain, open, willing and able to change’ (Blair 2005).

Or, to put it another way, ‘All that is solid melts into air, all that is sacred is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind’ (Marx & Engels 2015: 6). Framed within the argument of Marx and Engels, Blair’s terrifying vision is the face of capitalism unchained when the forces that should oppose it are cowed – a vision already fully formed more than a century ago in Forster’s *Howards End*, with its foreboding premonitions of today’s globalised world (Forster 1956: 275, 358). That Blair, an apparently socialist leader with a large parliamentary majority, should have capitulated so utterly to this ruthless economic paradigm explains why so many who felt abandoned to an increasingly rootless existence should have come to together in 2016 to deliver what Forster describes as ‘a protest against the inner darkness in high places that comes with a commercial age’ (350). Writing at the time, during Blair’s final years in power, Kingsnorth recognises the urgent need to call out the true meaning of the New Labour leader’s hypermobile, literally unsettling worldview. ‘Our evolution into citizens of nowhere is supposed to be A Good Thing; an opening up, a casting off of our narrow, parochial past, our petty local differences’ (Kingsnorth 2008: 10), he writes. ‘Communities are no longer geographical but communities of interest. Barriers are broken down by mass media, technology and trade laws. Rootless, we gain freedom. Placeless, we belong everywhere’ (10). Rejecting this view, in resisting the global consciousness that the new economic reality seemed to demand, Kingsnorth decided the focus of his urgent inquiry should be small, local, national; England rather than Britain, principally because ‘England is a nation; Britain is a political convenience ... because [England] is my country’ (12–13).

Such an overtly Little England position was a brave stance for anyone on the left to have taken a decade ago and, as Michael Kenny has pointed out, made many critics uneasy that ‘such a sensibility betrays a yearning for a world prior to the diversity and dynamics associated with modern life’ (Kenny 2014: 139). It also owes much to a

nostalgic idea of England as it was before the UK joined the EEC in 1973, and in that regard Kingsnorth himself voted Leave in the referendum – a decision that by his own admission came at the personal cost of lost friendships (Kingsnorth 2017). Moreover, his particular diagnosis of the main deleterious factors in the decline of English consciousness and confidence, though not including the EU among the list of the three forces eroding his idealised ‘Real England’, is nonetheless a familiar suite of frustrations for which the EU became the scapegoat in 2016: ‘a powerful alliance of big business and big government; an unspoken, twenty-first century class conflict, in which every nook and cranny is being made safe for the wealthy bourgeoisie; and a very English reluctance to discuss who and what we are as a nation or to stand up for our places, our national character and our cultural landscape’ (Kingsnorth 2008: 13).

A left-wing, environmental advocate of the local, the author finds strange bedfellows along the way, such as *Telegraph* columnist Robin Page, a campaigner from the older generation whose laments for the decline of rural England long pre-date Kingsnorth’s anti-global anxiety. Writing his book when New Labour’s cultural influence was at its height, Kingsnorth’s sympathetic encounters all across the country with people like Page offer glimpses of an England whose own anxieties had been sidelined by the metropolitan economic agenda of the Blair government. For this reason, ‘whatever you think of his views,’ writes Kingsnorth of his conservative fellow traveller, ‘they are representative of a very significant section of English rural opinion, and probably non-rural opinion too. It’s an angry, proud, rooted, frustrated opinion which feels, rightly or wrongly, that it is being overlooked. It is rarely heard in the liberal media or on the airwaves and rarely represented in Parliament, and when it is voiced ... it can often sound bitter, paranoid, antediluvian: a function of how little it feels it is heard’ (150–51).

Kingsnorth takes this strand of English opinion seriously enough to quote a passage from Page’s own introduction to a new version of his book *The Decline of an English Village* (2004), in which the *Telegraph* columnist points out that as his standard of living has increased, his quality of life in rural Cambridgeshire has been diminished by the multiple intrusions and agitations of modernity, as ‘the land is made safe for those who do not understand or care much about it’ (Kingsnorth 2008: 160), the ‘urban 4x4 drivers, gastropub diners, the owners of investment properties, the wearers of clean wellies and fashionable scents’ (14). It’s a phenomenon Page describes as ‘urban

colonialism' (160), echoing Michael Gardiner's description of England as Britain's (in this case London's) 'last colony' (Gardiner 2012: 163).

The growing class divide Kingsnorth discovered in the course of the years he spent researching *Real England* does not map automatically onto previous cultural schisms or class divisions in English history, as the complex coalition that united in voting Leave would clearly be poles apart in many other areas of cultural, political or economic activity – something the worse-off will surely discover should Britain actually quit the EU in any meaningful sense, as now seems likely, and the Brexit ultras filling the new cabinet of Prime Minister Boris Johnson get to satisfy the ideological cupidity that is the patent motivation for their fanatical hatred of the European project. But Kingsnorth's book finds urban pub landlords, shire Tories and northern hill farmers united in 'resentment and resistance' to the advocates of a 'globalised, placeless world' (16), and the same spirit informs his extraordinary first novel.

A Slave's Revolt

The annual Jack in the Green festival in Hastings, in taking place on the May Day Bank Holiday, draws on the fertility rituals of pagan, pre-Christian England to mark the cultural beginning of summer. The custom of parading a Jack in the Green through the town has historical roots, going possibly as far back as the sixteenth century, but the practice seems to have ended around the end of the nineteenth century (*Atlas Obscura* n.d.), by which time industrial capitalism had begun to sweep away ancient customs across the Western world, and especially in advanced nations such as late Victorian Britain. The festival's current iteration was revived as recently as 1983, the year of the first Tory landslide that gave Margaret Thatcher carte blanche to destroy the working-class traditions, and especially the trade union movement, which had grown up in the intervening century – institutions which had begun to reverse the profoundly unequal settlement which had existed all across the country for almost an entire millennium.

In settling on the Norman Conquest of 1066 and the Anglo-Saxon rebellions of the following few years, in *The Wake* Kingsnorth chose the same historical injury whose cultural, social and economic upheaval had consequences that are still with us today in the form of hereditary and grotesquely inequitable patterns of land ownership, and led to the suppression of Anglo-Saxon language and culture for many centuries to come. The Anglo-Saxons are obvious poster parents of the 'left behind' who were so important to delivering the Brexit vote, and the resistance to imposed and in some cases

legally sanctioned constraints on free speech – the circumscriptions of so-called political correctness from which the likes of Nigel Farage have made so much political capital over the past decade – should perhaps be seen in this deep historical context.

One quality for which the English are known around the world is their politeness, but numerous Mediterranean resorts over the past few decades of mass tourism have seen another ancient behavioural code that is every bit as typical, which is manifest in most towns and cities across England on an average weekend and for the most part is nothing more alarming than raucous and high-spirited revelry. The Leave vote channelled some of this aggressive exuberance to their own purposes by appealing to the English love of liberty, our ‘respect for the autonomy of individual thought and action’ (Black 2018: 44) as embodied in the Common Law, stirring folk memories of the Norman Yoke and antipathy to what many perceive as its modern equivalent, with the Luxembourg President of the EU Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, playing the role of Francophone bogeyman in a tradition that stretches from William the Conqueror through numerous bitter wars with the French down the centuries to Napoleon, the original bogeyman (according to some sources) of nineteenth-century nursery rhymes, who was the first modern Frenchman to contemplate the benefits of a union of European states. The Anglo-Saxon inheritance as the basis of Englishness is an ambivalent legacy, as Kingsnorth’s novel makes clear: on the one hand, an apparently harmonious social order whose disruption by the Norman invasion has had repercussions ever since; on the other, an ethnic view of national belonging such as left and liberal theorists of nations and nationalism like Anderson, Gellner and Hobsbawm have tended to minimise, but which has certainly played a part in the renaissance of English consciousness since the Anglo-Saxonism of the late-nineteenth century (Kumar 2003: 205–07), and which, for Michael Gardiner, still ‘has a vast weight of ideology behind it’ (Gardiner 2012: 14). It is also a view that extended, according to the racially deterministic thinking of the late Victorian period, to English-speaking Anglo-Saxon descendants in the colonies (Kumar 2003: 205–07) – a consanguinity today known as the Anglosphere, the ideal trading block of friendly nations favoured by many Brexiters, though this imagined community with a supposedly natural amity towards Britain, based on a shared mother tongue and an ethnocultural inheritance that is understood if not acknowledged, is yet another Brexit illusion that has run aground on the realpolitik of international trade; the likes of Canada are among the many countries unwilling to roll over the details of our trade with those nations under existing EU trade agreements, preferring instead the extra leverage

they will have in future negotiations once the UK has stepped naked into the world outside the EU (Partington 2019).

These hiccoughs aside, the Anglo-Saxons are certainly a background presence in towns such as Hastings, where an entire working-class neighbourhood, dating from the early twentieth century, has roads named after Saxon kings – including Alfred, Athelstan, Edmund, Edgar and even the Danish Canute (Cnut), as well as Edward (the Confessor) and Harold, the last of the Anglo-Saxon line – presumably so-called to foster a sense of belonging among the first residents to occupy these homes. And though the fashion among fans of the England football team for wearing chainmail and tabards emblazoned with the St George's Cross evokes the French-speaking Angevin King Richard I, nonetheless in the story of the Battle of Hastings instinctive English sympathies go to the defeated incumbent, Harold Godwinson, over the invader, William of Normandy, for which William's subsequent ruthlessness toward the conquered Anglo-Saxons serves as ample justification. Moreover, it was the Anglo-Saxons under Æthelstan who created the English nation in the early tenth century, though it would also be wrong to cite this as the moment of birth of a specifically English consciousness and culture. Indeed, the first history of the English people was written two centuries earlier by the Venerable Bede, suggesting that, despite being a young kingdom of just a few generations at the time of the Norman invasion, the conquered English of the late 1060s may well have taken a much longer view of their origins, going back even earlier than the great Northumbrian monk – one that, as depicted in *The Wake*, was intimately connected to the land.

Kingsnorth manages to convey this sense of ancient provenance not only through the fevered evocation and sacred memory of a lost past in the mind of the narrator and protagonist, Buccmaster of Holland, but in the formidable and entirely convincing creation of a form of Old English that a modern reader can fairly easily comprehend once they've accustomed themselves to its component idioms. This febrile intensity almost certainly owes something to Kingsnorth's own reading of Anglo-Saxon sources such as the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*; Peter Ackroyd claims that 'the Anglo-Saxon imagination was ... more intense than any current model. To them, history was of pressing social and religious significance ... deeper and darker than our own misty sense of origin' (Ackroyd 2002: 243). Certainly, Buccmaster's sense of foreboding at the portent of Halley's Comet or the five-fingered 'fugol', or bird, he has seen flying over the fen is not so much a reaction to events as the florid extension of a naturally

morbid, even disturbed imagination, in the same mould as the narrator in *The Season of the Boar*.

In its linguistic achievement, through which Kingsnorth compellingly inhabits the Anglo-Saxon mind, *The Wake* can be compared to another great post-apocalyptic novel of the past half-century, Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker* – a book cryptically referred to by Oliver (a reference misunderstood by the narrator) at one point in *The Season of the Boar* – whose brilliant invented language, Riddleyspeak, bears witness not only to the physical destruction of Inland (meaning England in the reduced form of a ravaged future Kent) but to the impoverishment of thought and culture which has followed the complete collapse of civilisation in the centuries after a nuclear holocaust. In the context of Norman tyranny, the language of *The Wake*, similarly invented but also historical, feels like a similar act of cultural survival and, in this case, resistance to the approved idioms of the 'state culture' of the late 1060s, drawing the reader into a clandestine intimacy with the oppressed people of the Fens whose point of view is the only one we are asked to consider.

Like his father and grandfather before him, Buccmaster is a 'socman', or minor nobleman, in his 'ham' or hamlet. But even under the Saxon dispensation that exists before William he is something of a dissident voice, at odds with his father and unusually close to his grandfather for reasons that become clear as the novel unfolds. The action begins in the months before the battle at Senlac Hill (the Battle of Hastings), when 'a haeric star' appears in the sky – the famous historical return of Halley's Comet that year, included in the record of events embroidered in the Bayeux Tapestry – which the people of the ham take as an omen of ill fortune. But Buccmaster is already an internal cultural exile, we learn, despising the prevailing Saxon Christianity, a foreign or 'ingenga' belief system his father had adopted in defiance of his own father. Buccmaster's grandfather, it later transpires, was a guardian of the old pagan beliefs which he has instilled in secret into his grandson, setting Buccmaster at odds with his father and with wider society as he harbours his grandfather's sacred teaching like a grudge: 'and these gods he saed was not lic the crist they was not ingenga gods bound about in lies and words not gods of fear unseen in the heofon what priccd man sore and bound him with laws and afeart him with fyr but these was gods of the treows and the water lic we is folc of them' (Kingsnorth 2014: 52).

As with the church after Henry VIII, but in this case more fundamentally distinct, two opposing belief systems compete for the soul of 'angland'. The first, the universal

church, is a European system and thus a foreign body which, having become the official religion, has turned men into ‘hunds’, or dogs – Buccmaster’s routine description of anyone he despises (indeed everyone, including himself) reflects his contempt for any human being obliged to live under that system. The other, the world of the Norse gods, is the forgotten spirit of the land and the water, as much a way of life as a creed, and above all an assertion of the right to be left alone, uninhibited by the kinds of laws, directives or vested interests at which Kingsnorth aims his contemporary fire in *Real England*: ‘our fathers was freer than us’, says Buccmaster, ‘our fathers stalced the wilde fens now the fens is bean tamed efry thing gets smaller. For efry cilde born there is sum new law a man sceolde be free and alone on his land the world sceolde not cum in until he ascs it. Freedom sceolde there be in anglanð again lic there was in the ealð daegs in the first daegs of the anglisc’ (4).

It’s a powerful, libertarian message that stirs the blood against the increasing constraints of modernity, of ‘civilisation’ – both theirs and ours; and for Buccmaster, while the coming of the Normans forces him to fight, in truth for him the new ‘ingengas’ are just a more extreme version of a cultural presence he has always seen as an existential threat: ‘the wilde will be tacan from these fens and the wilde will be tacan from in me for in efry man there is the wind and the water and his worc until he is tacan is to cepe the wilde lands from the tamers’ (4).

Paganism had been supplanted by Christianity in all the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms by the early eighth century, the period when Bede was writing his history, so it seems unlikely even that Buccmaster’s grandfather would have inherited these beliefs some three centuries later, unless like English Catholics after the Reformation the pagan creed’s followers had simply practised in secret. It seems stranger still that he would have associated them with the creation of England or ‘angland’ some two centuries after Bede, by which time the Roman religion had been long established in the kingdom. But these resentments and the historical revisions they feed upon are never rational, as the Brexit process keeps reminding us, so the socman’s false association of one with the other is a fiction necessary to maintain his righteous sense of grievance against his fellow men and especially against the ‘circe’ – the church – and the ‘preosts’ he holds responsible for his distemper. For Buccmaster, the clergy are an expert class who make people ashamed of who they are, confusing them with rules and directives about what is permitted and what is not, using book learning to cow the illiterate masses into doubting their own instincts over right and wrong. With a pagan fury reminiscent of Nietzsche’s

anti-Christian tirades (cf. Nietzsche 2003, 2013), he singles out in particular, ‘the crist who done this they cums with his boc loc they saes this deed is yfel this deed is good heed the crist... it is bocs that does yfel i saes all bocs the boc of the crist the boc of the cyng all laws from abuf more efry year’ (Kingsnorth 2014: 67).

Resistance to moral dualism aside, Buccmaster’s resentment towards the Church reflects a political division between the libertarian and the statist, between conservative and progressive, between continuity and change – above all between competing ideas of freedom, a persistent theme in *The Season of the Boar* – that goes to the heart of the current tribulations, not only in the UK but across the West, between liberal pluralists and populist authoritarians; which of course maps no more neatly onto events in *The Wake* than it does onto any one of the multiple zones of conflict or disagreement around the world where these opposing visions are currently at odds. Like many angry men today – both Western nationalists and those in equally fractured democracies such as Turkey and India – Buccmaster regards the universal civilisation of his father and now the ‘ingenga’ invaders as ‘outrageously false and enfeebling’, in Pankaj Mishra’s phrase (Mishra 2017: 25), and makes his own appeal on behalf of the ordinary man who just wants to be left in peace, again citing the words of his grandfather to protest the case against evangelical progressivism, with its hated ‘laws from abuf’: ‘my grandfather wolde sae men does not listen to the wise for what the wise has to sae is not what they wants to hie for what they wants to hie is that their lifs is right as they is and that they is good folc and does not need to do naht’ (Kingsnorth 2014: 77).

Jeremy Black makes a similar point with a more recent historical analogy, referring to ‘the self-righteousness, shallowness, and social condescension of much of what has been termed the Enlightenment; a tendency in which the people were generally presented as ignorant, and their beliefs the very antithesis of those of the enlightened’ (Black 2018: 106). Indeed, it is not hard to make the case that in replacing Christianity as the engine of western moral thought, the liberal humanism of the Enlightenment – which today ‘has the pervasive power that was once possessed by revealed religion’ (Gray 2003: xi), and whose most cherished offspring of recent generations is progressive politics in general and the European Union in particular – has persisted with the same basic assumption that human beings are both wretched and perfectible and, this being the case, ought to welcome the prospect of perfection prescribed by a secular clerisy of elites, whether or not they want it. Many do not, preferring ‘entrenched

prejudices' whose 'rapid overturning' by progressive politics, as Mishra explains, 'is one major source of male rage and hysteria today' (Mishra 2017: 107).

For Buccmaster, as for social conservatives everywhere, it is the shaming of established traditions and cultures that makes men wretched, robbing them of soul and self-possession, inducing in the socman a state of alienation that he may even experience as a true sense of self. With the ancient beliefs a social taboo, the novel's inner monologue becomes the only means of escape for these rogue ideas, engendering a visionary awareness that draws its power directly from the land, just as his grandfather taught him, with the fertile soul of England revealing itself in the archetypal figure of the Green Man – the same one who once again bestrides the streets of Hastings on the May Day Bank Holiday every year. Appearing in a dream, as Buccmaster tells the reader, this chthonic presence 'had been growan had been callan from the deorcness ... a man and the man saes thu cnawan me buccmaster thu cnawan me and this man... from his mouth there cum fronds lic the sceots of blosms' (Kingsnorth 2014: 69). So when both of Buccmaster's sons die fighting the Normans, and his wife is murdered in the family home in the terror that follows, Buccmaster heeds his dream and takes to the 'holt', or wood, gathering around him a small group of fugitives, a 'werod' or band of 'grene men' who make a successful surprise attack on a passing Norman knight and begin to harbour larger ambitions. It is in the holt, free of 'ingengas', that for Buccmaster the true heart, the mystical power, of 'angland' resides. It was in the holt that a boar (the magical animal at the centre of my own novella) once 'spoke' to his grandfather, a tale of animal possession that is one of many which made a big impression on the young Buccmaster, and one he draws on now for strength as he and his men are forced into a perilous nomadic life which is hardly better than that of any hunted creature: 'lic a hund in triewth lic a man with naht' (129).

In obvious echoes of what British imperialists later inflicted on other peoples around the world (and also of how so many people from the English provinces regard the capital), he reflects gloomily on the experience of colonisation, on how 'lundun is no longer an anglisc tun' (88), how the Normans will rename everything, even the trees, and that they may even rename the country itself – a process so thoroughgoing that he will end up not being able to recognise his own native land (124). But it's a process that began with the abandonment of the old gods, a colonisation of hearts and minds that for Buccmaster was lost long before the Norman fleet landed at Pevensey: 'anglisc folcs has had their sawol eatan I saes eatan first by ingenga god and then by ingenga cyng and

now what is angland but an ealond in the mist seen when the heofon mofs but nefer reacced again' (175).

A similar narrative of cultural displacement informs the bitter rhetoric that animated the Leave campaign and still emanates from the mouths of far-right agitators like Stephen Yaxley-Lennon (aka Tommy Robinson) as justification for their radical ethnonationalist prospectus. Nonetheless, this poisonous message resonates with many because it is partly true, even if the causes of the hated displacement, identified so exhaustively by Kingsnorth in *Real England*, in reality are due in large part to the surrender of public goods, the public sphere and public space to corporate interests whose loyalty to either nation or neighbourhood is never more than feigned. Physical colonisation is no longer necessary when corporations can enthrall us through distraction alone.

Buccmaster's understanding of this process of mental colonisation is a source of emotional instability and the root of his resentful nativist feeling, and as the novel unfolds it also becomes clear that the unreliable narrative of this classic antihero is itself unstable – a form of Faulknerian madness intensified for the reader by the immersive interiority of the language with which he tells his tale. This intensity is in part a product of Buccmaster's exceptionalism, the sense that 'I had always seen things felt things no other colde' (286), and the feeling of superiority he draws from his heretical belief system leads him to maltreat those around him – initially his wife and then later the men of his 'werod'. This has a political as well as a personal dimension. Early on in the novel he refuses to join Harold's army to fight the Normans on account of the Saxon king's Christian faith, and also because he, Buccmaster, is a man of the Fens and feels no obligation to help anyone who is not from that region, despite both his sons having given their lives to the national cause. Later his selective nativist pride is still so parochial that he dissuades his 'werod' from joining forces with larger resistance groups who might have a chance of defeating and driving out the Normans. On the one hand the Danes in the Northern Rebellion of 1068 are 'ingengas', and it is a source of shame to him that 'to use one ingenga to cwell another ingenga to cepe [angland] safe fuccd we was fuccd and beorned' (274); and on the other, even the larger English army of the historical figure of Hereward the Wake (here spelt 'Hereward'), which arrives in the Fens and is reported as having some success against the Normans, inspires in Buccmaster only jealousy and resentment that it is not he who is the potential saviour of his land (181). Thus his narrow circle of sympathies reveals his patriotism to be mere

parochialism of the most self-defeating kind – shallow, self-serving and enslaved to an ideology of grievance rooted in a romantic idea of the past, rather than the real people with whom he lives in the present.

Man and Beast

The Wake takes us into the dark heart of nativist resentment, showing us the compelling potency of nationalist arguments and the warped priorities they give rise to, which, following their own perverse logic, lead all too easily to often greater harm. And the same damaged consciousness is what meets the reader in *Beast*, the second of Kingsnorth's projected Buckmaster trilogy. Written in modern English and set in the present – indeed, published just days after the 2016 referendum – its protagonist, Edward Buckmaster, is clearly a kindred spirit of his Saxon namesake, an 'alienated young man of promise' as Mishra might describe him (Mishra 2017: 29), living alone on a West Country moor after what appears to have been some kind of breakdown in himself and, in his own mind, in society at large: 'All of the weight I threw down, my retreat from the encircling, from the furious thoughts and opinions, the views and positions soldered together with impatience and anger' (Kingsnorth 2016: 5).

What he desires above all is eremitic separation, secession, solitude: 'To be open, to be in fear, to be aching with nothingness, to be lonely as the cold subsoil in winter, lonely as the last whale in the ocean, singing in bewilderment and no other to answer for all of time' (2–3). It's another form of freedom, the flight from obligation – in his case from a wife and daughter he insists will thank him one day – at the age of 30 like some latterday Buddha, or like St Anthony (9) whose example and that of home-grown saintly figures like St Cuthbert (17) he holds close to his own fragile sense of purpose. 'Every saint walked away,' he says to justify his actions. 'Every holy man, every prophet, they all walked away' (10). It's a freedom quite different from the 'bogus liberty' which, according to Pankaj Mishra, Jean-Jacques Rousseau saw as the true character of the commercial freedoms Voltaire had lauded in English life during his stay in early Georgian England at the dawn of British imperial capitalism; the same bogus freedom that is the only kind that matters, deep down, for the chancers and conmen of the Brexit campaigns (Mishra 2017: 96).

Peter Ackroyd tells us that 'one of the curious features of the English imagination' is that 'all the great works of the medieval period were by and for "solitaries", where we see a native individualism in its most poignant and persuasive form' (Ackroyd 2002:

169). And even before the likes of Julian of Norwich – women as much as men are a part of this tradition – there were the great monastic island communities of the British Isles, literal isolationism at one time a distinctive feature of English spirituality, even as the British remained connected with the wider Church. The Saxon Buccmaster is much the same, taking himself off to the Fens to commune with the ‘eald gods’, in his case despising the unmanly influence of Christianity and instead drawing the strength a profound introvert gets from being alone, a sense of enlargement that comes from forsaking society to commune with a power that can’t otherwise be divined. And in *Beast*, in an echo of Orwell’s intuition, the modern Buckmaster tells us, ‘you will understand soon enough that this world is a great animal, alive and breathing, that we walk through it ... or fall to our knees in front of an altar in the presence of something greater than ourselves, then we are seeing the animal shift and turn beneath our feet. Then it is calling us home’ (Kingsnorth 2016: 16).

As his isolation deepens, this animal becomes a physical creature, a Beast of Bodmin or Exmoor or wherever in the West country it seems likely the story is set – a big black animal, large enough to be a mortal threat in a country where creatures such as bear and lynx were hunted to extinction many centuries ago. And observing the abundance of creatures, the ‘beetles the bacteria the earthworms the centipedes the viruses the mycelium the seeds lying dormant in the soil waiting for us to burn ourselves out’ (64), quite unlike his Saxon counterpart among the Fens, this Buckmaster begins to sense how alien he is to the landscape in which he has taken refuge, his existence contingent upon a natural order that was far from indifferent to his presence; the land not his own and not even the preserve of the human society he has so recently fled; his fugitive experience like that of the tens of thousands fleeing unsettled parts of the world to reach the supposed safety of England. ‘I was a stranger here I could see it now I was a foreigner an invader an immigrant and they were turning on me’ (64).

His consciousness begins to disintegrate as he develops an obsession with the beast, plunging into paranoia in a similar way to the narrator in *The Season of the Boar* or the subterranean obsessive of Kafka’s story ‘The Burrow’ (cf. Kafka 1993). The sentence structure becomes increasingly dissolute, again with Faulknerian interior monologue as a model, just as in *The Wake*, though in this case dynamic in its grammatical collapse as the narrator’s worldly persona gradually disintegrates under the pressure of his willed isolation – as if being a person, as John Gray insists, was ‘not the essence of humanity’ but simply ‘one of its masks’ (Gray 2003: 58). Any punctuation – that bulwark against

semantic confusion; the linguistic markers of civilisation – becomes almost non-existent, as the modern Buckmaster's existential fears spiral out of control. He tells us, 'there were things in the heather surrounding me coming for me I was being watched some great force was just behind me shadowing me stalking me and I couldn't turn and look back' (Kingsnorth 2016: 65). He feels himself to be like the animal he senses is stalking him, Poor Tom on the heath, a brown man with 'thick orange fur all over his body' (86). But despite his best efforts, echoing the all-pervasive presence of the predatory beast in the minds of the boys in *Lord of the Flies*, he only ever glimpses the beast when he is not looking for it, 'when my guard was down when I was tired and hungry and walking away' (104). A poor, bare, fork'd animal, 'the wild creature I was' (69), scuttling on his hands 'like a giant cockroach' (129), with its obvious echoes of Kafka's 'The Metamorphosis' (1915; cf. Kafka 1993), the narrator gradually sheds his humanity and in doing so feels 'like I had fallen down a hole into a thousand years' (Kingsnorth 2016: 93). Whether or not this is a reference to his eponymous predecessor, his diminishing grip on worldly sanity plunges the reader into the realm of portents and apparitions familiar from *The Wake*. But the loss of self that ensues the protagonist in fact comes to see as a gain – 'I don't care about anything and because I don't care I have become free' (94) – because the world has 'cracked open'; and this itself would be a gift if only he could break through his habitual patterns of thought, like the great historical sages of the wilderness whose example has inspired him to try. 'I saw the abyss open and ... everything I thought and felt and cared about and refused to care about had been carefully constructed only to help me survive any glimpses I might have of this' (70).

But these glimpses of something in himself are echoes of the beast that reappears to haunt him throughout the story, not with its otherworldliness but with a frightening reality he longs for at the same time as he tries to keep it at bay. 'I felt like I was fighting off some huge emptiness just beneath the surface of everything I had ever pretended was real. I felt like I was breaking apart and I wanted so much to break apart and yet I resisted it' (93-4). In passages such as this one, *Beast* reveals itself as a story not so much about England as about the deepest human need for meaning which 'the furious thoughts and opinions, the views and positions' (5) and the increasing disturbance of modern life distract us from finding, even if we are committed to look. As the economic and social reality of the West has similarly 'cracked open' in the years since the financial crisis, it seems reasonable to imagine that such fundamental drives

have played a significant role in the political upheavals of the past few years, with one in particular, the Logos of politics, trumping the Eros of market economics by which the politics of the West have been infantilised for so long, even when the political solutions lead to material outcomes that are disadvantageous at best. As John Gray has framed the choice, ‘When truth is at odds with meaning, it is meaning that wins’ (Gray 2014: 82).

In the case of Buckmaster, it is loss of meaning which has driven him to a life of hermetic isolation, and like the great sages whose example he follows, in losing the world he recovers something essential which may be no more than a recognition of his ‘real conditions of life’ in the most existential terms, and ‘his relations with his kind’ according the broadest possible notions of genetic kinship. His bold claim that ‘Everything was me’ (Kingsnorth 2016: 91) is a recognition of the interdependence of all life that, ironically, is something he only comes to realise having separated himself from all human entanglements. In the same way, the equally eremitic John the Savage in *Brave New World* is unable to reconcile himself with ‘contamination by the filth of civilized life’ (Huxley 1994: 218), choosing rural self-reliance and ‘the right to be unhappy’ (212) in preference to a sham existence under the stifling conditions of a totalitarian paradise – conditions that are simply intolerable for someone whose inner life has been allowed to grow naturally through childhood and youth, in intimate connection with the living world in a way that civilisation no longer allows. This physical and spiritual separation is also something that Mo in *The Season of the Boar* has tried to achieve in a less dramatic way, though for reasons of self-preservation (primarily from state power) which are no less urgent. Moreover, it is a level of realisation the narrator of my novella also yearns for, like the equally risk-averse insurance man George Bowling in *Coming Up for Air*, but does not have the courage to pursue – something, indeed, we suspect he may have sought through the proxy of a vote to leave the EU, though exactly how he did vote is never made clear.

Twilight of the Gods

If the protagonists of the two Buckmaster novels published so far are both Green Men of a sort, taking us deep into the fertile and febrile heart of an everlasting England, they are also disturbing figures whose resistance is as much a search for private meaning as the concerted public act it appears to be in *The Wake*. A far less self-absorbed symbol of the ancient forest – indeed, one who seems defiantly to rebuff any kind of self-reflection or analysis – is Johnny “Rooster” Byron, the sad Falstaffian antihero at the heart of Jez

Butterworth's 2009 play *Jerusalem*, and a man as promiscuous and amoral as the Romantic poet whose name he bears.

Byron lives in a mobile home in a woodland close to the fictitious town of Flintock in Wiltshire, though the home is anything but mobile, having stood illegally in the same place since 1982, when the former daredevil stunt rider moved in. In the intervening years he has become a notorious local character, increasingly despised by the settled community on the nearby estate that was built in the years after Byron established himself in his woodland abode. The newcomers have complained over time in such numbers about his drug-dealing, his loud music and his corruption of the youth of the town that the municipal authority, Kennet & Avon Council, have decided to evict him with the help of South Wiltshire Police. Set on St George's Day, the action begins with two council officials pinning a notice to that effect to the door of the mobile trailer, but Rooster treats the intrusion with dismissive, if cowardly contempt. Presaged by the sound of a ferocious dog on loud-speaker – a canine symbol, like the many in *The Season of the Boar*, of what Gardiner describes as 'localised English resistance to the state during this period', the 2000s (Gardiner 2012: 33) – when he is sure they have gone he emerges from his trailer to holler his defiance, before letting out '*a long, feral bellow, from the heart of the earth*' (Butterworth 2015: Act I).

As the play develops, in an echo of the arguments of Paul Kingsnorth (who, significantly, wrote the programme notes for the play's original London production [Kenny 2014: 162]), it becomes clear that Rooster sees himself as a martyr of the new puritanism of tick-box modernity, epitomised by the health and safety culture of 'a post-democratic, post-political, ultra-managerial Britain' (Gardiner 2012: 50) that has placed virile, risk-taking activities like his former profession firmly beyond the pale. In his case, officialdom has deprived him of a livelihood which in his youth saw him feted at country fairs all over the south. As his friend Ginger puts it, he 'Used to jump buses on a trials bike. All over Wiltshire. Dorset. The Downs.... May Days, Open Days. Agricultural Shows. Salisbury. Taunton. Bournemouth. Bath. Broke every bone in his body' (Act I).

In 1978, at the Flintock Fair, he got one stunt so wrong and crashed so badly that for ten minutes he died, so Ginger tells us. Then with broken leg, arm, jaw and teeth, and a compressed spine, he came back to life and strode into the beer tent to down a pint, telling the barmaid to keep the change. It's a story of devil-may-care resurrection whose manly insouciance – with an appeal similar to that which Brexit voters respond to in the

cavalier manners of Nigel Farage and Boris Johnson – explains the mystique that Rooster, the man with an animal name, exudes for his young friends and hangers-on. He sees it as an almost supernatural power – telling us at the outset of Act II that his mother was a virgin when he was born – sustaining the heroic image he has of himself, despite so much evidence of the patently squalid life he has lived for nigh on three decades since putting away his leathers.

His stunt-riding days are certainly in the past, a thrilling spectacle of a bygone era replaced in the public's attention by genteel distractions that do not risk litigation or the bad press of an unnecessary accident in an increasingly risk-averse age. As Ginger tells us, 'Council stepped in. Made daredevilling illegal. Come '91, '92, main attraction on Fair Day's some twat in a tent doing snooker trick-shots. Balloon animals. Smarty fucking arty' (Act I). Faced with an increasingly anti-virile world where balloon animals supplant the real ones, Rooster retreated to the woods, scraping a living by selling drugs and doing occasional painting and decorating jobs. Once king of the Flintock St George's Day Fair, he is now described by his friend Davey as a 'Free ogre what loves trance music, deals cheap spliff and whizz, don't pay no tax, and has probably got AIDS. Guaranteed non-stop aggravation and danger' [Act I] – a modern, antiheroic Robin Hood, living the free life of the woods with his band of merry followers and fellow wasters, shagging young and, in at least one case, underage girls – liaisons that signal his immaturity – and defying the power of the state to unman him.

Indeed, the evidence of grown men being humiliated by the inhibiting managerial culture and the 'soul-killing mediocrity, cowardice [and] opportunism' (Mishra 2017: 49) of the post-industrial West is all around. Wesley, the landlord of the last pub in the town that Rooster has not been banned from (until recently), turns up at the trailer looking to score some whizz from his supplier, but he is dressed as a Morris dancer, having unwillingly agreed to the brewery's suggestion of forming a troupe to attract more punters on the day of the fair. On the surface this would seem to be the playing out of an authentic English tradition, but in truth it's another example, like those in Barnes's *England, England*, of how corporate endorsement of what was once the spontaneous cultural expression of the people eviscerates traditional practices of their meaning, reducing them to the role of hollow signifiers, like effigies of the dead – painful reminders to those obliged to perform them that they are indeed the very 'citizens of nowhere' that Kingsnorth describes in *Real England*. Confirming this view, in a comical passage in his introduction to a new edition of *There ain't black in the Union*

Jack (2002), Paul Gilroy points to the confusion of the English around such ancient rituals, ‘a nagging uncertainty as to the cultural content of national identity. Is it morris dancing or line dancing? Gosford Park, Finsbury Park or park and ride?’ (Gilroy 2002: xxv). Rooster, as a man who still embodies the once-vital spirit of those traditions, tells Wesley he should tell the brewery to ‘fuck off’, as it’s his pub, after all; to which the emasculated landlord replies in the language of his employer–oppressor: ‘It’s a Swindon-level decision. Even if I wanted to, it’s out of my hands’ (Act I).

In fact, the St George’s Day fair itself still allows for the spontaneous expression of the white English id (all the play’s characters are white), both ancient and modern, through a random concatenation of cultural artefacts like an inventory of postmodern Englishness so chaotic and uncontrollable that, perhaps surprisingly, it can’t help but seem authentic. It’s also an expression of vernal cultural exuberance as old as the first communities that lived here, though as Ginger acknowledges such a perception will also depend on who is watching. ‘It’s all go in Flintock,’ he says. ‘Trestle tables. Hot-dog vans... Bunting. Bumper cars.... There’s a *Lord of the Rings* float.... There’s a George and the Dragon. *Men in Black II*. Crown and Goose have gone *X Factor*.... And the lads from the rugby club turned out as golliwogs. Steel drums. Frizzy hair. Bit offensive, but it’s all for charity’ (Act I).

Unlike the good burghers of Flintock, however, for Rooster these seasonal revels are the hedonistic pattern of his daily life, signalling both a defiant immaturity and a clear-eyed vitality that will not be tamed. When Wesley confronts him about the fifteen- and sixteen-year-old kids who are drawn to his woodland raves, he protests that ‘There’s not one mum or dad round here could come here and say they weren’t drinking, smoking, pilling and the rest when they was that and younger. And shagging too. Like cats in a sack’ (Act I). In his refusal to grow up, like a lippy teenager he calls out what to his still-adolescent mind is the hypocrisy of those who would now undo him, in part, no doubt, to suppress incipient awareness of his own degradation.

In this way keeping any qualms at bay, this natural Englishman from an ancient lineage – though one we later learn is partly of Romany origin; his friends, indeed, call him a ‘gyppo’ – is keenly aware of his own birthright, though powerless to assert it, even as his right of abode is threatened by the full force of the law, which in removing him from the land continues the process of enclosure to which, these days, ancient outsiders such as Rooster are among the few to offer any kind of challenge. Indeed, it is perhaps his very marginal identity, ethnically and economically, which blunts the

nationalist edge inherent in his *völkisch* advocacy of Englishness, making him, in a way that recalls the character of Mo (the lapsed Muslim Green Man in *The Season of the Boar* with more knowledge of English nature and culture than his white pool friends), the unlikely carrier of a true-born Englishness; one now hounded to its final redoubt, like the ancient English boar, where his ancestors had once had the freedom to roam. ‘There’s Byron boys buried all over this land, lying in the ground as fresh as the day they was planted’ (Act II), he claims; and his self-belief fortified by awareness of this ancient lineage, he tries to rope his young followers into helping him to fight the coming wrath of Kennet and Avon Council by storming the town of Flintock and razing it to the ground – a prospect even more futile than Britain trying to dictate the terms of its departure to a far more powerful European Union. But in the world of action, as opposed to the realm mythic passion in which he reigns supreme, Rooster is unable to persuade any of them to stand shoulder to shoulder on his behalf. Indeed, as we later learn, one night when he was blind-drunk, Davey and Lee, two of his closest acolytes, treated this postmodern Falstaff with a level of physical contempt usually reserved for the most wretched members of society – the homeless whose ranks he looks set to join – pissing on his slumbering body as he lay prostrate on the forest floor, while filming their degrading act.

If this event has perverse echoes of an incident early in the play when Rooster, while pissing against a tree tells us he would swap riches and fame and even ‘a glimpse of God’s tail ... for a solid golden piss on English soil’ (Act I), a similar parochial attitude towards not so much their country, nor even their region, but their immediate locale prevails among all but one of the ‘educationally subnormal outcasts’ (Act II), as Rooster calls them, who hang about the trailer on a daily basis for want of something better to do with their time. Despite a globalised culture they can’t avoid, their whole existence, in a way that is reminiscent of the insular outlook of the villagers of Crace’s *Harvest*, is spent not only physically but also mentally in the few dozen square miles around where they were born and have lived their entire lives. In a discussion about the local news programme BBC Points West, according to Davey an item on the bulletin one night about an old woman kicked to death for her scratchcard by a group of delinquent youths turns out to have happened in Wales, just a few dozen miles away across the River Severn. For him this makes all the difference. He declares that, having watched the story and been upset by it, on learning where it had taken place he immediately lost all

concern for the victim. ‘Some Welsh nonsense,’ he calls it. ‘Good luck to ’em. I ain’t never fucking been there and I never will’ (Act II).

This small social and geographical circle and the lack of ties to people or places beyond it (a well-documented characteristic of those who voted Leave in the referendum), the lack of solidarity with anyone not of their tightly definable tribe, is an example of the local asserting itself, self-defeatingly, not only against a ‘globalised, placeless world’ but against any meaningful idea of the national collective of a kind that the UK electorate has been struggling to hold onto since devolution. Equally, in one small hint of political and cultural animus, but one that suggests the colossal scale of British (which in the context of the play means English) self-repression, Davey also jokingly remarks of the same news programme that they missed Rooster’s apparently made-up story of a ninety-foot giant. An obvious reference to the giant Albion himself, the mythological universal symbol of Britain as both man and land, of *Jerusalem. The Emanation of the Giant Albion* (1804–20), one of the prophetic books of William Blake, Davey ascribes the indifference of the BBC to this story to a lack of interest in the British people they are meant to serve in favour of the cosmopolitan culture of modern Europe – ‘They was too busy merging with BBC Belgium’; to which Lee adds, ‘And that, in a nutshell is what’s wrong with this country’ (Act II).

In fact, despite this anti-global outburst Lee is the one character who can recognise the crippling limitations of the life they are living and is still young enough to hope for something better. Seeing no future in being one of David Goodhart’s ‘Somewheres’, he has saved up just enough money to buy a one-way ticket to Australia in the hope that a new environment will change his fortunes. As he says to Davey, an abattoir worker, on the eve of his departure, ‘You’re going to live your whole life with the same fucking people. Going to the same shit pubs, kill two million cows, and die a sad, fat povvo’ (Act III). To which Davey replies with considerable relish, ‘Sounds unimprovable’. It’s a contented echo of the plea of Buccmaster, the Saxon socman in *The Wake*, that what men ‘wants to hie is that their lifs is right as they is and that they is good folc and does not need to do naht’ (Kingsnorth 2014: 77).

For Rooster, lacking both Lee’s youth and his pragmatism, there is no way out. One of civilisation’s natural misfits though not among its obvious discontents, he is someone for whom ‘the roots of ethics are in the animal virtues’ (Gray 2003: 110). Always having lived by loyalty to the land, the physical country in which he was born, his philosophy of life is lyrically articulated in the patriotic pastoral recited at one point by

the Professor, another regular at the trailer, who is given to declaim that ‘an Englishman’s duty at the first scent of May [is] to make the turf his floor, his roof the arcing firmament... his clothes the leaves and branches of the glade’ [Act II]. And as the noose of eviction tightens around him, Rooster chooses a final blaze of glory over emasculation, dousing the ground around the trailer with petrol, envisioning a funeral pyre worthy of a Viking longboat or the old Norse gods of the pre-Christian English kingdoms, as Buccmaster invokes them in *The Wake*. Retreating further into ancestor worship, still cock of the woods for a few more hours, the doomed Rooster Byron, champion of masculine licence and ancient English freedoms, summons a defiant Götterdämmerung, delivering the generous, unrepentant Blakean vision of a true Little Englander (cf. Gardiner 2016: 43) to a lost but glorious country; a barbaric yawp as expansive and disobedient and valedictory as the rules and regulations of the modern British state – indeed any modern state or superstate – are dreary and stifling and small.

Ceaselessly into the Past

The cast of characters in *Jerusalem* evokes a marginal Britain that is found in market towns and villages across the country, the kinds of places that delivered the balance of the Leave vote in 2016, and one whose eccentric grotesques populate the novels of Nicola Barker. *Darkmans* is a major work written around the same time as *Jerusalem*, but is also, like Barker’s oeuvre as a whole, an example of the provincial or minor literature that Michael Gardiner feels is essential to the recovery of a specifically English literary consciousness, as he puts it, ‘in order to help England establish itself as a body able to negotiate and to represent the experience of its people’ (Gardiner 2012: 163). Set like *The Season of the Boar* in the Kentish environs of Ashford, the novel’s idiosyncratic characters are an almost wilful rebuttal of the enervating blandness of their surroundings. Barker describes Ashford as ‘a through-town, an ancient turnpike ... a geographical plughole’ (Barker 2007: 5), and at that time, in the decade after the Channel Tunnel had opened, it was also considered a boom town, its boundaries constantly expanding as new arrivals moved in to make the most of the promised opportunities.

The novel’s central character, Daniel Beede, doesn’t think much of these so-called opportunities, regarding his life and career as having been ‘irreparably blighted by the arrival of the Channel Tunnel’ (6) after the new access road has physically separated his grandmother’s village of Newington from his grandfather’s village of Peene, both of

them close to the Tunnel's Folkestone terminal. Paul Kingsnorth, returning in 2006 to his own ancestral village of Kingsnorth, just outside Ashford twenty miles northeast of Folkestone, 'where generations of my ancestors worked in the fields, doing nothing obviously spectacular' (Kingsnorth 2008: 199), finds its medieval heart thankfully preserved. But he knows that Ashford is one of four growth areas in the Southeast designated for a significant expansion of population, which for Kingsnorth means one thing: a merger with the nearby 'hub' town, 'a suburb located in something called "greater Ashford"' (202).

At the time *Real England* was published, the planned development was scheduled for some time after 2021, but anyone approaching Ashford from the southwest (the direction of Kingsnorth) over the past decade will have observed the affluent but thoughtless new estates which now crowd the approach to the town. The author is taken to a housing development already built on the outskirts of his name-place and is predictably dismayed at the mish-mash of vernacular styles taken from all over the country: flint houses from Norfolk or the Chilterns, mock-Tudor, 'all dark beams and whitewash' (204), next to old Kentish wood-and-tile-style homes. 'It's like a regional housing styles theme park, or a very big model village. Off-the-shelf regional consumerism' (204). An everywhere place like this, being so mixed up and so ersatz – like an afterthought from Barnes's *England, England* – could never hope to be anywhere in particular, and is therefore perhaps ideal for the citizens of nowhere who, according to Paul Kingsnorth, we have all become. As Maude, one of the minor characters in *Darkmans*, says of modern Ashford: "'When I was a kid, this place was a beautiful, rural backwater, and now it's like fucking *Lego-land*...'" (Barker 2007: 690).

Given the soullessness of what is happening to his region, his town, it is hardly surprising that Daniel Beede, as one of the few who possesses what Ian Baucom calls 'the skill of reading and valuing England's memorial places' (Baucom 1999: 33), is also cynical about the trumpeted benefits of the Channel Tunnel, the catalyst for all this development, thinking that 'many of the employment opportunities on the project would pass over local people ... to benefit non-indigenous outside investors and foreign businesses' (Barker 2007: 7). What is missing from this critique is any sense of what the tunnel is for, of the unprecedented moment it represents. At face value, it's a surprising insularity to observe in Beede, of all the book's characters, a thoughtful man in late middle age and by no means an obvious nativist. But it's one which again points to the widely felt frustration at the corporate capture of twenty-first-century Britain even at the

height of the post-Millennium boom (the novel was published in 2007), notwithstanding the symbolism of liberal connectivity that the tunnel represents.

For Beede, as for Kingsnorth, this fast track to the global was the enemy of the local, quite literally in the form of various historic buildings around Folkestone which had stood in its way. He had tried to save one old water mill scheduled for demolition, by physically dismantling it with a view to rebuilding it elsewhere, but to no avail. The bulldozers arrived and Beede ‘saw history die’ (11), along with his faith and optimism, as ‘Progress, *modernity* ... had kicked him squarely in the balls’ (12). His son Kane says that ‘Beede thought modern life was “all waffle” ... [and] blamed David Beckham – personally – for breeding a whole generation of boys whose only meaningful relationship was with the mirror’ (19) rather than in service to the communities in which they were raised.

In the context of Beede’s curmudgeonly attitudes, the kind of reactionary fare often lazily associated with the Baby Boomer anti-immigrant cohort who predominantly voted Leave, Barker’s Ashford and Beede’s immediate circle is a fairly diverse community. One of these associates, a young Kurd of Yezidi origin named Gaffar, is an embodiment of the modern nomadism Ian Baucom describes in the context of Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* (1988) (Baucom 1999: 203); but also, in expanding the possibilities of modern Englishness, an example of ‘the migrant as England’s life-sustaining transfusion’ (208). Gaffar has the typical immigrant’s perspective on the attractions of neoliberal Britain, even for those on the lowest rung of the ladder – a perspective which in the wake of the EU referendum has been radically revised. ‘Politics were all well and good, Gaffar reasoned – ideals and such – but money was the language of progress. Money actually got you out of there [his birthplace of Diyarbakir in eastern Turkey]; into the colourful world which flickered on the screens of cable tvs in local cafes. Into freedom, Into Eden’ (68).

But progress was an unalloyed good only for those, like Gaffar, without an attachment to the places affected by it. For those rooted over generations in a town like Ashford – David Goodhart’s Somewheres – progress meant disruption even erasure of past or present, as with the line of trees on the edge of a forecourt at a local supermarket being laid waste by a ‘small but ruthlessly efficient band of chainsaw-wielding contractors’ (350), despite the trees’ useful function in reducing noise and pollution from the motorway nearby. Again with echoes of the Saxon Buccmaster from *The Wake*, Beede despairs at the spectacle, asking, “‘where’s the harm in just leaving things

as they are”?’ (351) And he browbeats the young lad stacking trolleys with a symbiotic view of life similar to that of Mo in *The Season of the Boar*, trying to persuade the kid of his real value. ““You’re an essential component ... the *spark* plug ... And without a spark plug this huge capitalist enterprise ... simply couldn’t start up””(351). For Beede, the young trolley stacker is more important than a footballer or famous actress, neither of whom have any essential function in his mind. ““They simply entertain. If Capitalism was the ocean,”” he says, ““all they’d be is the scum, riding on the crest of a wave.”” Inevitably, the young lad, who has a better intuitive grasp of the monetary theory of value in modern capitalism, replies, pricelessly, ““*Rich* scum”” (352).

An oxymoronic construction, the phrase’s mix of resentment and admiration is typical of the attitude of Barry towards his wealthy clientele in *The Season of the Boar*. A painter and decorator, Barry’s childhood experiences have made him scornful of the idea of class solidarity and a believer in neoliberal freedoms which have nonetheless failed to liberate him; though not averse to analysis, he is reluctant to admit that his own growing struggle to make ends meet in fact makes him a modern-day ragged-trouserred philanthropist toward the people he works for, as Oliver points out in a passing reference to Robert Tressell’s novel based on the writer’s own experience working in the same profession – in Hastings – in the early twentieth century (cf. Tressell 2008). And the ambivalence of people like Barry toward the cruelties and the near-impossible windfalls of lotto capitalism, which are nonetheless sufficiently plausible to keep millions of people investing in them a kind of desperate hope, is what until recently has made a genuine shift in politics so very hard to imagine let alone to engineer.

But a shift may be coming all the same, and what would drive it could be the very history whose loss Beede had mourned with the demolition of the old water mill. Even here in placeless, rootless Ashford, marooned in a neoliberal purgatory on the cusp of an economic crisis that will change the electoral calculus for so many in the years of austerity to come, with a door to Europe the people are increasingly keen to close, as the narrator tells us in *The Season of the Boar*; even here, even then, a remarkable past was intruding on the blandness and soullessness of the present. It’s a phenomenon we have started to get used to in the context of Brexit, with its frequent and often disturbing clarion calls to a lost national–imperial prestige, variously described by Nairn, Gilroy, Baucom, Kalliney, Gardiner *et al.*; the alarming use of air-raid sirens to herald the arrival of Nigel Farage at a Brexit party rally in Birmingham being one of the most recent examples (Osborne 2019). In *Darkmans*, in a way that evokes Freud’s tentative

analogy from *Civilisation and Its Discontents* (1930) of the psyche's deep-lying archaeology (Freud 1991: 256–58), this resurgent past manifests in material terms in the unearthing of archaeological artefacts from layers of subsoil during the construction of the new housing developments growing up around the town, or like the spreading geographical ripples of urban development around modern Ashford, whose “‘tiny, perfect, medieval heart ... is surrounded – obfuscated by all these conflicting layers, a chaos of buildings and roads from every conceivable time-frame.’” (Barker 2007: 398).

But there is also a supernatural element to these eruptions of history – disturbing encounters with animals of all kinds – dead raptors dropping from the sky or elderly dogs suddenly giving birth when long past a viable viviparity – an element which emanates from the ghost of the historical personage of John Scogin, the pre-imperial English trickster figure who begins to haunt the consciousness of many of the characters in the novel. Scogin, court jester to Edward IV and the Darkmans of the title, is described by one character as “‘a force of nature ... vicious and amoral. The absolute personification of misrule’” (644). Above all, he is a disrupter of lives and minds in a way that seems an eerie correlative to the disruptive forces, first economic and then political, which have beset the United Kingdom, and England in particular, since the novel was published. In that regard, in the context of Brexit's raking of the ashes of an apparently settled history, in which an ancient English imaginary has been dispossessed or at least misused over time by an opportunist British state, his supernatural claims on our attention, as on the minds of the characters whose undemanding lives he throws into chaos, may even signal the beginnings of a refusal by England and its literature of being ‘its own cultural export form’ (Gardiner 2012: 4) – ‘the carrier of the needs’ (4) of a disunited kingdom whose unsettled politics can no longer be ignored. In that sense, as the narrator discovers in *The Season of the Boar*, by accepting as somehow necessary the vicious and amoral process that Brexit in particular, and British politics in general, has become since the referendum campaign, and will no doubt remain long after we have left the European Union, we can perhaps see a path through the woods to an enlarged idea of England as a reenchanting country; rewilded, reinvigorated with ancient myths as well as modern dreams, and an unsuspected fauna of the future and the past.

The Season of the Boar: a novella

‘I’ve always been the outsider. I’ve always been regarded as some extraordinarily dangerous figure. I’m none of those things! I’m just a middle-class boy from Kent who likes cricket and happened to have a strong view about a supernational government from Brussels.’

Nigel Farage, interview in *Time* magazine, 6.12.2016

‘The life of nations, no less than that of men, is lived largely in the imagination.’

Enoch Powell, 1946

‘There’s no knowing what a dog myt have on his mynd.’

Riddley Walker, Russell Hoban, 1980

I have always had a fear of someone creeping up behind me. It can strike at any time and anywhere: in the street or the workplace or the woods behind my house; or even, in bed in the dead of night, in the hollow in the mattress my body has made over so many years. There are moments when this terror, which has dogged me for so long, seems poised to overwhelm me, though it's not the threat of violence I find unnerving. As far as I'm aware, I have not made enemies who would do me physical harm, if given the chance to hurt me, and I might not feel so menaced if that were the case. Instead, the climax to my fretful fantasy amounts to nothing more than a tap on the shoulder and a sense that someone or something has at last caught up with me which I had hoped to outrun. Still, for as long as I can recollect, I've managed to avoid thinking too deeply about it for fear of bringing on the very thing I'm trying to evade. But events in the country have taken a turn these past few weeks which make such a confrontation, if that's what it will be, look increasingly difficult to dodge.

I still go every day to my job at the insurance firm in Ashford, where I've risen to a position in management that is well-rewarded and will see me to a decent pension when I retire, assuming in the meantime the financial house of cards we've all been propping up for years hasn't come crashing to the ground. I don't really enjoy my work and I'm not sure I ever did. And while I've not exactly spurned opportunities I might have taken to advance myself, even within the limited vistas afforded by the industry, I have not exactly sought them out. So my professional status reflects not so much my ability as my level of ambition, which in recent years I've admitted to myself is a quality that I largely lack. But I do like my colleagues, though the easy banter we used to enjoy, when I worked at the coalface myself, is somewhat strained these days, the more so since I finally did get promoted three years ago from the low-ranking managerial post in which I had languished for the best part of a decade.

That's the price of progress, I suppose, though it might not be so irksome if the other managers, with whom I am now expected to fraternise, were a less dynamic bunch than they all pretend to be. I do my best to follow suit,

to thrust in the approved manner, but I can tell by the way they look at me that that is something else I lack – a killer instinct, the ability to stick the knife in when it counts – and it's true that I am always inclined to give even the laziest so-and-so another chance to prove themselves, because I can't bear to confront them. I don't know if such a quality, or its absence, is obvious in a person from birth or reveals itself only when a certain kind of pressure forces it to surface. I'm not even sure whether anyone I know beyond the boardroom cares about such things, and perhaps for the same reason they don't see the lack of it in me. I suspect this want of decisiveness would not be the personal failing of mine my wife would point to first, and my daughters would also moan about habits that I myself consider to be trivial. Which begs a question: are the worst aspects of a person's character the things they know about and seek to hide or those that everyone else can see but to which they themselves are blind?

I imagine these are not the kinds of problems my eldest, Libby, was being asked to think about for the GCSE in psychology she was busy revising for the other night – the night her sister, Anne-Marie, came back from a trip to France with her primary year group. That was when this funny feeling started up again, or at least when I first acknowledged to myself that the same thing was happening which I'd never been able to put a name to for all these years.

I'd gone to the school when the coach arrived back there in the early evening. There was a police car parked right behind it with a blue light flashing, skewed at a melodramatic angle across the road. I beckoned to the teacher to let my daughter get off the coach. Then I saw the man in the back of the police car – a young black man by the look of him.

My daughter was very excited by it all. "Daddy," she said, hardly able to catch her breath. "There was a man in the boot of our coach. Can you believe it? When the driver got out to open it up, he saw two legs sticking out behind the cases. He called the police. Can you believe it? The man must have got on board when we were in the supermarket in Calais. That's what Mrs Pettifor says."

“I expect she’s right,” I said in the measured tone of voice I always adopt when I want to calm her down, though on this occasion it didn’t seem to work.

“He was smiling when the police got him out. Can you believe it? We could have been kidnapped,” she said.

“Who by?” I asked her, though I didn’t believe for a minute that he was smiling.

“By the man, of course. That’s what Fatima says. The man on the coach.”

I could see my daughter in the mirror, looking round at the police car as we pulled away.

“Why would he want to do that?” I said. “He just wanted to get to England, and he did get here, didn’t he? I should imagine that was why he was smiling. I don’t think he was trying to kidnap anybody.”

“Oh,” she said, looking a little disappointed. Then she said, “What will happen to him now?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I guess he’ll ask to stay here and his case will be considered. Perhaps they’ll let him stay and perhaps they won’t.”

“Oh,” she said, looking round again one last time.

I took her home to have some supper and we talked some more about the man on the coach. Bridget, my wife, is a very fair-minded person, always rooting for the underdog and determined to set the children a good example. She works with kids with special needs in a local school not far from the grammar school that Libby is about to leave. She says it’s the first job she’s ever had that’s meant something to her, though she earns far less now than before we had the children, when she used to be a marketing manager for the company where I still work. It was a level of career achievement which at that time put my own efforts firmly in the shade, though nowadays she doesn’t put much store by a success that came all too easily and for that reason meant so little. “I can’t believe I was ever that person,” she says sometimes, as if there was something wrong with her back then, though in fact the signs of the woman she has since become were there even when I first knew her. These days she says she’s happier, and I take this as a

positive, trying not to be resentful of the extra burden it places upon my shoulders. But in truth the humanitarian impulse is so strong in her that it can be hard at times. Things came to a bit of a head last year when she joined a convoy taking supplies to the camp in Calais. I told her that it was no place for a woman, and the children were more than a bit nervous about her going. But nothing I say makes much of a difference these days, if it ever did. She said there were women in the camp who would take heart at seeing another woman helping out, and besides the men there weren't rapists. They were far too concerned with getting through the tunnel to be thinking about things like that.

"I never suggested they were rapists," I said, "just that a place like that is no place for a woman" – sound advice that, of course, she completely ignored, leaving the room without even bothering to look my way.

So she went, spent a few days there, and came back trying hard to hide what was a big disappointment, or so it seemed to me. It turned out her crowd of Good Samaritans had taken things that mostly weren't needed for which, though she wouldn't say it, the people there were less than grateful. "What did you expect?" I told her, not that this setback made her moderate her views in any way that I could tell. We had an obligation to help them, she insisted, whether they were grateful or not. After all, we caused the problems that forced them to come, starting illegal wars that sowed chaos across the world, and so on, and so on – at which point, the script being so familiar by now, I tend to zone out.

So anyhow, the migrant on my daughter's coach gave her another chance to soapbox the children with some of the reasons why people risk their lives to come somewhere so far from home. "He has probably been close to death more than a few times," she told them, her eyes glazing over in the way they do when empathy, her drug of choice, begins to take effect.

"Think of it," she said, "crossing the desert in fifty-degree heat, and then the Mediterranean in a boat that is so overcrowded it is in constant danger of sinking – with no captain or crew and perhaps no engine, either, abandoned to the wind and the waves."

"And the sharks," said Anne-Marie.

“There aren’t any sharks in the Mediterranean,” her sister added in her usual deadpan manner. “Not man-eaters, anyway.” Anne-Marie made a face. Her sister was always putting her right on things and in recent months it had begun to get on her nerves.

My wife went on, doggedly. “Then, as you travel through Europe, somehow avoiding all the people who are out to catch you and send you back home, not to mention the almost impossible task of smuggling yourself into Britain – well, you wouldn’t do it unless you were forced to,” she said.

I wanted to add something then – a few things, in fact – but I bit my lip. Bridget is an idealist and I guess it’s fair enough that she thinks every young person has a right to be that way. That’s the example she is setting the children, and they seem to appreciate it, too, I have to say. But I very much doubt it’ll do them any good. Life has got a whole lot tougher since we were young. Idealism is childishness, the luxury of a rich part of the world that’s getting poorer and more put upon by the year. “Today’s children can’t afford such trifles,” I tell her. “They need to live in the real world.”

“Idealism is the real world,” she comes back at me. “It’s about action or it’s nothing at all.” And I won’t deny that my wife is not just a keyboard warrior – she does follow through – though I’ve yet to see anyone getting any tangible benefit from what I admit are noble efforts on her part. In my case, calculations like these have never made much of a difference to my own outlook on life, as I was never much of an idealist in the first place. In fact, I struggle more and more to recall what it was that drew us together at the beginning, as the two of us are chalk and cheese on so many things. I remember the first time I became aware of this difference of outlook was when Diana died. The whole country went bananas for a week, and it was that crazy you were made to feel like not wailing and gnashing your teeth was tantamount to treason. Bridget went the whole hog, made the trip up to London to leave flowers at Kensington Palace, went and stared at the windows of Buck House, trying to shame those wicked royals into making an appearance. It put me right off her for a while.

We broke up for four or five months and, to be honest I didn’t know what to do with myself, so I’d drive off on a weekend simply for the change of scenery. It was on one of these trips only a couple of weeks later that I

found myself in a coffee shop in Canterbury – the old-fashioned kind you used to see a lot before the international chains put most of them out of business. The girl in there was doing everything on her own – taking the orders, making the orders, bringing the orders – with an attentiveness that immediately caught my eye. To look at her, it wasn't so much that she was pretty; it was her presence that struck me then as it does, even now, whenever she comes into my head. And I must still have been running on adrenaline after the break-up with Bridget, as I came straight out with it when I went to pay, asked her what she was doing that evening once she'd finished work. She looked at me, so surprised at the question that I felt sure she would turn me down. But it turned out that she was free that night, after all, as her mother had been planning to come and stay with her but had had to cancel a couple of days before when the family dog had got sick.

“What kind of a dog?” I asked her. Again, that look of surprise.

“A border collie,” she said. “My mother likes English dogs.” And it was then that I noticed her accent, which she told me later in the pub was French, from some city with a girl's name that I've forgotten, somewhere in the east near the border with Switzerland or Germany – at least, where at one time there used to be a border. She also told me her name, and that I haven't forgotten – Heloise, a lovely name I thought then and still do, though I didn't have the nerve to suggest it to Bridget when we were thinking of names for the kids in the years that followed.

Bridget doesn't know about Heloise, who can't have been any more than twenty when I knew her. In fact, that was quite a lot younger than I was, though by then she'd already been in England for the best part of a year and had lived for some months before that with a friend in Frankfurt. That was the time when a lot of the younger Europeans started to come over, and you could sense that things were changing; not just university cities like Canterbury but even humdrum sorts of places started to acquire a café culture, or at least they tried to. Heloise told me at our second meeting, when I came over again later that week, that she didn't really have a long-term plan. “I'm open to anything,” she said, and it was at that moment I realised she wanted me to kiss her. So I did kiss her, though not for long, as I didn't feel happy about people in the pub looking over at what we were

doing. But later, walking along the street, she stopped all of a sudden and pulled me into a doorway, and the kiss she gave me then almost blew my head off, I have to say. She wrote her address on a page of her diary she ripped out and shoved in the front pocket of my jeans, and made me promise to come direct to her place after she'd finished at the café the following Saturday.

I don't know why it never worked out with Heloise. I guess I was on the rebound and maybe if I hadn't been, I'd never have plucked up the courage to ask her out. But those few months that we were seeing each other... well, she was not like anyone I had ever met. She wrote poetry – in French, of course, so I couldn't really understand what any of it meant. But that never stopped her from whispering lines and verses into my ear when we were lying in bed together, as if she was trying to make what was happening between us even more miraculous than it already was, than it still seems to me even today. She was certainly full of surprises and literally open to anything, just like she had said. Our lovemaking, as she liked to call it, was a voyage of discovery – for her but even more so for me – across an open landscape, vast and without boundaries, in which we moved with complete freedom and a wondrous inventiveness from one astounding vista to another. *Des canyons aux étoiles*, as one of her poems had it; from the canyons to the stars just about covers it, I reckon. By any measure that's a lot of territory to get around, and it was as much as I could do to keep up with her endless curiosity and appetite for love, the playful adjustments of posture and positioning that found a new path to the waterfall, a new route to a paradise of mutual knowledge and delight. And when she came, she would cry – not just the plaintive gasping of another plunging cascade, but proper tears; at first just enough to wet her cheeks, then building into outright sobbing that went on for a while even after we had slumped down in the bed. And I didn't know what to do with myself, as I was also upset by it – stars and canyons do take a while to come back from, after all. I wanted to comfort her, but she told me that there was really no need, that I was very sweet but it was just the way she was, though for some reason even more so with me than in the past. She was stroking my cock very gently as she said this, and then she kissed me with a tenderness that reached right down to a

place whose existence I had never suspected until then, and have neither forgotten nor rediscovered to this day. I had not imagined that life could offer up a sweetness so solemn, and it was only when I let slip one night that I had also written poetry that things began to unravel. She was so excited by my admission that her open face and dark eyes seemed possessed of their own light source in the dimness of the bedroom. “I knew it,” she said. “I saw that in you, that need like I have it too – like a breathing you have to get out or a part of you will die. The only important part.”

Her words seemed like to drop like a stone into a deep pool, and perhaps that was why I couldn’t help being struck by the way she looked at that moment – the radiance she gave off that I realised, with a sudden sense of alarm, she had already seen in me, although she had to be mistaken about that. And then for a reason that I have never been too clear about, but which must have some bearing on the deep disquiet I still experience to this day, it all became too much. And when I insisted, in spite of her protests, that I didn’t write poetry anymore, she got angry and we had what amounted to a row, our first and last. By this point we’d been seeing each other for a few months, but the next time we met, just after Christmas, she had cooled a bit and it felt like she wanted something from me before she would welcome me back to the full candour of her love. But she can’t have understood what she had asked of me or she would never have asked it. Even if I had been able to find what she wanted and to bring it to her, I felt sure she’d recoil from the gift, and this might have been the reason why, when I tried to talk about it, I could feel myself withdraw. It was like the barriers coming down – my own and then hers in response to mine – and I knew that I would not be able to force them open again, that there was simply no way back.

For a while I felt pretty woebegone, as I could see that it was me who held the keys to any future we might have shared. But Heloise was a free spirit as well as a kind one, and I was certain, even then, that I was not. If we had stayed together, with her need to haul everything into the light she would surely have found this out before too long, and I didn’t know how she would think of me anymore when that happened. But I knew what it would do to me if she left me so exposed like that. So I decided that I would break it off before she did, and despite her evident distress when I told her, I didn’t

go back on my decision but simply rode out as best I could the agony I felt at having to let her go. The person she had fallen in love with was not who I had decided I was or was going to be in the future, was not who I am today or have ever been at any point in my life, but someone else entirely – some imaginary man I did not have it in me to become.

So anyway, that came to an end because it had to, and I consoled myself that despite feeling as if I had cut my own balls off, sooner or later the anguish would pass, though I was also sure that I would never again meet a girl like Heloise, if I lived to be a hundred and one. I tried to go about my life from day to day as if nothing important had happened, though I do remember on one occasion catching a glimpse of a face in the mirror that seemed even more stunned than I was that it was mine. But then a few weeks after the break-up, as luck would have it, there was Bridget, across the street, and I have to admit that it was more than just a flash of familiarity I experienced at that moment; it was something like the relief a sailor feels at the sight of land. She looked my way for the briefest time, a smile seemed to flicker across her lips, and as she disappeared into Asda she put a hand through her golden hair, which I had told her often enough in the past was the physical feature I loved most about her. Then a couple of weeks after that I got a Valentine's card that I knew was from her, and seeing as I'd already sent her one myself, this obviously meant we were back on again, that it was meant to be, and that familiar flash now became a constant spark.

For a few years things were great – hand in glove, as she used to put it, being a Morrissey fan. We got married, had Libby, and Bridget gave up her job, and for a while things just toddled on from one day to the next. And I have to say, though we never had much money in those days, that suited me to a tee. And then I don't know whether she was broody or just bored, but all of a sudden it wasn't enough just to stay at home and look after the three of us anymore. She got wound up all over again with the Iraq War thing, said she wanted to go on a march, that we had to stop this awful action that was happening in our names. I shrugged my shoulders at the prospect of her going until she announced that she was taking Libby with her. Well, I put my foot down at that. I said that she could go, that I wasn't stopping her, but

Libby had to stay at home with me. So anyway, she went, she marched, she shouted and screamed at Tony Blair, she got it all off her chest. She felt better about herself, she came home. Iraq was bombed anyway. Iraq was occupied. Iraq became a basket case, as Bridget puts it. She's right about that, I suppose.

Back in those days she used to try to persuade me of her point of view, an effort she's now more or less given up on, thank God. One night, a few weeks after the march, we were watching the news and there were missiles smacking into the side of some palace or other in Baghdad, and she asked me what I thought about it. I said I didn't know what I thought, that it was all a bit surreal, a bit remote for me to get my head around, which it was.

"Well, it won't be remote for long," she warned. I guess she was right about that, too.

"How can you support this?" she went on that evening, pointing at the TV as another bomb boomed out of the set. But I didn't support it, I told her. It wasn't a matter of principle. It was all about the balance of risk. A lesser evil to prevent a greater one.

"Lesser!" she said. "Lesser! How can you call that lesser?" And in the light of what has since transpired, perhaps that's another thing she got right. But forecasting is a notoriously difficult business, or else the actuaries our firm employs wouldn't be as well paid and as highly qualified as they are.

At the time, I was a supervisor in the claims department, but nonetheless I fell back on the collective expertise of my trade to amplify the point. "If in one case someone long outlives their actuarial prognosis," I patiently explained, "in a quite a few more they'll die before their time. In the end, someone has to make that call."

I thought I had weighed my words, made a very good argument for my own pragmatic point of view. But Bridget looked at me then like she didn't know who she was talking to, like she didn't believe what she was hearing. It was the first time she had ever looked at me like that, and this was unsettling enough for me to offer something further, something about the spread of democratic values and the freedom from tyranny that by stepping in with boots and bombs we were helping those poor people to achieve. I wasn't sure how much I believed what I was saying, or even if I cared that

much what happened to people in some faraway land. But no matter: what appeared to me to be an argument of plausible moral purpose only seemed to make things worse.

“Freedom isn’t something given to you by others,” she said, looking me straight in the eye. “It’s something you seize, even if it costs.”

Such a bold declaration made me worry for a day or two about what it was she really wanted, though I am fairly confident now that there was no personal dimension to what she had said. It is quite typical of Bridget that what seemed at the time like a high-minded statement of principle was indeed no more than that. But whatever she meant by it, in the light of current events, of which she takes quite a different view, it’s an idea which has struck me again with a certain force.

After supper that day when my daughter came back from her trip, I went out to the White Hart, as I tend to on a Friday evening. There's a group of us who go there for a game of pool and a bit of a chat. Barry shook his head like I thought he would when I told him about the young man on my daughter's coach. "I tell you, there's no stopping 'em," he said. "They just keep trying because we're such a soft touch. The whole bloody world knows it."

Oliver was lining up a long pot into the top right pocket. "If this goes in, I'm out," he said, in his customary mock-serious manner. Oliver still lives with his mother at the age of forty-whatever-it-is, and he's hardly ever serious about anything. He always claims to be a lifelong member of the Monster Raving Loony Party, though I suspect that even that is meant as a joke. He works for the council – a cushy gig like mine is, if truth be told – and he's somehow managed to avoid getting the chop in the shake-up of the last few years, since the crash. I asked him once what he did all day, and he looked at me for a moment as if I'd found out some dirty secret. Then his face cracked into a nervous grin. "Keep my head down, mostly," he said, sheepishly. "And if that doesn't work, I sit up and beg."

That's Oliver, a bit of a card. He hit the cue ball and I could tell he hadn't caught it right: the ball rattled against the jaws of the pocket and careered across the table, knocking the 8-ball on a tight angle into the middle left. "Dambusters!" he said. "Doesn't mean I'm in, though."

He reached into his pocket for some more coins, placed them in the slots and pushed in the slide until the other balls came rolling down. Mo, who makes up the fourth member of the quartet in our regular Friday get-together, reached down, pulled the balls out a couple at a time and plopped them in the rack.

Up to now, we haven't really talked that much about the big vote, as Barry likes to call it, but it's been getting lively in the past week or two, and people at work are pretty mixed up by it all. Not Barry, though, who has never had a moment's doubt on where he stands. Oliver is like me, weighing up the options, though leaning towards out, if his joking is to be taken at

face value, which I guess it shouldn't be. Mo is almost certainly for staying in, though he's canny enough in present company not to stir the pot, preferring cryptic offerings like the one he came out with now. "What you've got to ask yourself," he said, "is what's in your best interests. It is not as simple as some people are making out."

"Yes, it is, Mo," said Barry, flatly. "Honest, if you do all those calculations, you can tie yourself up in knots – lose sight of your instincts. And that's how a thing like this gets decided – from the gut. Look at you, for instance. What difference will it make to you? Your raw materials are all home-grown, and so is your market. No more thinking needed. I can't see what you've got to lose. Same with me. Same even with these two pen-pushers, I'd imagine," he said, winking at Mo and tipping his head to where Oliver and I were standing. "It's only those vultures on the Isle of Dogs who stand to lose by this, and they've got enough money stuffed away to get through anything that's thrown at them. Most of them got richer since the crash, after all – at our bloody expense!"

"It's true," said Oliver, for once without irony, and I also made a gesture conceding the point. Not that Barry has anything but the utmost respect for those who want to get on in life, as long as they have earned their good fortune. As he sometimes reminds us, his dad was a miner in the Kent coalfield. He was one of the few who carried on working when nearly all of his comrades were on the picket line way back when, though many would rather have worked but were too scared to defy the union – or at least that's what Barry's dad used to tell him. Barry says the experience of wanting to work, being jeered and insulted by his mates as he crossed the picket line every day, and being sent to Coventry by the community in which they lived for doing just that, knocked years off his father's life and forced the family to move away from the area when all the strikers went back to work. But that in itself turned out to be a blessing as the pit was closed for good just a couple of years after the strike had ended. Barry had been glad to go, as by then all his friends at school had turned against him, pushing him over in the playground almost every day, his knees constantly bleeding and permanently crusted over with what his tormentors accused him and his father of being. There was no argument, he says; it was one out, all out, and

anyone who thought otherwise was just a scab, bullied by the shop stewards in a way that was far more brutal than anything the bosses would have served up. The striking families had even organised a rota in the village to come and bang pots and pans and toot car horns every night in the street outside their house, to stop his dad from getting a good night's sleep before the next day's shift. He says he never did forget the lesson he learned at that early age – that all talk of solidarity among people is bullshit, that you've got to look after yourself before thinking about anybody else or you're just a pawn in someone else's game.

None of us have ever dared to point out the obvious flaw in Barry's argument, this being something that he couldn't begin to discuss but can only retell again and again to anyone who will listen until somehow things turn out all right. Which, of course, they don't; they didn't – not for anyone involved, aside from the bosses, of course. "Look at the good it did them, those so-called socialists," he says. "Even their own side hung them out to dry and got into bed with the other lot. No, when you scrape away all the flannel, self-interest is the one thing everybody lives by, and anyone who says otherwise is doing so for reasons they'll never let on, perhaps not even to themselves."

Of course, Barry is the first to admit that the way things have been going in recent years has made even self-preservation an increasingly difficult burden to bear. He says he hasn't been able to put up his day rates in a decade because of all the Polish tradesmen coming over, who still manage to undercut him by amounts he can't afford to match, something those hedge-fund managers whose houses he spends so much time painting and decorating didn't seem to give a toss about – that is, when they condescended to speak to him at all. One of the few who does make an effort among these masters of the universe is Ivan, the so-called One-Armed Bandit, a name that the City plutocrat apparently calls himself. According to Barry, this virtuoso of the two-way bet is ex-Army, an officer in the Sappers who lost a hand trying to defuse a landmine in the first Iraq War. "He sees it as a plus," Barry once told us. "A way of putting people off their stride, cos that's the kind of bloke he is." At this point Barry launched into a bad imitation of what he insisted was Ivan's posh-boy accent. "My dear

Barrington, I have always played a pretty slick game of squash. But when I come on court against a new opponent, *sans* prosthesis, it's like a six-point head start, don't you know. The tough ones are the guys who quickly adjust to going up against a cripple. They understand that you've got to use every tool you have, because the other feller certainly will," said Barry-Ivan, screwing his eyes up at the cunning of the man and marvelling at the opulence of Ivan's country seat. "It's some place, I can tell you. Ivan the terrible, I call him – yank the handle and see all the lemons line up. And you bet we do."

"Course we do," said Oliver with a goofy grin. "We're all ragged-trouser'd wazzocks, these days, aren't we?"

Barry looked baffled for a moment and turned his attention to the table. Mo was doing some lining up of his own at the other end, centring the balls with the rack, ready to begin another frame. He rolled the cue ball to the rim of the D and glanced up at Barry. "There are certainly enough scoundrels out there," he said. "But these people that you and I depend on, Barry – for work, I mean – they're just as trapped by the system as we are. There's a bigger picture that no one can step outside of, no matter what their circumstances. It's all connected – a symbiotic world."

Barry looked at Mo in disbelief and scoffed. "Parasitic world, more like," he said, though it wasn't quite clear – to me, at least – who he thought was feeding upon whom. He shook his head and smiled. "You spend too much time in the woods, mate. I'd say you should get out more, but it strikes me that you're out a bit too much. You know, mad dogs and Englishmen."

Even Mo had to laugh at this, as we all did. Then he smacked the white with his cue, slamming it against the phalanx of balls at the other end of the table, a stripe dropping into the top left from the chaos that followed.

Barry was right. Mo does spend a lot of his time outdoors. He makes furniture but it's more than that, I think. He lives by himself in a little bungalow on the edge of the woods that surround the village on three sides. But unless he's busy making a new piece, most days he'll be out and about among the trees, cutting and coppicing, I think it's called. We've got a golden retriever, Trudy, who needs a fair bit of exercise, or if truth be told perhaps it's me that needs it. I remember one time we were out walking in the woods and there he was, up ahead of me, picking mushrooms, making a very close study of the different ones he had found. I beckoned ahead as the dog ran towards him. "Is that your dinner?" I said. "Rather you than me. I'd always be worried about poisoning myself."

Mo shrugged a response. "It's not so hard. You start with the common ones, check with the books – you know," he said, patting the dog on the shoulder. I said it was a while since I'd read a book, which I later realised was actually true, and then I asked him what he did, and that was when he told me about the furniture. I've seen some examples of it since. It's not my cup of tea, to be honest, but it seems he's a bit of a craftsman. He gets plenty of orders from the well-to-do hippies and trustafarians and oligarchs' offspring living incognito in this part of the world, though I have never once learned who these people are, as their identities are strictly hush-hush. With people like that, discretion matters as much as the quality of the product or service you provide. So if Mo always bats away Barry's questions about them, it is no doubt because he makes a point of never asking any himself.

Trudy hustled out of view so I told him I'd see him down the pub the following Friday. But I turned back to look at him just as the path rounded a bend. He was standing very still, watching something in a tree – a bird, perhaps, or a squirrel – though I hadn't a clue as to why.

He's a bit of an enigma is Mo, prone to doing the unexpected just when you think you've worked him out. A few years ago, he stopped coming to the pub for months on end, from early spring to late summer. Not a word from him, which made the pool games a one-against-two affair for a while, unless someone else wanted to join us. Then one Friday in late July, rather

than go down the pub I stayed in to watch the Olympic opening ceremony when the games were in London, and there he was, on TV, in a stovepipe hat and mutton-chop whiskers, no less – looking like some swarthy Victorian magnate, standing alongside that famous actor who played Brunel. Well, that was a surprise to all of us. The following week he turned up again in the pub – he was without the whiskers by now, but he wasn't fooling anyone. Barry called him a right dark horse, and we all laughed at that, though I'm not sure Mo was laughing, despite the big grin.

He wasn't there the weekend after Anne-Marie came home. When I walked past his cottage, it was all locked up. I looked in through the kitchen window, feeling like that creepy old fox in the one book by Beatrix Potter I remember reading as a kid. There were a couple of rabbits hanging down over the sink, which told me he'd been out the night before.

I remember one time, I stopped by for a cup of tea and there was a rifle propped up against the counter.

"What's that?" I asked him, pointing to what looked like a rather bulky telescopic sight.

"It's a night sight," said Mo. "That's the best time for shooting game, best of all for rabbit and deer. I leave the deer alone – you're not supposed to shoot them – but in the winter you can't beat a rabbit stew. It's a bit of work to skin the things until you get the knack, but there's nothing better than doing the whole thing for yourself, of knowing you could always survive if you ever needed to."

I guessed he'd be back soon, while the rabbits were still fresh, and I thought about waiting around for a while on the off chance. But then Trudy trotted off into the bushes, her nose glued to the ground, so I carried on behind her into the quietness of the wood. In fact, there was no one around that day, only me and Trudy and what was left of the bluebells, which seemed a bit odd by itself. A blanket of cloud was smothering the sky – smothering the entire country, or so it seemed – and it left me feeling a bit restive. I stopped for a minute and looked around, listening. It was late May and even the birds were quieter than I could ever remember them being at this time of the year.

I came out of the woods and stepped onto the cricket ground. We're lucky to have a cricket ground in the village, though it is so small that a good visiting batsman who gets in can quickly rack up a big score against our pretty ordinary bowling attack. I used to play myself, chucking down a few round-arm pies that got slower every year. But being carted around the ground week after week, season after season, took a toll in the end, so I stepped down to allow younger and more talented players to see if they could do better. But now I had just come around from behind the pavilion – which in truth is not much more than a shed – when I saw the extent of the damage. The square, and especially the pitch they were due to play on that afternoon, had been dug up by some cack-handed gardener. That was what it looked like. Richard, the wicketkeeper, who is also the groundsman, was standing over the damaged area, prodding it with his boot.

“Crikey! What happened?” I said as I approached.

“Animal of some kind,” he said gloomily. “Doubt if I can firm it up enough for this afternoon, but I’ll give it a go.”

“What kind of animal?” I asked.

“Dunno. Not deer, though. Possibly badger. More likely a boar.”

“Boar? You’re joking, aren’t you? There aren’t any boar round here. I thought you only get them in Europe.”

“I’m afraid there are. You don’t see them but they’re here all right. One was killed out on the road near Woodchurch last year.”

It was true. I remembered seeing the report in the paper, though at the time I had thought it was just a lone animal which had got out of a zoo or an animal park like the ones we’ve been to with the kids in the past. I hadn’t imagined there were so many at large. It seemed incongruous that a creature so exotic could have done this.

Richard went on prodding the earth back into place for a bit. Then he said, “Better go get some tools, I guess. See what I can do before we make a decision to phone the other team or not.”

I watched him traipse off to the pavilion and then, absent-mindedly, pressed my own shoe against a divot in the pitch, annoyed to see a surface so familiar so disturbed.

When I got home with the dog, Bridget had gone out shopping with Anne-Marie. Libby was upstairs in her bedroom revising, and all of a sudden I felt at a bit of a loss. I wandered from one room to another, looking for a spirit level that had gone missing from the tool shed which I still haven't managed to track down.

I went into Anne-Marie's room, which was neat and tidy as it always is. On her desk I found a sheaf of papers she had taken out of the photocopier. On the top sheet were the words 'Samuel's Epic Adventure', and beneath them was a picture she had drawn of a man with curly hair and dark skin, smiling and sticking his thumbs up, standing between two smiling policemen.

The story was pretty unlikely but no more so than the similar kinds of stories you see in the papers or on the TV all the time. In Anne-Marie's tale Samuel was a farmer's son from somewhere south of the Sahara. But farming was getting increasingly hard to sustain as the desert crept across the continent, taking up more and more of the land where people could viably grow things. The climate was changing, said the story, and it wasn't Samuel's fault. Crops, if they grew at all, were stunted and hard to eat, so nobody wanted to buy them. Samuel could not see any kind of future for him in his village, and seeing as he needed to help his family as much as himself, he left for the capital city of his country. But everyone there lived in a tin shack, and food was just as hard to come by. So far, so miserable, I thought.

But Samuel was a bright boy brought up with love – that much was clear from my daughter's drawings – and thus he had the confidence or the wisdom to make up his mind to leave. He got on a bus that crossed the desert, but soon the bus broke down and the passengers set off back to the city on foot. Now he was facing a dilemma: he had used up the last of his money on the bus fare and he knew very well that if he went back to the city he would never get out again. So in a heartbeat he resolved to walk across the desert, even though it was clear that he would probably die trying. And sure enough, within a day and a night he was down to the last of his water.

Exhausted on account of the heat, he collapsed in a sand dune as the sun was going down at the end of the second day. There he would certainly have perished if it hadn't been for a friendly camel who came along towards morning and found him asleep in the dune. Standing over the boy, the camel licked his face to try to wake him up. In a while, because the camel's tongue was so rough – my daughter had drawn a very big and sloppy pink tongue to which she had Pritt-sticked some real sand – the animal managed to rouse him and persuaded the weary and dehydrated lad to clamber up onto his back. Then off it set again across the desert until, towards the end of the day, with his bottle now empty, Samuel spied what appeared to be a waterhole in the distance. He drank and drank from the oasis and even had a coconut to eat. And the camel, knowing all the wells and waterholes from Timbuktu to the Nile, took him right the way across the Sahara until, after a long and difficult journey, Samuel at last caught sight of the pyramids in the distance. In the moonlight they passed beneath these mysterious structures and slowly trudged their way along the Nile until they reached the sea. The camel wished him luck and Samuel concealed himself on the dockside amid a mountain of luggage until nightfall the next day, when he crept aboard a big ferry and hid again, this time in a lifeboat on the upper deck.

The stowaway was found the following morning by two British children, a brother and sister a few years younger than him. In fact, they had been looking for stowaways but were amazed and even a bit scared when they found a real one. They brought him things to eat from the buffet and a newspaper to read. He seemed to know a lot about the different countries of Europe, and especially the football teams. He spoke three languages. Then the next morning, as the boat came close to the southern coast of France – my daughter had clearly underestimated the length of the journey from Egypt to the Côte d'Azur – the children discovered that Samuel had gone. Unnoticed by anyone, he had dived off the ship as it came into port and had swum the rest of the way to shore.

When he got out of the water, he met a Frenchman with a big moustache cycling along the promenade. "I need to get to Calais," said Samuel. "Will you give me your bicycle?" The Frenchman thought about it and, folding his arms, said with a dignified air, "I will if you tell me a story that I like."

So Samuel told the story of the journey he had made from his village, with the bus breaking down in the desert, and the camel finding him, and the swallow who had sat with him on the camel for a few days when it, too, had needed a rest. (I couldn't decide whether Samuel had made up the swallow to make his own story more interesting or whether my daughter had added a new detail she had forgotten to mention earlier on; children's aesthetic accidents have about them such a persuasive charm that it's all too easy to see purpose where there is none.)

And so they carried on over dunes stretching to the distant horizon, day after unrelenting day. Samuel said the stars in the desert looked as dense as a swarm of bees and were almost as noisy, so my daughter's story had it. He told him he had met the swallow again on the ship, hitching yet another ride, and he realised then that swallows were getting as lazy as men, which made him more worried about the state of the world than any other single factor. At long last he had made it to France, said Samuel, and here he now was, needing a bicycle to get to Calais.

"I do not believe a word of it," said the Frenchman with a great flourish, despite Samuel standing in front of him, dripping wet after walking out of the sea. "But it was a good story, well told. Here is the bicycle you want, but if you do not mind taking it to this address, I would be grateful to you." He handed Samuel a postcard on which an address was written. "It is a small village a few miles from Calais, where my sister lives. She will drive you the rest of the way."

"Not at all, it will be my pleasure," said Samuel courteously, and with that he got on the bicycle and started to pedal. It took him three weeks to get to Calais but the weather was pleasant and the French people threw away so much food that was good to eat that he never went hungry. With the help of the Frenchman's sister, getting on board the coach full of schoolchildren, including Anne-Marie, the story's narrator, proved to be the easiest part of the journey by far. And that seemed to be the end of the story, though I wasn't sure if there was more to come, and whether what happened to him when he got to England was the hardest part to think up.

I tidied the sheets of writing and drawings into the same neat pile I'd found them in, on top of the copy of *The Little Prince* that Bridget had

bought for Anne-Marie for Christmas. I was amazed at the twists and turns of the story. It was rather romantic and a bit silly, but it showed real imagination, and once again I got that strange feeling I had had a couple of days before. I decided not to mention the story to Bridget, though no doubt she would find it herself and tell me about it. I made up my mind to pretend I hadn't read it.

The week after my daughter's trip, all the talk in the office had turned to what we should do – stay or go, leave or remain, in or out. Even Brenda, my PA, whose normal interests encompassed little beyond the world of celebrity dished up by the tabloid press, had put her mind to addressing the same subject that was beginning to exercise the rest of us, and it seemed she wasn't happy. In fact, it surprised me a bit that people were starting to develop such trenchant feelings when even a month before no one had known what to think. Opinions are easy, I guess, and these days we're all encouraged to have one, whether we know what we're talking about or not. And woe betide anyone who says we don't.

In some of the lunchtime conversations in the staff canteen, I overheard suggestions of what I already knew – a general sense that everyone was fed up. What they were fed up with wasn't clear at all, and it still isn't clear, though there was something doing the rounds that week about the millions of Turks who would come and swamp the country and sponge off the welfare state. It all seemed pretty far-fetched to me, but still it struck a chord – a barely audible chord, like a high-pitched whistle beyond the human range, so that you were never quite sure who else had heard it. I guess that's why no one liked to talk about it directly. But what with all the other chords which had been sounded in the previous few weeks, the disharmony it created was something we could all feel.

Midweek, I left work early and went to have my hair cut. I've tried a few barbers in town over the years. I got fed up with the repetitive patter of the old twins, local boys from a long line of barbers whose sons had always taken over the business in the past. But when the time came, none of their own offspring was interested – there were better livings to be had these days – and none of the trainees they had tried over the years had worked out either. Now their own skills were on the wane and they were just doing it to keep their hand in between rounds of golf on a Wednesday afternoon and the weekend. And every time I went there they told the same old stories, the same old Brylcreem shtick they'd been pedalling for years, alongside the

regular whinge about benefit scroungers they'd read up on in the paper. They were just marking time, the pair of them, and the cut I was getting was pretty erratic at best, so for the past few times I've gone to Emre, who's stuck out on the Canterbury road and also happens to be the cheapest in the whole of Ashford. Best of all, he doesn't feel the need to chat, just gets on with it and does a good job, though on this occasion he kept getting calls on the mobile, breaking off what he was doing to natter away in a language it occurred to me, with a bit of a jolt, could have been Turkish. The second call that came in, after a couple of minutes I began to feel a bit tetchy and when he came back I could tell that he had picked up my change of mood. I tried to snap myself out of it, but then a group of men passed by outside the window – I don't know where they were from; somewhere in the east – having a noisy conversation in yet another language I didn't understand as they swaggered down the road. When the haircut was done, I paid up but forgot to give him the tip I usually do. It was only when I got to the car that I realised.

Friday evening came around and the four of us reconvened at the pub. It was as hard to stay off the topic as it was to avoid it on the net or on the telly. Barry was grinding his axe with more annoyance than usual. He said another boat in trouble had been picked up – full of Albanians, this one – taking on water like billy-o, just off the coast at Dymchurch, which is only a few miles away to the south. That really brought it home to all of us, I think. Barry said it didn't matter that the Channel lay between us and the Continent – people came anyway because they felt that once they got here, they could lap it up on the system and never would be sent home, not in a million years. "They prey on our good natures," he said. "You don't see them stopping in France, do you? That's why the Jungle is still there. It's not called that for nothing, you know. The French treat them like animals, worse than dogs – just look at the Paris suburbs. And the Germans are just as bad. You've got hundreds of thousands in Germany living in conditions you wouldn't wish on your worst enemy. Even people who've come from a hell-on-earth like Iraq want to go back home. Frau Merkel may have open arms but the fists are closed up tight, you can be sure of that."

This was one of those times when I wondered where Barry was getting his information; he certainly wasn't reading the same things I was. But then, when you go to the well these days, it never is dry, is it? And the torrent of stories that has gushed to the surface in recent years – as if the earth had begun weeping them from every crack in the ground – meant as long you said it loud enough, you could argue almost anything you wanted and people would believe it. You see news reports that we've become a nation of addicts – drugs, sugar, sex, oil, gambling, gaming, drinking, you name it – but from where I'm standing our most unquenchable craving is for stories, one we go on indulging as today we can like never before until every little certainty we ever had is hanging off its hinges. And that is why it occurred to me that perhaps what he said was true, after all, because almost everything seems to be these days, when even two things that appear to contradict each other directly can be asserted as truth and neither one can ever be wholly disproved.

Later, lying in bed that night, I couldn't stop thinking about that boat in trouble, an incident which, being in our neck of the woods, had made it seem true to all of us, though why being local made it more authentic, I'm not sure. I guess the national media had named places we knew to be real, which even people living in the next county might have had to look up, and that kernel of hard facts had brought the lifeboat, the coastguard and the boatload of bedraggled human cargo vividly to mind. In fact, I didn't care about the men on the boat – I reckoned they were just chancers – but I wouldn't wish that kind of escapade on anyone. But why had they done it? Was their own country so dreadful, sitting forlornly outside the economic embrace of the EU? And why here, at the other end of the Continent, only reachable by a journey of such obvious danger? Was this really the land of milk and honey, worth taking that kind of a risk to reach? What had made our little island such an Eldorado for the poor and the needy? I really didn't know.

As I was drifting off to sleep, for the first time in years I remembered something that happened when I was maybe twelve or thirteen. There was a lake near where I lived, which is not so far from where we are now, just

across the county line. One summer, a couple of friends from school came to stay, and I took them down to the lake to have a wander. It wasn't all that big, perhaps a hundred and fifty yards across at the widest point. But an island with steep sides rose out of it from roughly the centre of the lake, and I had always wanted to know what was on top of that island. There were trees and thick undergrowth I could see from the shore, but I imagined these hid something more interesting, perhaps some hermit who lived there unbeknownst to anyone, spending all his waking hours in fervent prayer for the souls of the living and the dead, or so I fancied, or even simply for his own troubled spirit. Or perhaps it was something even more ghoulish, like the mortal remains of someone just like that, the skeleton of the same hermit still kneeling with his hands clamped together, having used up the last of his strength reciting one final impassioned prayer. I described these ideas to my friends, who became as caught up in the fantasy as I was, so that one of them suggested we make a raft and paddle across.

The lake was in a quarry which had been abandoned a few years earlier when the brickyard that dug the clay went bust. I could still remember the hoot of a steam whistle that went off every afternoon when the shift had ended and then the surprise I felt when I mentioned to my father that we hadn't heard it for a while and he told me that the brickyard had closed. And for a moment I could see all the men who had worked there walking out for the very last time and I wondered where they had all gone, and whether their sons were boys I might have known who lived in the village. I might even have wondered whether the same men had gone on to find other ways of earning a living, though the problems of people we didn't know personally were not something that was talked about in my family. But since that time, a few years earlier, the quarry pits had filled up with water from underground springs, and some of the diggers and trucks they had used to take out the clay had been left in there and were sitting on the bottom of the lake like shipwrecks – 'underwater hazards', as the signs all around the shore made clear, and not just for the legs of an unwary swimmer but also, I have since come to realise, for an unsuspecting mind.

The afternoon we all went down there, I wasn't thinking about any of that. I was full of plans for building the raft and getting across to the island,

as I had long dreamed of doing. A few derelict buildings still stood just a short distance away from the lake, and we went inside them to gather up bits of wood and lengths of rope and even a few plastic canisters that we decided would give the raft some much-needed buoyancy. Somehow we managed to tie these bits of garbage together into a vessel that seemed to float OK, and with a couple of broken planks as paddles we set off for the island. The sun was setting behind the far side of the island, and by the time we pitched up on the shore I had begun to feel a bit of a chill.

The raft also felt a little bit loose by the time we had pulled it far enough up the bank, and we should have taken a few minutes then to make it seaworthy for the journey back. But we were too excited at making it across and now we raced each other to the very top of the bank, which I was the first to reach – it was my island, after all. But even in the gloaming I could tell that none of our imaginings would come to pass. Stunted trees and undergrowth – dense brambles and beds of nettles – were all there was. It was a big let-down. We walked around the edge of the island, where the growth was not so thick, to see if we could find a way into the centre that might reveal something more than the monotony of a natural disorder. But there was no path, nothing, and besides within a few minutes the sun had gone down and it was getting hard to see clearly beyond a few feet in front of us.

We came back to where the raft was and slid down the bank. At the water's edge, it was pretty gloomy now. I said we should probably fix up the raft a bit, but the other two were worried by the approaching darkness, so we pushed off and began to paddle for the mainland shore. The raft began to wobble beneath us almost as soon as we pushed away from the island, and it was obvious that we weren't going to make it. We were still twenty yards from the shore when the whole contraption fell apart and tipped the three of us into the water. Even though we were close enough to the shore it still seemed miles away. I made a grab for one of the canisters, but it slipped out of my grasp and drifted out of reach.

Everyone was panicking now and almost in reflex I shouted, "Swim for it!" But it wasn't really swimming that any of us did then, just a sort of misdirected thrashing toward the darkening shore. And at that moment the

shipwrecked machines came into my head, calling out from the deep. And as if hearkening to these industrial ghosts my shoes and clothes seemed suddenly to want drag me down with them, like malevolent spirits whose true allegiance I had never suspected until then. I felt like giving in to them and slipping under the water, letting myself be dragged down. But somehow my legs and arms had other ideas, and I also hadn't reckoned that at this point in the lake the ground sloped in a shallow gradient into the water, so at least ten yards out I found I could touch the bottom. I was panting, almost hoarse from fear, but I managed to shout to my friends to put their feet down. They scrambled even more frantically for the shore, and first one and then the other managed to stand up in the water and stagger into the shallows until they felt they were safe. We all sat down in a few inches of water, and then one of my friends started screaming. In fact, it wasn't so much screaming as a terrified wail that drained the oncoming night of any atmosphere and seemed at that moment, in my mind, to put a curse on the lake. The sound of my friend wailing burrowed deep into me that night, so that the following day when the two of them had gone I could feel it was still there – like some parasitic worm, lodged in my hippocampus, that's been gorging itself ever since.

I never went back to the lake again and I had buried the memory until now, as I lay in bed in a cold sweat, realising how close we had all come to drowning that night. And I couldn't help thinking of all those boats in the Mediterranean, all the people in the water every time one of them capsized, all the children slipping from their fathers' hands and sliding into the water. I thought about my own children and I felt the same panic I had that night at the island, and I know that, lying there, I did what I must have done back then and tried to put all of it out of my mind. It was a problem I hadn't caused and couldn't do anything about. It was none of my concern.

The following day, I was feeling a bit unsettled and instead of going through the woods I decided to skirt around the edge and head across the fields with Trudy. There had been unbroken cloud overhead for about a week, and I needed to get some fresh air into my lungs, so we made for the old ruin up on the hill. The path around the first field goes past a farm I once stumbled into by mistake one autumn day, a number of years ago now. It was a chilly morning in late October and I couldn't help but be drawn by the noise, which even from a hundred yards away was a high-pitched uproar of gobbling; in a spot that was normally so peaceful it sounded like bedlam indeed. The din was coming from a large metal shed in the yard, but there was no one around. The door wasn't locked so I took a peek inside, and there in the dim light that seeped through the couple of corrugated plastic sheets fixed high up in the side of the shed was a biblical multitude of turkeys – hundreds of them, maybe thousands all jammed together in that cavernous space, with hardly room enough to dip their heads down and eat whatever it was the farmer had put on the floor for them to gobble up. They were so cheek by jowl, it was obvious that they were destined for the slaughterhouse before too long, and perhaps I should have been horrified, or at least saddened, to see sentient creatures of this size being kept in these conditions. But I can only remember being dumbstruck at the spectacle and wanting to get out of there as soon as possible, aware that I was trespassing, though not so much on private property as on the prelude to a massacre. Perhaps that's why it isn't often I bring Trudy this way, even though it's a pleasant-enough walk with a nice view from the top of the hill. And fair play to the farmers, who have to deal with life and death on a daily basis. They understand as well as anyone that civilisation is a neat little word for organised cruelty. And as guardians of a hard truth that most of us are able and happy to ignore, perhaps that gives them a sense of the world that puts a lot of other things in perspective.

Now, as I walked up to the farm, I couldn't help but notice a big red campaign poster on a homemade billboard, overlooking the road. It was hard to understand why any farmer who is worth his subsidy would want

shot of an institution that keeps so many of them in business, no matter how corrupt it seems. But, of course, I knew why, and by now I could see any rational doubts were swept aside by the calling of a greater cause, a principle of liberty, economic and otherwise, in the minds of those who took that view. It was the same mistrustful idea of sovereignty that Barry was always harping on about – the need for self-respect, of not having to lean on anybody else or have them lean on you, just in case they did you over, as basic human nature dictated they would in Barry's way of seeing things. And if that means a few sacrifices need to be made to achieve the cherished dream of autonomy – whatever it amounts to in the end – well, we'd cope with the consequences. That's what they keep telling us. That's the vision. And it's not as if we haven't already shown enough stomach for the fight. After all, so we're told, that's what the last few years have been all about for most of us – a necessary sacrifice for the common good – though it's a tale that no one quite believes anymore, as the good is good for nothing and no one, and to most of us seems the opposite of common.

I carried on until the path bent around towards open country, passing a small stagnant pond in which part of a rusting bicycle frame was sticking up out of the water. In the distance, getting closer, I could see another walker with his dog, a German Shepherd, which for some reason he kept on a lead, though as the pair got closer I realised the thing he was holding was in fact a kind of handle, and the man himself must have been blind. I was about to call my own dog to heel when the two canines met about twenty yards ahead, and I could see the Shepherd wasn't at all fussed with the attention Trudy was giving it. The owner stopped and bent down to give Trudy a pat.

"They take us for a walk, don't they?" I said as a joke, assuming the man was up for a bit of banter. "I wouldn't get any exercise at all if it wasn't for Trudy."

The man's blank face softened into a smile. "I had the option of another retriever last time around, but then someone introduced me to Lord, and it was love at first lick, wasn't it, boy?" he said, talking gently to the dog.

"That's an unusual name," I said.

"Lord is my shepherd," he said simply.

"He leads me in green pastures," I quipped.

“Ah, yes, very good. Something along those lines, or perhaps by still waters.”

I looked over at the pond and wondered if he knew it was there. “It’s funny,” I said, “I remember Alsatians used to scare me witless when I was a kid. They had a bit of a reputation. But they seem quite docile when you think of some of the breeds that have come into the country since then.”

“None of which is half as dangerous as its owner,” he said, with a calm certainty that seemed slightly odd. “There really is only one breed we need to worry about, and I can usually sense when there’s going to be trouble.”

I nodded, then added a “Yes” when I realised he couldn’t see the gesture, though it occurs to me now that I might have been wrong to think that.

“Well, anyway, time for a spot of lunch for us. Have a nice walk, won’t you,” he said, as off they went again. But then a few yards down the path, apparently as an afterthought, he called out over his shoulder, “And be careful.”

I did wonder for a moment whether he was trying to warn me about some hazard I would come across further on. I was just about to call out to ask him when I realised his remark had been of a more general nature, which also seemed a bit strange. I carried on watching the man and his dog as they followed the path along the edge of the woods, using his own four senses and the dog’s five, and perhaps some special talent he had hinted at, an intuitive gift I found a bit unnerving to contemplate, a kind of blind person’s X-ray specs that I was tempted to dismiss outright.

They disappeared behind the farm and I looked around to see that Trudy had run off. I didn’t know where she had got to but I carried on all the same in the direction of the ruin, beginning to breathe a bit harder as the gradient began to rise. In truth, the ruin is just a section of a thick stone wall with the hint of an arch where centuries ago it was broken off. It was just coming into view beyond the spinney at the top of the hill. The spiteful cries of jackdaws spat out from among the trees as I approached, and I was rounding the last of these when Trudy bounded past me and shot behind the old wall. In truth, it isn’t much of a ruin, not even enough to be marked on the OS map for this area, and I had often wondered what kind of building the remaining section of wall had once belonged to. The hilltop site suggested a

defensive structure like a castle, but the possible arch pointed to a sacred building of some kind, most likely a minor abbey such as existed all over the country until fat King Henry decided he would part company with the Church of Rome. That divorce from an ingrained consensus, which had already begun to fragment, led to a golden age that still defines old England in the national self-image, but it can't have been easy if you didn't go along with it. Priest holes and persecution followed later, and by that time the abbeys had been ransacked and so thoroughly dismantled by noblemen needing stone for their own grand designs that it's a wonder there's anything left of them at all. I remember on the first trip Bridget and I ever took together, we were driving around somewhere in the west country. We were drifting through a valley one afternoon when completely by accident we came across one of the more intact of these monastic dinosaurs – its massive defenestrated skeleton looming up to one side of the road, a stone carcass stripped clean by time. In lesser ruins, too, like the one over in Lamberhurst where we used to take the kids – and even in this one – something still lingers that is more than just an arrangement of stones according to the building codes of the period, to the extent that I have long thought that the effort needed to erase a culture and its ways of being is almost as much as that required to establish it in the first place. And even when all the physical traces are as good as gone, what happens to the memories of those who knew them? If they speak of those memories, knowledge of another way of being is invariably passed on; if they are forced to remain silent or they do not speak, something is still transmitted, if only by omission, through the intuited refusal of speech – the sadness of a lost love that was never allowed to be openly mourned.

I looked out from the top of the hill, trying to imagine the monks at their exercise, their bellies growing fat from the collecting of unearned wealth and the selling of pardons – the only kind of insurance that mattered at the time – benefits whose reality, let alone whose effectiveness, had to be taken completely on trust. Still, back then at least it was your own sins you were paying to absolve; not like now, when the banks can frighten governments and the people who vote for them into handing over our money to pardon not the sins of the supplicant but those of the pardoner himself. God knows,

that's a great story they've got going there, and the few facts that we can all agree on are never enough to refute it. Even now, whenever I blot out the economic shoptalk and think about it for a minute, the sacerdotal dogmas of the financial system seem as impenetrable to reason as the doctrines that once governed the lives of everyone in Christendom, but which now even the Church takes with a big pinch of salt. And the financial clergy are such a powerful bunch that it isn't long before I lose my nerve in these matters, mindful of my own position, and fall into line with what Barry describes, without exaggeration, as the biggest con trick in history.

I've never understood the attraction of so much risk myself. When I started in the insurance business, things were so much simpler. Finance did more or less what it said on the tin. And I like to think that my own trade has remained true to that function, though I try not to look into it too much as I know there's enough evidence of bodies buried and rightful claims denied. Tom, the senior manager in office supplies, an avuncular fellow who has been with the firm even longer than I have and rather likes his puddings, put it well over lunch the other day. "Why risk anything when what we're selling is something far more valuable – peace of mind – which when you get down to it is all that anyone ever really wants, the holy grail of assets. You just cannot put too high a price on it."

Kevin, who works in business strategy, shot him a look of wonderment, but Tom was undeterred. "In fact, if you're looking for an alternative to religion, I reckon we're a pretty good bet. No need to believe in anything you can't spend and with far lower premiums than the Church expects, even today – and payment is as good as guaranteed should the worst ever happen. Now that's what I call reassurance, and you won't have to give up your soul to get it. Yes, peace of mind is a fine business to be in – indeed, a truly noble calling, it seems to me."

By this point, Kevin had started to cough on something that had gone down the wrong way, and that rather put an end to the conversation. No doubt marketing would have been interested in Tom's consoling philosophy, but I'm not sure it figures much in the kind of calculations that Kevin is employed to make. And I've seen no evidence, personally, for Tom's confident boast; despite all my years in the industry and all the perks

and privileges I've secured for myself and my family, I'm not sure I'm any closer to the mythical 'peace of mind' on which he was expatiating with such certainty. Perhaps I'm expecting too much, as it never claims to be anything more than a worldly business, insurance, its effects directed firmly at the needs of the living – at the needs of the body not the soul – a business and nothing more; one that trades on a fear of the future, but a rational and testable fear for all of that.

I guess the real power of religion or any other kind of faith depends on a twisting of the same kind of fear into a desperate and quite unreasonable form of hope, persuading otherwise sensible people into doing the most irrational things – like praying or blowing yourself up – on the unlikely chance that some quite implausible benefit will result from it, even though any rational analysis points quite clearly to the opposite outcome. In fact, sometimes people give in precisely because these same arguments are so patently at odds with their own material interests, as if stabbing themselves in the face will deliver insights, deep and transformative, that a wider, worldly path would simply avoid; the road less travelled and all that. Some of the things I've been hearing on TV and the radio these past few weeks have certainly struck me in that light, and I concede that it's a message that's not without a certain, strange appeal.

That said, as I understand them, from their own point of view the abbeys were among the most rational institutions of their time, cleverly managed cash cows for the Church, and the hubs of all cultural activity for the surrounding communities, as well as an utterly convincing cover story for their spiritual needs. Being a monk must have been a good and even varied career by the standards of the day, and for that reason it seems odd that we now think of such places as a retreat from real life. But I guess it depends on what you mean by real. I remember there was a TV series I got into a number of years ago now, just after Anne-Marie was born, in which a group of men from different backgrounds spent time in a monastery, trying out the cloistered life for size. I was quite taken with the evident simplicity of that existence but, even more than that, with the kinds of questions it was asking of the participants. In fact, a choice which at first sight seemed like a form of escape, and clearly was in the minds of some of those involved, ended up

being a kind of existential reality TV, exposing them to everything they had felt or done in their lives which they had tried to suppress or forget. There really was no escape. There really is none, even when your every move is not being dogged by a camera crew and half a million viewers.

Trudy had disappeared again, and when I looked out I could see her nosing her way across the field at the bottom of the hill. I set off home, trying to remember the rest of Psalm 23, which at one time in childhood I had been able to recite by heart. But the only verse that came to me was the one about walking through the valley of the shadow of death, a place I had often tried to visualise back then, though whenever the image had started to crystallise in front of me, I had always pulled back, afraid of what I would find.

The mood in the office seemed to darken over the next week. There was an atmosphere that everyone could feel, and on Tuesday, for some reason I haven't yet got to the bottom of, it all became too much for Nadia, the Romanian graduate who's been with us for about a year. If truth be told, she's a lot brighter and more self-possessed than most of the locals who work here – and her English is better, too, in a formal sense – so I had already marked her out for a promotion. I had her down as a tough cookie, but then she went home in tears at lunchtime and called in sick for the rest of the week. Her section, which can be a bit lively at times, was pretty quiet for the next few days, I noticed.

When I got home on Friday, my wife had bought the local paper, as she tends to, being someone who is interested to know what goes on. The front-page story was alarmist in a way I have learned to expect from that old rag – ‘DOG SAVAGED IN WOODS ATTACK’, the headline screamed – and I wasn't sure I wanted my emotions quite so blatantly churned up. Not that I don't understand the kinds of pressures the local press have to deal with these days, so that they tend to foreground the most morbid and depressing stories simply to grab your attention. As it happens, in this case the headline turned out to be pretty accurate. It seems a Yorkshire terrier had run off into the woods, ahead of its elderly owner. These were the same woods I go to with Trudy, so that was enough of a reason to carry on reading. Apparently, there was a yelp and then ‘blood-curdling screams like those of a child’, according to the newspaper report. It seems they came from the dog itself, as the owner found out some minutes later when she finally caught up to where it had got to. There wasn't much left of the poor creature, which was just a bloody, chewed-up corpse. According to the report, the owner was discovered sitting in a kind of stupor next to what was left of the body of her little friend, and was later taken to hospital with breathing problems in case, as the doctors feared, her heart gave way. Still staring into the distance perhaps, making little whining noises as she had been when she was found, the old woman was being kept in for observation until the doctors thought she was out of danger and could safely go home. Her daughter was still in

shock herself, the report concluded, unable to imagine what kind of animal would have wanted to attack and eat a dog.

It was a main subject of discussion around the pool table that evening. “Blimey, teddy bears’ picnics are a getting bit lively these days,” Oliver said. “I guess the foodbank must have run out of honey.”

I went on as if I hadn’t heard him, as it didn’t seem like something we should joke about. “It makes me uneasy about going in there with Trudy,” I said. “She’s no toy breed but whatever did this could do some serious harm to just about any animal.”

“Or a child,” said Barry. “Now that’s a bloody worry.” Barry became a grandfather for the first time last year. His daughter was only nineteen but had got pregnant from Ibrahim, the Somalian boyfriend she lives with up in Barking, just the other side of the river. Barry was as proud as Punch when the baby was born. He admitted the little boy was like the son he had never had, telling us all that the child’s arrival had given him a new lease on life. But he had also been worried for some time about Ibrahim, the father, a delivery driver who worked long hours, charging around the M25 for almost no money at all when he had a new mouth to feed. He was a good lad, Barry had told us, but it was clear that the grind and the lack of hope for anything better was already beginning to get to the boy. He worried about the kinds of things that Ibrahim was hearing on the rare occasions he could get to the mosque or, even worse, online – the kinds of feelings that were being stirred up by the maverick preachers and the other ne’er-do-wells, as Barry had described them, without a shred of goodwill toward the country. These were powerful voices whose influence on Ibrahim he said he couldn’t predict. “You never know what’s inside people, do you?” he said, and I had wanted to add, for a reason I couldn’t explain, that most of the time neither do they.

The conversation had stopped, the attention of everyone focused on the game. Mo was into a three-shot break but looked across from the ball he was lining up – a long pot into the bottom left – to clear a bit of fluff from the baize. I thought of the cricket pitch. “It could be a boar, you know,” I said, waking from the daydream I’d been in.

“A what?” said Barry. Mo slammed the shot and sank it but sank the cue ball along with it.

“A wild boar,” I said. “The woods are crawling with them.”

“Not exactly,” said Mo, sceptically. “There’s a small population of perhaps a couple of hundred in this part of the world, but they’re pretty spread out across the area. They live in family groups, and they don’t attack humans. It’s why none of us have ever seen one – even me.”

“I’ve seen the mess they made of the cricket pitch,” I said.

“At night, when no one else is around,” said Mo. “And a cricket pitch is no different to a forest floor from their point of view, just somewhere to grub up some more food.”

“Bloody wild boar! How on earth did that happen?” said Barry.

“Well, around here they’re descendants of animals that were imported and bred for their meat – wild boar sausages, things like that,” Mo said. Barry made a face to show he knew very well the kind of people who ate wild boar sausages, and he wasn’t impressed; Mo knew the same kind of people and ignored him. “They got out in ’87, during the storm. Falling trees brought down the fences that penned them in. They’re adaptable creatures, and they’ve made the most of their luck. You can’t blame them for that.”

“Bleedin’ immigrants,” Oliver muttered with feigned contempt, bending over his shot with a grin.

Mo smiled wanly. He said it was true, they were immigrants of a sort, although the country had once teemed with boar, just like on the Continent today, until their status as a pest species and the royal fondness for hunting back in the day, along with the lack of anywhere for the boar to run to beyond the borders of the kingdom, meant they were slowly wiped out. It seems these new ones are a strange case of a non-native, native species – if that makes sense. At least, that was Mo’s take on the boar.

“I don’t care whether they’re native or not. If they go around killing things like that, they need getting rid of,” said Barry.

“To be honest, I’m no expert, but the wounds described in the paper don’t sound like a boar attack to me. They are certainly omnivores and they

have been known to attack dogs when the young are threatened, but not like this,” Mo said.

But I could tell that Barry wasn’t satisfied with this explanation. Something was getting his goat.

The following day, I took Trudy for her usual long weekend walk, back to the woods where in the two weeks since we had last been there, the bluebells had as good as disappeared. My mind fell back on the Great Storm, to the time before I moved to this area. I still hadn't met Bridget, and in fact I hadn't even left my parents' home but was working for one of the big insurance firms in Sussex, where I got my first job straight from school. At the time, I was still treading water – more or less what I've been doing ever since – dreaming of another life as perhaps a writer or a poet or a singer, or something along those lines. I've never told Bridget about any of this stuff, as she was never that curious about the life I was leading before I knew her. But as Heloise had guessed a few years later, at one time I'd needed to express myself so badly, I ended up trying to get at things that were simply beyond my ability to understand – that may not indeed have been there at all, though I felt they were – and this meant disregarding other, simpler things I might have understood to my great advantage had I taken the trouble to think about them properly or even at all. I was also in a band at the time, and the lyrics I wrote for the songs we played were in the same vein and, by and large, they used to baffle the other band members.

Sometimes, one of them – mostly it was Sandy the keyboard player – would ask me to explain what they were about. But I couldn't explain them, as I hardly understood them myself, so the explanations I did come up with only tended to leave them all the more confused. More and more often these days a line pops into my head on the way to work or when I'm out walking with the dog, and over the years I've begun to see why they all reacted in the way they did, even Simon, the bass player, who accused me of writing metaphysical bullshit when I ought to be writing about the kinds of things that pop songs had always been about – boy meets girl, boy loses girl, and so on and so forth. I countered by saying that in fact they were about such things, though not in the obvious way he wanted, and anyway there was more to life than boy meets girl.

“You’re joking. Like what?” said Sandy, who was a very nice lad but had never had a proper girlfriend despite years of trying to get one, so that there was more than a hint of desperation when he said it.

“Like ... like the forces,” I said, flailing around in an unconvincing attempt to describe what I meant.

“What forces?” said Simon, incredulous.

“The armed forces, obviously,” said Kevin, sardonically, from behind his drumkit, and he backed up his remark with a martial flourish on the snare.

“You mean market forces,” said Jason, without looking up from the semi-acoustic on which he was trying out a new fingering with the sound turned down. Simon, who valued commercial appeal over artistic integrity, could only nod in agreement.

I shook my head. “No, not that. I mean the fundamental forces,” I insisted portentously.

“What, like gravity?” said Sandy, sounding rather stupefied.

I shook my head again, as much at my own lack of ability to articulate what I meant as at the misfiring guesses of my bandmates. I could see Simon out of the corner of my eye, twisting his finger at the side of his head.

“What else is there then, for Pete’s sake?” said Sandy. “Politics?” But the idea seemed so ridiculous, even to me, that we all scoffed at the prospect. Politics was the last thing that any of us thought pop music should ever be about. Politics was something that happened to other people – mostly poor people we didn’t know and didn’t need to care about – but certainly not to us.

Simon raked a horrible open chord across his bass strings and looked at me. “What a load of crap!” he said. “Your problem is you can’t see the wood for the trees.” And I guess by his own yardstick he was right, the big picture for him being a simple biological imperative, no different today than it was at the dawn of time. He seemed suddenly so fed up with me and with the whole pipedream of pop stardom that we’d all been harbouring, which in his case meant an endless parade of willing female fans falling into his bed, that he packed up his bass and left. And within weeks the band had officially split, not with a rip but with a gentle parting of the ways, and we

all settled down to our steady lives with a kind of inevitability that none of us, it seems, had the will or inclination to resist.

Then one day, just before I met Bridget, it dawned on me that the dreams I'd been holding onto – of which the band was an integral part – were all gone, and that, more to the point, I had done nothing to prevent them going. It was a strange moment, to realise that the sense of possibility I had built my hope around for so long – of the future I had imagined for myself, as opposed to whatever came by – had been as fleeting and insubstantial as an image seen in smoke; an adolescent vapour dispersed by the first stiff breeze that came along. At the time, I brushed off any sense of loss as a sign that I had grown up, and in truth the only one who would ever have disagreed with that view was Heloise. But she's just one person, and there have to be as many ways to grow up as there are to remain a child, and in that sense I did what I set out to do – mission accomplished – though it's true that I never had anything to do with anyone in the band after we split, and seeing as they also made no attempt to stay in touch with me, I'd say the feeling was almost certainly mutual.

I think the night of the storm I had still not completely surrendered. In fact, I slept through the whole thing, where the other members of my family had been awake for hours. But I do remember getting up the following morning to find two big trees had come down in the garden of my parents' house, lying like fallen giants whose outsized reality had suddenly gate-crashed our own, confirming a feeling I had that the world of human dimensions and desires that we all take for granted is in fact just one of many whose loss in time even the most self-centred person may come to sorely regret. That's a speculation I might have ventured back then that Simon would have dismissed out of hand and which in subsequent years I have done a pretty good job of suppressing in myself. But things have been happening in recent weeks which have stirred up these feelings all over again, so I'll just let them come when they do, and perhaps by the time I've got all of this out of my system, if that's even possible, I'll have seen through whatever it is that's been bugging me these many years. After all, there was once a time when a well-chosen metaphor really meant

something, when it wasn't just a reminder of the naivety and foolishness of my younger self.

Anyhow, that day after the storm, as luck would have it, I could still get out and about in the car, but everywhere the roads were blocked and power lines were down, forcing unplanned detours made more exciting by the prospect of other trees, rendered unstable on account of the storm, coming down on me at any moment. It was exhilarating to drive around in such a traumatised landscape, full of unforeseen obstacles, a world of creative destruction – or that's how I think it felt – dangerous but tangible, with known and explicable causes which, being rare, made the chaos an inconvenient but stimulating novelty. At one point, I had to divert along a road I didn't know at all, which even then had trees, sometimes half across the carriageway, that you had to swerve around to avoid. The day was clear and bright, the more so because the trees left standing had been stripped of all their leaves, literally overnight; they now stood out against the yawning spaces left behind where others had come down around them. And it was just as I was approaching another trunk which had fallen partway across the road that a stag with a huge rack of antlers came careering out of the undergrowth by the roadside. I stepped hard on the brakes and halted as the stag turned towards me. Behind it first one doe, then several more with their young, bounded across the road as the hart stood there, holding up its snout like a regular Monarch of the Glen, or at least the woodland glade – a pose that seemed to me like haughty disdain though I later realised it was probably an attempt to sniff the wind. In fact, the last doe was still crossing when I heard the dogs not far behind it in the woods beside the road. The stag turned, snorted and dipped its head as the first of the hounds came through the gap in the hedge. The lead dog came barrelling towards it, apparently oblivious to the lowered antlers on which it was now impaled. It squealed as the stag lifted it up into the air and dropped it among the pack – eight or nine of them – just as they also lunged at the beast, encircling it. The stag thrashed its antlers at the dogs from side to side, but each one of its legs was now held in a deadly grip by at least one pair of jaws. It managed to fight them off from the front, wounding another dog that took an antler in the face, but the rest of the pack was soon wise to the threat and began to

pull the beast down from its hindquarters and from some of the other dogs leaping up and sinking their teeth into the animal's haunches. But just as it seemed that the stag was done for, a sudden gust of wind, almost as powerful as those from the storm the previous night, surged along the road toward me, and a large bough that must already have been loose came crashing down on the carriageway, almost on top of the struggling group, striking at least two of the dogs with flailing branches.

The startled animals all scattered in a sudden panic, including the stag, climbing to its feet and limping off in the same direction as the rest of the herd. The way ahead was now completely blocked, but lying amongst the branches I could make out one of the hounds, flipping on its side like a fish out of water. It was trying to get up but either one of its legs or more likely its back was broken, and I could see there was a wound in its side where one of the antlers had punctured. I remember thinking that I should get out of the car and see what I could do to help the creature, or at least to try and find someone else who could. But instead I simply sat there, staring at the dog as several times it raised its head and hind legs before collapsing back on the tarmac, unable to get to its feet. After a few minutes I saw another car in the rear-view mirror, coming up behind me. I was half-aware of it slowing, stopping, then manoeuvring a five-point turn, and it was just as the car receded and disappeared the way it had come that a horse burst through the hedge where the dogs had come from, its rider in a red jacket and black velvet riding hat, black boots and jodhpurs. The horse circled the fallen branches as the rider cast his eye over the dog, which seeing an object of obedience redoubled its efforts to get to its feet, yelping in obvious pain as it did so. But it was quite hopeless, and seeing that nothing could be done the red jacket cursed the inconvenience and manoeuvred the horse towards the dog. It became clear that he was trying to make it tread on the dog to put it out of its misery, but the horse resisted, stepping daintily to one side or the other of the paralysed animal in a kind of dressage to the death. After a couple of minutes, cursing the horse for disobeying him, the rider turned his mount and they bounded back through the gap in the hedge, and at this point I lost interest myself in the spectacle of the dying dog. In fact, I must already have forgotten the animal, from that day to this, as I turned around

my own car that afternoon to find an alternative route through the maze of arboreal hazards which had blocked up so much of the surrounding area, a windfall labyrinth whose complexity had continued to increase, even as efforts were being made to clear up the damage already reported.

Then the following Monday, as if to confirm the apparent portent of the storm, the stock market crashed, and this was something I could not comprehend at all. At first, it seemed of no consequence, even if, coming so hard on the heels of the tempest, the timing was a bit spooky, to say the least. But Black Monday, as it was soon dubbed, I remember being the subject of a lunchtime conversation among some of the staff later that week. There was an intellectual caucus of slightly older clerks, all male, some of them with degrees they weren't using and probably never would. Among this group there was speculation that we could all lose our jobs very suddenly if share prices kept falling like they had been. The consensus of opinion held that because of something called Big Bang the previous year, when Mrs Thatcher had let the bloodhounds of the City off the leash, more disasters like this one would arise. If this particular collapse did not bring about the end of Western capitalism, so the argument went, then another one would come along soon enough to deal the death blow. Some of the older ones in this prandial brains trust – old-fashioned commies, as I remember them – seemed to relish the prospect, and in fact it was not as if the job meant that much to me, either. But their dire predictions, which I overheard and only half-understood sitting on the fringes of a lunchtime conversation, had a great effect on me, so that I was dizzy with nervous excitement by the time I got back to my desk. I started to hum one of the songs I was writing at the time, and I couldn't stop repeating the same refrain – the same baffling misperceptions expressed in the lyrics I had written – over and over again, even though my work colleagues kept on telling me to put a sock in it. I didn't have the experience or awareness then to reflect on what had caused my anxiety, and if truth be told I hardly have it now, or I would long since have got to the bottom of all this worry. But I did realise, even then, that despite the job meaning nothing to me, I was not equipped to deal with a volatile world, and the older I have got the more people I can see feel the exact same way as I do. So I made a pledge to myself: even though I knew it

would not be an unbridgeable disaster to lose the job, I would not let the rug be pulled from under me like that; in fact, I would do everything I could to prevent it happening.

So I decided, only half-unconsciously, to pull up the drawbridge – to eliminate as many sources of risk as I could by cutting off the kinds of temptation that might have put me in two minds. The band was drifting apart anyway – I could see it quite clearly, even before that final showdown – but I did nothing to arrest the process. And I don't think I wrote a single poem or story after that time, either; or, if I did, it went straight in the bin, as in the great vacuum in which I could sense we were all living, nothing I wrote seemed adequate to convey my own experience of how things were. There was a wildness, a darkness, in the world – and even in the prosperous part of the country where I was – which I knew I had to respond to if I was not to be wasting my time, but which I did not have the will to face. So I simply stopped.

Saturday evening, Bridget was having a long conversation on the mobile with one of her oldest friends, which at one point seemed to descend into an argument. “But we’re not ruled by Brussels, that’s a myth,” she was saying, followed by a fractious silence and then a further futile attempt to dissuade someone she’d been close to in good times and bad from betraying twenty-five years of shared values with what amounted to a heresy. It was painful to listen to and after various failed attempts to persuade each other of the mistake they were making, to smooth things over they drifted onto other subjects, though by the strain in the way that Bridget was talking I could tell that both were getting ready for ties to be cut.

Then the landline started ringing, so I knew it had to be Vic, her dad, who aside from the scammers and the cold callers was the only one who ever used that number anymore. Bridget knew it, too, and knew what she’d be in for if she picked it up, so this time, already in a mood, she let it ring, as she has done more than once over the past month. Her father is an old blowhard whose greatest regret is that he was born too late to have lived through our Finest Hour, and has been making up for it all of his adult life with a pointedly incurious love of country. For Vic and his adamant circle of friends, the ERM debacle was a national humiliation greater than Suez and the subsequent loss of empire, which for most of them were childhood changes in the weather they only came to reflect upon in later years, as a way to explain their broad dissatisfaction with the way things were going. So of course he’s beside himself at the gift of an opportunity he never thought he’d live to see, going out canvassing every day with his bowler hat, Battenberg tie and Union Jack lapel badge, using up all the life force he has left cajoling people to join him in escaping the clutches of the “evil empire”, as he always calls it. I reminded him recently that that was how we had once described the Soviets, but that was just red flag to a bull.

“Exactly,” he said, raising his arm involuntarily and beginning to wag his finger. I backed off a bit, aware that if I didn’t he’d soon be spitting in my face. “And no sooner had we seen the back of them,” he ranted, “than another one grew up like a cancer – a cancer, I tell you, growing, always

growing – eating away at the freedoms we won for them – for them, over there! – with the blood of the English-speaking peoples. And those same little nations who’d been crushed by the Russian bear ran straight into the arms of the cold-eyed creature which had crushed them before, almost as soon as they could, as if everything had been forgiven.”

I wanted to point out that they had made a free choice – that history didn’t have to be a weight around our necks – but that would only have extended the diatribe, and in any case, I wasn’t sure it was true. For Vic, history was the ground we walked on, and so something we couldn’t possibly escape and shouldn’t want to either, though his idea of what was meant by history was selective at best. Just as no Russian seemed to figure in his pantheon of war heroes, no doubt the last forty-odd years would make for a very short and dismal chapter in any story he told himself about his beloved country. And where the EU was concerned, he could only see enticements and intrigues, obligations that before you knew it had tied you up in a goodwill knot you couldn’t undo. “Tyranny is tyranny, however it comes about, and it never is benevolent,” was one of his favourite refrains. “Don’t be fooled just cos there aren’t tanks in the streets. They’ve got better ways now to crush dissent. They’ve got so good at it, they can do it through the ballot box, or the banks.” And given the bullying of the troika in recent years, which as Vic likes to point out is “a Russian word, mark you – a Russian word”, I can sort of see where he’s coming from, even if I can’t share his passion for the nation-state.

I let the phone ring fifteen, sixteen, seventeen times while Bridget tramped upstairs to run a bath. In the end he gave up and rang off, but then I couldn’t pick up the thread of the article I’d been reading, so I turned on the telly to watch the football, though here, too, I found I couldn’t keep my mind on the match. It wasn’t the violence in the stadium that bothered me, or the chants of “Fuck off, Europe. We’re voting out,” though I did wonder why our supporters thought that was so clever when the team we were playing that night was Russia. – Didn’t they know? Perhaps they did and simply didn’t care. – And it wasn’t even the battles in the streets outside between competing sets of fans, depressing as it was to see all these things coming back into the game, our lot falling prey to those tired old taunts all

over again after a quarter century of good behaviour. No, it wasn't those things, but the same strange feeling of something creeping up behind me, creeping up behind all of us, and it was so strong that evening, I remembered something that happened when I was young, which I'd forgotten about for forty years, though whether this in itself was the root cause of my dread I still cannot say.

I must have been nine or ten years old, and we were living in the country, my parents, my sister and me. I was out walking in the fields behind our house and I must have been playing a game in my head because I didn't see or hear them until they were right on top of me – two huge ebullient beasts, colonial hunting dogs of a breed whose name I can't recall – bounding along like dun-coloured hounds of hell and suddenly swooping on me, putting me on my bum as I tried to avoid being flattened. I was so scared I didn't even cry, and it was only when the neighbour of ours who owned the dogs came strolling up, calling them to heel with well-intentioned bluster that they more or less ignored, that I felt able to let out a frightened little whimper. The bluff old chap was an ex-air commodore who according to my father had "served with distinction" as a wing commander in Malaya during the height of the emergency after the war, though I never quite understood what he meant by that phrase, 'served with distinction' – perhaps he didn't either but was simply repeating what others had told him.

He was a kindly old man, this neighbour, and once he'd managed to pull his dogs away from the small, quaking body lying flat against the ground, its childish hands clamped tight against its face, he took great care to see that I wasn't hurt, brushing down my clothes with the back of his hand and reassuring me that there were no cuts or bruises that were obvious to his eye. But he had never bothered to train his dogs to obey him, and didn't do so even after the warning he ought to have taken from that day, as if in being given such licence the dogs expressed something on his behalf that he couldn't permit himself. So despite putting on a brave face, I was not reassured by his concern for my welfare and was never quite certain whether I could trust him after that. And his unwillingness to train the animals would eventually be their undoing, as a couple of years later they pulled their usual trick of rushing out of view and, on this occasion,

bounding into a field full of sheep. As I heard the story later from my mother, the farmer who owned the sheep caught sight of the two dogs worrying the flock – some of the animals were quite literally scared to death; others were savaged by the pair, even in the short time they were bombing around the field. The farmer went to get his gun, and within less than a minute had re-emerged and shot the both of them stone dead, just as my neighbour was waddling up to the gate, puffing like a steam train, shouting at the beautiful, heedless creatures to stop. He was heartbroken, but I wasn't sorry at all, I have to admit. It was almost bound to happen one day, and then one day it did.

Sunday afternoon, I took Trudy down past the pub to the church, where the village fete had pitched up as it always does in midsummer in the next-door field. We used to take the kids down, but they're both bored by it now, so in fact this was the first time I'd been there for a good few years. There was a bank of food trucks, three or four of them down one side of the field, and a few stalls selling homemade jam and cakes, as well as nondescript items – homewares and bric-a-brac – that gave it the air of a gentrified boot sale. It seemed busier than I remembered it being in the past, and there was a strange air of confidence about the gathering that I don't often associate with anything that happens in the village, whether good or bad. There were smiles all around, in fact, and this may have owed something to the brief appearance of a watery sun, but seemed also to have some other, less tangible source that I couldn't pin down. What did surprise me was how few of the people I recognised as we made our cursory tour of the field. Where had they all come from? Surely they didn't all live hereabouts, or if they did, what had made them suddenly emerge from hiding? And then it dawned on me just how many years it was since I'd been to one of these events, and I realised that perhaps many of these folk had been living here for a while and from this vantage point it was me who had been hiding, as aside from my visits to the pub and to the woods with the dog, I tended not to take much of an interest in village life.

There was a small stage with a couple of amps and a drumkit, with a performance space in front of it. Later there would be a dog show in the space, whose general standard, if memory served me right, gave even the most misbegotten mongrel a fighting chance. A three-piece band had just stepped up to the stage and started to tune their guitars while a couple of kids scurried around on all fours in front of them, yelping with puppyish excitement. The band lurched awkwardly into their first number, a US pop tune from the 1980s by a group whose name included Huey or Louie or Dewey – some American name, I can't remember which. The players were about my age, and I stood there watching them, wondering whether, if we

had also carried on, my own band would have ended up doing applauseless hobby gigs like this one, churning out nostalgia playlists at low-key events where no one ever came for the band. Not that people weren't deeply attached to this music, even if they didn't show it. At the time of their release, songs like this one had been a part of the fabric of the lives of more or less everyone I knew – we were all bound by it, if only because there were no alternatives to the three or four radio stations and TV channels that were all we could get. Even now, I'd wager that standard listening for most of those at the fete was radio catering to the middle-aged market – like that Burrow FM my PA, Brenda, is always listening to – whose staples are the same kinds of American drivetime hits from their halcyon youth, three or four decades ago. And they must have spoken to us in some way, these songs, even if the story they told was not one that bore much resemblance to the lives we actually led. Perhaps they were aspirational, their romantic tribulations the more glamorous for being backed by the dollar. Whatever the reason, these corporate anthems to small-town values and parochial dreams had lodged themselves in the general affection, and for many of my peers may well have been the musical highwater mark of whatever cultural curiosity they had once entertained. The axis of our interest was always east–west across the Atlantic, the open sea, and never north–south to the continental Babel across the Channel, whose own musical offerings – when we noticed them at all – we looked down upon as limp imitations of the Anglo-Saxon model, with funny accents rendering the songs incomprehensible even when they were sung in English. Until I met Heloise, for me as for most of my friends Europe was just somewhere to go away for a couple of weeks every summer, with better food and more sun, but on the evidence of those embarrassing bands, boring, even backward; that so many of them did choose to sing in English proved just how desperate they were to be more like us.

Despite this conviction I harboured, that in every way that mattered to me at the time the culture I had grown up in was better and more worthy of emulation than any other I could think of, except perhaps America's, at some point my own appetite for new experience had also begun to decline. I wasn't sure when or how it had happened – I guess it started when the band

split up – but like a slow puncture that goes unnoticed at first, it struck me only some years later that I’d completely lost the habit of analysing whatever it was I was listening to, and at some point later still that I was turning repeatedly to the same diminishing pool of albums. Everyone has their limit, I guess, and there comes a point, different for each of us, where the need to be comforted takes over and the only bearable excitements are remembered ones we take out like old photographs from a drawer, and then hurriedly put back when the memories begin multiplying and we realise there is no magician to come home and reverse the spell. And I’m sure it is partly for this reason that in recent years the music I have favoured, increasingly, is nothing at all.

The middle-aged rockers in front of me could have done with a keyboard player or another guitarist, as they weren’t skilled-enough musicians to fill out the thin sound of a three-piece. The singer–bass player wore a greying ponytail and had clearly lost whatever vocal range he’d once enjoyed: he was singing most of the songs down the octave, which made them sound hangdog as well as threadbare. They had just blundered their way through ‘Girls Just Wanna Have Fun’ – a subject on which once upon a time they might have claimed some first-hand knowledge – and they were having a crack at ‘Family Man’ when the guitarist’s E string broke. This rendered the song lugubrious for the rest of its running time, but no one in the crowd seemed bothered by the mishap. Their ideas of musical propriety may have been dulled by the beer they had drunk over the past few hours or a karaoke culture that deluded all of us into thinking we had equal talent and expertise, though such a belief served merely to extend the corporate reach. It was deadbeat domestic dramas in songs like these that Simon had felt I should have been writing about all those years ago, though to give him his due he did at least prefer Difford and Tilbrook to Hall and Oates. “What have you got against this stuff?” he once pleaded with me. “Why can’t you celebrate what you have in common with everyone else? It’ll be you, too, you know, one day – and sooner than you think.” But I knew there was something more, some force of inspiration – a different kind of existence – that would give me reason to break away from the never-ending round of getting and

spending which, from the evidence around me, everyone else seemed to think was quite sufficient for a happy life. I'd known it and yet, when the one person came along who could show me what I knew, I had refused that knowledge.

The three-piece were halted in their tracks by the need to restring the lead guitar, and not before time I set off home again with Trudy. We were just passing the pub on the way back when I realised that the words of 'Family Man' were buzzing around my head, and I couldn't shake them off, even now I'd become conscious that they were there. The lyrics had made me cringe when I first heard the song on the radio, and I remember in the pub after band practice one afternoon taking great pleasure in pulling apart a track that seemed utterly anodyne to me at the time, heaping scorn on the triteness of the chorus, as if fighting off a powerful urge to adopt the same crude aesthetic logic in the interests of cashing in. The memory of my mocking critique began mimicking the song in my mind as I walked on behind the dog, and it was then that I looked ahead and saw a trio of girls, a couple of years older than Libby, coming towards me on the opposite side of the road, all of them giggling about something that was happening in the street. But it was only as I got up to them and the laughter became even more raucous that I realised I was singing out loud. Then one of the girls yelled at me from across the road: "Oooh, yer bark is worse than yer bite, mate, is it? What a shame! What's a girl got to do to get shagged?"

The other two doubled over with cackling laughter, and I hurried on, drawing level with Trudy and then almost pulling her along in my haste to get home.

I slept badly that night, unable to hold back the rising flood of memories and the feelings they evoked, still troubled at hearing the sound of my own voice again after all these years, belting out a song I had despised at the time. I didn't know where the sudden urge to sing had come from, but it bothered me just as much to think I'd been suppressing such an urge for so long as it did to give in to it with such involuntary passion.

I'd woken up for the second time and after a few minutes, I rolled over and looked at my phone. It was two-thirty and next to me in the bed Bridget was sleeping soundly, as she always did, her face turned to the wall, her breathing as peaceful and virtuous as it ever was. It occurred to me that before Libby came along, we had routinely gone to sleep in the spirit of friendship we had discovered from the time we got back together – facing each other in the bed in anticipation of things we might want to tell each other in the middle of the night or simply to be able to touch and be touched in turn. Sometimes we held hands; at others we cuddled or I fell asleep with my head between the ample softness of her breasts. Or else we would lie there stroking the skin of the other with feathery touches until neither of us could resist the gradual gathering of desire. That same night years ago out west, after we'd stumbled upon the ruined abbey, we stayed in a pub near Shepton Mallet that Bridget was very pleased to have found on account of it being so cosy. We had a light supper and then went upstairs, and as she lay there and looked at me when I lay down beside her, she begged me to love her with a frankness that startled us both, her body yielding to mine in a way that I had never known before and seldom have since. Then at one point, as both of us were barking at the moon, I slid my fingers across her ribcage and thought again about the ruined walls of the abbey as I came inside her, flooding the temple, her strong and solid body trembling beneath my own. And later that night, sensing that there wouldn't be a better moment than this, I popped the question, and she kissed me on the forehead as if I'd just done something really good.

Bridget and I haven't had sex like that for many moons, or even at all in quite a while, and on the face of things I'd say it hasn't mattered much to either of us for a long time whether we did or we didn't. It was some time ago now when it first dawned on me that, in fact, sex was no longer the be-all and end-all of our friendship, as for a time it had been; though if it isn't, I'm not sure what has taken its place. For many years, I have thought of my wife in the position she now adopts, with her back turned in apparent contentment, and I suppose there are times when I want to reach out and touch her shoulder, sliding my fingers as once I would have done instinctively into the curl of her neck and beneath the strap of the nightdress

she now wears, just to feel again a soft topography I had once been so eager to know. But between the intention and the action there is everything else – all the noise and fury and smoke of our lives and of the world – like a no man's land running down the middle of the bed. And I know that all this is what I would have to sweep aside if I should try to wake her up. Even if I could push past her alarm at the unfamiliar attention, I would have to say something or even do something – a loving touch or a meaningful gesture – and the odds on a favourable outcome look so daunting that I allow myself to slip back into what has been my habitual pattern for many years, weighing up the risk and deciding on the wiser though dispiriting course for fear of something worse. It is not that I'm afraid of being rebuffed, as the Bridget I married would never have done that. But there is also another woman there now, like there is surely another man where I lie down every night – someone who looks and even sounds remarkably like me – and much time has gone by since either one of us was able or even willing to shut those interlopers on the other side of the bedroom door.

I'd been awake for at least an hour when the rush of thoughts and disinterred memories began to die down. I became aware of a rustling noise outside the window, made by a small animal that was probably a rat, though I consoled myself that it might just have been a hedgehog. Bridget had been lamenting the other day how much these once-plentiful creatures had declined in recent years, and for a moment I felt like getting up to take a look at an animal I must have come across dozens of times in childhood, which I realised my own children may never have seen; in these small but appalling ways by the hundred the world was changing, and there was little will, it seemed, to try to stop it.

The rustling ceased and I lay there still, waiting to drift off. After a while, I did get up, walking across to the window and leaning my head out to get some fresh air, though the night was so still it seemed surprising that this was stuff you could actually breathe. I was just getting back into bed when a dog started barking in the distance; it went on like this, incessantly, as if having suddenly given in to a fear it could no longer suppress, though a

little while later even this could not prevent me from sinking at last into the quagmire of sleep.

Over the next few days the mood in the country became increasingly charged, so much so that I was nervous going to work for reasons I couldn't figure out. People on the telly and the radio were saying all kinds of things just to get attention, with no real concern for the consequences. It was hard not to get caught up in it, and in fact like so many others I did get caught up. I found myself agreeing, though trying not to, with some of the sentiments expressed, even some of the ones that weren't exactly expressed but merely hinted at; everyone knew what they meant, though I noticed that people at work were avoiding talking about it now, as if too much had already been said. It felt like something would happen, something terrible. Then a grinning golf-club bullyboy appeared on television on the poop deck of the flagship of a would-be people's armada, facing down a rival fleet outside Parliament on the Thames, the two of them broadsiding each other with megaphones in the kind of pantomime conflict that passes for political debate in some sections of the media, for whose benefit this was staged. And it brought to mind things I dimly remember seeing on the news as a boy – frigates of the Royal Navy ramming the sides of gunboats from other lands which had sailed out to stop us from fishing their waters in the North Atlantic – and I wondered if this cunning little stunt for the cameras was a taste of things to come, depending on the result – a state of simmering conflict with the world at large that seemed to be the real ambition of the grinning Machiavel and his fellow contrarians. And the following day that same lord of misrule – now grimly serious but still completely cocksure of the effect it would have, when effect was everything and truth nothing – unveiled a billboard poster that was clearly intended to stir up loathing and fear among those who now felt entitled to indulge these emotions. And then the terrible thing did happen, in a way that was even worse than anyone had thought of. Someone was murdered – a woman, a good woman who had spent her whole life trying to help people, gunned down in cold blood by a man even older than me – a long way away in some godforsaken place up north that I'd never been to and had never even heard of, though in truth it didn't feel like it was that far away. In fact, when I think about it, nowhere

and nothing feels that far away anymore, and maybe that's why everyone is so angry all the time, as everything these days seems to affect us personally, directly, no matter where in the world it is.

It's driving us all mad, the relentless intrusion of news, whether real or fake – a global intimacy, unprecedented, unwelcome but impossible to resist, making all the natural, local familiarities of life seem somehow less relevant, less real, as if the personal bonds that tell us who we are need updating to versions more compatible with what we're now expected to be. "Keep up, Dad," Libby says whenever I am less than fully *au fait* with the latest celebrity crusade or YouTube activist setting the tone for her own concerns. The debate moves on, another one comes into vogue, another Pied Piper with a tune to dance to that only the young or the well-meaning can hear. And if I am neither of those things, is that my fault? Is there anything wrong with just wanting everyone to shut the hell up for once – not so that I can work out what I think but, for once, so I simply don't have to? People like Mo have the knack of detachment, and even Oliver seems pretty sanguine about life in his own sweet way. He's a strange fish is Oliver, but peace of mind perhaps isn't possible without something of that quality. His car went to the garage for a service the other week, so I gave him a lift to his office in Ashford, which for some reason he insists on calling *Burnt Arse*, though whether that reflects his true feelings about the place, which is not quite as bad as he makes it sound, I really couldn't say. It's an example of what I mean, this peppering of his conversation with jokes that only he understands or finds funny. I don't reckon he's ever had a girlfriend, as nothing he's ever said has pointed that way. Not that he seems to care. I can't be certain, of course, but on the face of it he seems quite content with life, and I haven't yet made up my mind if this is because he doesn't ask too much of it or it never occurs to him to do so. It's a trick that for years I persuaded myself that I, too, had mastered, because I also never thought about it much. But I can now see that for a long time I have taken one sideroad after another, trying not to care about things that it turns out did matter, after all; and now either life has changed or I have, and it's no longer possible to ignore them.

It's the unexpected moments that give it away, like the time a while back when I bumped into an old acquaintance of mine when I had popped into town to go to the bank. I couldn't remember his name, and in fact I wouldn't have known him at all if he hadn't called out to me in the street, as he now wore a big beard and was dressed in a moth-eaten jumper and dirty jeans. From where I was standing, which was a bit too close, he needed a bath, though I have to admit that otherwise he did look in the prime of health; in fact, it took me a few seconds to reconcile the wiry individual in front of me with the somewhat tubby young bloke I can now recall. I think he was an underwriter in the place I worked at back in the late eighties – at the time he was doing better than I was – but he'd left the firm a few years after me, not to take another position but in fact to get out of the game altogether and go back to the soil. "We've got a smallholding out near Headcorn," he said, once I'd worked out who he was. "We live in a caravan and grow stuff for markets and fruit and veg boxes for anyone who wants them. I had to get out of the insurance malarkey, it was driving me nuts, but in the end it happened quite literally by accident. My car ran off the road in the middle of nowhere one night on the way back from a gig I'd been to – to be honest, I was well soused – and this being in the days before mobile phones I had no way of reaching anyone unless I found a phone box. I thought the quickest way home would be in a straight line, so I set off across country and got completely lost. I ended up walking through the night, stumbling and falling over, though it must have been about one o'clock in the morning when I saw lights in the distance, an unknown hamlet – a few houses and possibly a pub. But you know what? I realised I was so enjoying myself that I carried right on by and kept on walking until daybreak, five or six hours later. By that point I was stone-cold sober and absolutely caked in mud from head to foot. I found a station and got a train home, though it took a while to work out where I had to change, as it wasn't my neck of the woods. But, all the way home, the only thing I could think of when I looked at the state of my clothes and the other passengers, who were obviously avoiding sitting next to me, was that, yes, at long last, I had got my hands dirty, filthy in fact, and it felt great. And all I had to do was work out a viable way to go on doing it. When I told my girlfriend at the time what my plans were – remember Janet

from HR? – well, she couldn't cope with it, could she? But that wasn't going to stop me. A few months later, I met Mouse at a green fair – her name's Michelle, but she likes me to call her Mouse – and here we are, fifteen years later. It's a good life, I recommend it, most of the time. You have to be frugal but it's not hard, not now. We do all right. We manage. We manage well," he said, referring to himself, his Mouse and the three children he said they'd had, all of them apparently living in the old jalopy they now called home. "What about you?" he said.

"Oh, much the same," I said, trying to be nonchalant, which drew a rather quizzical expression from the beard. "Managing," I clarified. "I manage. Now. I mean, I'm a manager. Managing. Just about." And at that point my voice clammed up before I could expand on what I meant, though in truth there was nothing more to tell.

"Just about managing. I get it," he put in with a little laugh. But even if I had been able to think of a quick response, I wouldn't have been able to speak it, and seeing my obvious discomfort he clapped me on the shoulder and sloped off to the car park to find his van.

I stood there for a moment, feeling a bit disorientated and wondering what had just happened, and I realised I was desperate for something to drink, though it wasn't especially warm that day. M&S was just around the corner, so I went in and bought the biggest bottle of water they had, then went and sat down on the wall beside the World War One tank that the kids all clamber over, even though they're not supposed to. This metal box on caterpillar tracks was meant to commemorate the lives of the Kentishmen who died in that war and for some is a symbol of pride; but what is it, really, but a monument to self-defeating futility, a reminder of why we ended up with the institutions we do have – the ones we now seem so willing to chuck away? I thought of the millions who had died in the mud of that conflict and felt no better, seeing it, than I had before – ashamed and somehow illegitimate, too; both relieved and resentful that I had not been tested like those brothers in arms; that of all the things they had had to grapple with – the mud and the bullets and the boredom – I had known only the boredom.

I guzzled down almost all the water in the bottle and the feeling of disorientation went away, but still I had the sense that there was something

stuck in the back of my throat – some idea or impression I needed to get out that was too insoluble simply to swallow and forget.

For weeks the pub had been draped in St George's flags, inside and out. There was the football in France but there was also what was happening in our country, and Geoff, the landlord, wanted to show where he stood, so he'd put the bunting up early, at the beginning of May. "I'll take 'em down if we lose, and if we win I'll leave 'em up. I can't say fairer than that, now, can I?" he'd announced. But they weren't Union Jacks, so I didn't know if he meant the football or the vote.

The mood in the pub was sombre that Friday evening, the day after the shooting, so we all pretended not to notice them. Even Barry was subdued. There was nothing any of us wanted to say that didn't seem a bit wrong for the occasion, so we all had the good sense to keep our thoughts to ourselves. We played a few silent frames, which seemed a good thing to do in the circumstances – kind of carrying on as normal, even if it seemed as if things would never be normal again. And then Barry went off home without even finishing his pint. Something was eating him beyond the terrible events of the past couple of days.

I sat out front for a bit longer with Oliver and Mo, and then Oliver announced that he was off home, too, to catch the end of the football. "Who's playing?" I asked him.

He shrugged. "Poland?" he ventured. "Love Poland," he said, with a bit of a leer, and then realised from our silence that he ought to have kept quiet. He quickly downed the last of his Guinness and headed off into the twilight. We watched him go, and it seemed to me that Mo was waiting until he was far enough out of earshot, almost as if he had been hoping for the others to leave first. But when I thought he would speak, he didn't. He seemed on edge, and it was the first time I'd ever seen him like that. Then he said, "That poster, did you see it? Did you see it?"

I nodded. "Not good," I said.

"*He* was Syrian, you know."

"Who was?" I said, wondering what he was on about.

He pointed over his shoulder at the pub. "St George. The historical man. A Syrian Christian. Not that anyone cares, but he was. It's a fact."

It seemed an unlikely piece of information, but knowing Mo it was probably true, though in fact I soon realised that this was not what he wanted to say. I have always wondered how someone like him ended up in a cottage in the middle of a wood in a place like this, and it seemed the events of the last twenty-four hours had persuaded him to tell me. He said that back in the late nineties, a few years after leaving university, he'd found himself one summer evening sitting amongst the crowd which had gathered on Primrose Hill, looking down over London. And he had what he could only describe, even now, as a revelation of a kind he had never known before – a vision of universal harmony, of an entire society of men and women of great goodwill working toward a goal they all agreed upon and all agreed was possible, if difficult, to achieve. That's how he put it. And this was so, he said, not because anyone had spelled out what it was, but simply because they were where they were at that moment, all the people – not just those on the hill but right across the city and far beyond.

"I've always been scornful of these oceanic feelings," he said. "Always avoided the actual or conceptual group hug. But the reality of this experience was undeniable, tangible – a feeling I had never had and had certainly never looked for. And I don't know why it came on then, so suddenly, or even if anyone else around me on the hill could sense the same thing that I could. I'd like to imagine that that was what was happening, by some kind of telepathic connection which sounds ridiculous when you try to describe it." He laughed briefly at his own words and carried on.

"It was certainly a lovely, peaceful evening. But really there was nothing out of the ordinary aside from my own reaction to the wholeness and the rightness of the world that I felt so strongly at that moment, a blissful half-hour in which it seemed I could feel the individual essence of everyone around me. I had been drifting for a while through various undemanding jobs, but from that moment on I could see no calling more noble than to work in some fashion toward the fulfilment of the vision I had had. After a few false starts I landed myself a job with a thinktank in Clerkenwell whose philosophy seemed a good fit with my own. In fact, our little group became quite influential over the next few years, even more so after Bush's war on

terror started to have consequences that no one had predicted and no one seemed able to control.”

Mo stopped to take a slurp of his drink and I noticed that a group of bats was flitting around in the twilight above our heads, like firelight shadows flickering on the wall of a cave. I was about to point them out when he took up the thread of his story.

“Then 7/7 happened,” he said, “and all the well-thought-out ideas we had been putting forward seemed like pissing in the wind. I began to question what on earth I thought we were doing. I was shocked most of all because suddenly the ideas of individual freedom as the basis of collective harmony which had fired me up and seemed so right and so inevitable at the time, in this horrible new context seemed neither inevitable nor even possible, but simply the cynical canards of an economic system that promoted these ideas to keep the cash tills rolling. I began to think that people were driven by intractable things that went far deeper than any argument about the virtues of self-interest that I could make to counter them. People’s lives are given a shape and a purpose only when shared with others in ways that transcend purely rational motivations. That’s the conclusion I came to.”

“I can see why you did,” I said, and without thinking I looked round at the pub, with its cheerful St George’s bunting draped like a garland from the guttering.

Mo pressed on with his story. “The collective habit of sacred observance or even group identity was something I had tried on purpose to outgrow, but to point out to people that they were wrong to cling onto it was never going to work. In fact, I had begun to envy that very group identity which I had always found such a burden, no matter how nonsensical I thought the belief that bound them together might be. If you add to the herding instinct the problem that no matter how much we tried to reassure them it was safe, and even sensible, to put some distance between themselves and the group – to become a free-thinking *individual* in the way our society both promotes and proscribes that notion – and no matter what an apparently well-meaning minister might say, even if they did mean it, these young lads only had to turn on the TV at night and witness the chaos in Gaza and Iraq to see the gaping holes they would leave behind them, the pledge of solidarity they’d

have broken, which in their eyes would be worse than the government breaking its own promises and then pretending it hadn't.

"Then a couple of weeks after 7/7, I was travelling to work on the Tube. The train had just pulled in at Stockwell, and like every other day I got off and crossed the platform to get the Northern line. The train pulled in there and I sat down in a carriage that was empty except for a couple at the other end, and we were still waiting in the station with the doors open when a young guy skipped into the carriage with his work bag and sat down opposite the couple. There was a bit of a racket coming from the escalator shaft, and then these two big blokes with guns stormed onto the carriage themselves. They turned immediately toward this guy, pointing their weapons straight at him, and of course he got up, bemused at what was going on. But before he even had time to ask them, they shot him, just like that – one, two, three, all in the head, with the efficiency of an abattoir, only way too thorough – and by then he had crumpled to the floor and they carried on firing at what was already a corpse. The couple sitting opposite immediately got up and ran when the shooting started, and my own instinct was to do the same. But I also realised what was happening, and it struck me that *I* was not free to leave – that with a load more police waiting outside, running away was bound to be the worst thing I could do. So I stayed there watching those goons as they checked the bag and the dead guy's clothing for what, of course, they didn't find, until it dawned on them that they had just shot a completely innocent man."

Mo stopped talking and drank some more, then sat there without saying anything. In the distance, I could hear the strangled barking of a fox. Mo heard it, too, and waited until the noise had stopped before resuming his story.

"After a minute, as calmly as I could, I got up and stepped onto the platform, and luckily the shooters were too preoccupied to notice. I crossed the concourse to get the Victoria line, with a commotion growing in the escalator shaft as police swarmed into the station to clean up the mess they had made. I got the next tube to King's Cross, as if I was still heading up to work by another route, but I couldn't sit down, and by the time we pulled into Vauxhall I was soaked with sweat. I wasn't thinking straight, but I

knew I had to get out of there as quickly as I could. I must have walked across Vauxhall Bridge and along the river on the other side, because I was suddenly confronted with Parliament. But the Gothic macabre of that building now felt far from the way it's usually depicted, as a balanced institution whose physical majesty is meant to model the official dispassion of the state. I was too confused to work out whether I had come there to find answers or out of a reckless, unconscious desire to put myself once again in harm's way. I thought about diving down into the Underground or trying, as in fact I did, to pass unnoticed beneath the bastions of Whitehall, with the scene I had witnessed still playing on a loop in my head as I tried to understand what had happened. I didn't think it was possible that someone completely innocent could be rubbed out like that in the middle of London, like in the kind of bad movie that began with 9/11 – a public, summary execution committed by those charged with keeping us safe and without a word of protest from anyone nearby, including me. I had watched them fire one round and then another and another and another and so on – though they must have known he was already dead. Then they poked at the body, looking for a device. But they didn't find it because they had got the wrong guy – a poor foreigner, as it turned out – whose life had been worth so little that it was less important to make even the most basic checks than to act on what they still insist on calling intelligence. It was a word I already knew could be corrupted to mean anything they wanted it to mean – the war had taught us that – but now I could see how the impunity it offered gave permission, for those who had it, to do anything to anyone that this so-called intelligence had singled out as an enemy. The state was supposed to keep us safe, not to kill us. And the word 'us', too, kept coming at me like a rifle poking me in the ribs, and I realised that there was more than one kind of 'us' – it was the sort of thing I had heard more than once from some of the youth we had been speaking to for years – and the guy who had been killed wasn't in the right kind, and for that matter neither was I. If it had been me walking into Stockwell Tube that morning, the same thing could easily have happened."

Mo shifted his chair to get his legs out from under the table. I lifted up my glass, drank a little, then held it between my knees, waiting for what came next.

“I can hardly remember the route I took after that,” he went on, “but I know I walked right the way through town, staring at the faces of people I passed, trying to kindle some connection with them, some sense of understanding. But, of course, they were all caught up in their own little world, even as I got out of the West End and carried on through the park. And it was here that something happened that I do remember very clearly indeed. I was just coming up to the big nets, the aviary at London Zoo, when a kerfuffle started up in what must have been one of the enclosures I couldn’t see. As I passed by, the pandemonium spread across the entire site, from the gibbons to the other primates and then to creatures of all kinds, all howling and squealing and squawking in a chorus of derision which at the time I felt was directed solely at me – most likely, I fancied, in disapproval at what I was doing, or else mocking me as the assumptions I had put my faith in, which now seemed so naïve, all came undone.”

Mo stopped again and sat there shaking his head, then went to drink something but pulled the glass away as there was more to say.

“For an instant that went on for a while, I stopped and listened and took the full force of the animal mockery on the chin. After a few minutes, I couldn’t bear it anymore, so I carried on, though I was still mostly unaware of what I was doing or even where I was going. When I got to Primrose Hill, I sat straight down in what must have been the exact same spot as that time before, looking down again over London, trying to conjure the vision I had had that summer night, which had grown into the speculative architecture of a virtuous world. But the visionary structure I had built in my mind – a crystal palace of perfect transparency – had been razed to the ground with a suddenness which for some reason also made me ashamed. It hadn’t occurred to me for a moment that so many others had not been able to see this building that I had conceived – and for the same reason I held it in such high regard – and that this was also the quality which had made it so fragile, so prone to shattering into millions of deadly shards as it collapsed into its own footprint from the shock of a single, well-aimed blow. And now

there was nothing left, just the maddening wail of police sirens in various places across the city, cutting through the fug of background noise that none of us pays any heed to in normal times but which now seemed to be the only thing that was real.”

Mo stopped again as from a distance the whine of an electric motor grew louder in the darkness. It sounded like a toy racing car of the kind Bridget had bought for Libby as a young child in her efforts to deflect her daughter from the trap of gender stereotypes. But then we saw the source of the noise for what it was, twenty yards away, as a woman in late middle age riding a mobility scooter emerged from the gloom. She leaned forward, as if into a wind, though the Union Jack that projected from the back of the vehicle hung limply in the stagnant air. We watched her pass, her eyes fixed on the road in front of her. She had already trundled beneath the one street-lit pool and seemed to be heading away from the village, but where she was going at that time of night it was impossible to say.

Mo tried again to pick up the thread of his story, sitting up and bracing his hands on his knees. “You won’t be surprised that I couldn’t stay in London. I started looking around for another existence that wouldn’t be undermined by powers beyond my control, where I could work out what had happened and what had changed.” He paused, still bothered by the whirring of the scooter, and we listened again until it was clear that there was no more sound. “After a year or so I ended up here,” he said. “I found the cottage and took to living in the woods. I discovered new things about myself – a life that suited me, after a fashion. Over time I started to get things in perspective, to see myself for who I was, separate from any social role I had once intended to play. And I realised that my vision had never been wrong. It was just incomplete, or rather I was. I had to think it through from top to bottom. I’m not sure now whether I made the right decision or not, but at the time it was the only one that made any sense. I thought that by coming here I could leave all the madness behind. Perhaps that was also naïve.”

Mo stood there nodding his head very gently, and I let the breath I’d been holding in seep out between my lips, because I couldn’t think how else to acknowledge what he’d just been telling me. In fact, I’d been somewhat

rankled by the one-sidedness of his account, even if in his place I would probably have felt the same. I wanted to remind him of the bigger picture he was always talking about, those people on the Tube who'd been blown to pieces just weeks earlier, all of them just as innocent as the guy he saw. Didn't they deserve, if not vengeance, then vigorous, even violent efforts in their memory so others could avoid their terrible fate? Didn't we all deserve to live without feeling constantly threatened by random destruction? If an innocent man had to die in defence of that goal – as awful as that event was and quite obviously had been to witness – then better one life sacrificed in that pursuit than many more lost. If the price you pay for freedom is to be forced to redefine what you mean by it, then that was fair enough, wasn't it? That was the original trade-off, the cost-benefit analysis our distant ancestors had made when they first clubbed together to kill whatever dread beast it was they had wanted to eat. In that respect, how much had really changed in all those eons of human time? I looked across at Mo, as if expecting him to answer, but I realised I had not been speaking after all and that Mo was now as lost to his own thoughts as I was in mine.

Just then there was a bit of a commotion across the street. Some kids of perhaps twelve or thirteen were going past on their BMXs, none of which had lights, though by now it was getting quite dark. Another group of lads, slightly older and loitering outside the One Stop just down the road, had seen them and started swearing and throwing stones as the crowd of bikes passed by. One of the stones skidded across the road and into the metal leg of the table we were sitting at, while another smacked the leg of the cyclist at the back of the fleeing group. He screamed in pain and the shock of being hit made him lose control of his bike and tumble into the road. We both immediately jumped up and Mo ran across to help him, but the boy was dusting himself down already and his attackers, seeing an adult come to his aid, stayed where they were in front of the shop while carrying on their abusive ranting until even this was reduced to a single word, like the baying of a pack of hounds. "Out! Out! Out! Out!" went the chant, over and over again, though what they meant by it I doubt if even they knew.

The boy got back on his bike but did not respond to their taunts. He kept saying to Mo, "I'm not one. They think I am, but I'm not. None of us are."

It's disgusting." Then, with a violent push down onto his pedal, he cycled off along the road to catch up with his friends.

Mo just stood there watching the boy ride off and rubbing his own forehead. I finished my beer and said that I was heading off home, but I'm not sure if he heard me.

It's a good stroll back to the house, about a half a mile before you come to the village green just before the turning into our road. I was still taking in what Mo had told me, trying in the light of new information to reconfigure who I thought he was. As I came up to the green, I could hear the resident ducks quacking with a settled contentment as they paddled around the pond where they live, but there was also another sound I hadn't heard before – a low, snuffling, grunting noise that came from by the bushes at the back of the green. I stopped on the other side of the pond to have a listen. I peered over at the bushes, which I couldn't see for both the darkness and a shadow that was even blacker than the darkness surrounding it. But I could hear the sounds, and after a while my eyes began to get used to looking into the dark foliage until it was obvious there was an animal moving around over there, in fact more than just the one. I crouched down and waited as the group of them – a sow and three piglets – moved out from the bushes across the green towards the pond, their noses down, scraping and chewing up the earth as they went. I wanted to shout to stop them doing it but the closer they got, the more worried I was about how the sow might react if I did that. So I just watched them for a while, grunting and snuffling at the ground, the little ones distracted by something and then, remembering their mother, trotting up to safety beside her. They were getting close to the far side of the pond, and I was wondering to myself what had become of the father and whether he might come charging out of the shadows to protect his family, as any father would. Then the silence was shattered by the roar of an exhaust, like the snarl of Cerberus, as a guy from the estate came down the road and pulled up behind me in a souped-up Astra. He rolled down the window and leaned out.

"What are you doing, you pervert?" he sneered, and his girlfriend sniggered in the seat next to him.

I turned around and stood up to my full height. The driver laughed and revved his engine, and for a moment I thought I would have to go over and make a thing of it. But then he sped off in a squeal of tyres and I watched the car go before turning back to the green. It took me as long to get reacquainted with the dark as it did to feel the night settle back to its peaceful vigil, and by that time I realised the boar family was long gone.

The following morning, I woke up early and couldn't get back to sleep, so I came downstairs and sat on the sofa. There was a pile of books where my daughter had been revising the previous evening until just before I got home from the pub, while her mum did the ironing and watched the telly with the sound down so Libby could study. It wasn't the best way of revising but she was serious about her work, so I guess this was more a way of relaxing on a Friday evening, taking the pressure off in the middle of her exams without feeling too guilty about it. A paperback copy of *Lord of the Flies* lay on top of the pile of books on the sofa. I had a vague memory of studying the novel when I'd been at school and was surprised to see it was still being read as a set work. I picked up the copy and opened it, and I was still reading when Bridget came downstairs and saw me sitting there.

"Well, I *am* surprised! When was the last time you read a book, and a novel at that?" I ignored her and carried on reading, and I was still absorbed perhaps half an hour later when Libby came down.

"This is much better than I remember it," I said, without looking up from the page. And I meant it. I went on reading, my daughter even more taken aback than Bridget by the sudden interest I was taking in some aspect of her life. She was standing there with her hands hanging down awkwardly at her sides, as if waiting for me to say something that for once might be of interest to her. But I was much too engrossed in the story to look up at her, and, perhaps embarrassed, she turned and went into the kitchen rather than say something in reply.

I stayed there reading on the sofa until Libby came in again after breakfast. She was dressed now and stood right above me, so that I had to give her the book back; after all, she was the one who was taking the exam the following Monday. But the lawless atmosphere of the story – a vision of what the world becomes when rules are abandoned – stayed with me all that day, so that wandering around B&Q in the afternoon, looking for a new toilet seat to replace the one in the downstairs bathroom whose hinge had broken, I was thrown back on a time when such places were bizarre purgatories to which I felt I could never acclimatise. I was always reading

back then, in my last years at college and then the first couple of years after I started work. The world so often seemed a dreamlike place when it was somewhere I would enter only on the rare occasions I was not inhabiting someone else's imaginary land, feeling like some solitary animal from the Russian steppe, displaced from its natural habitat and with almost no hope of ever getting back. But, as we are all expected to, I had acclimatised when the time came – in fact, long before it was necessary, if it ever is necessary. For want of anything to resist it, or from fear of even trying, I had let myself be assimilated into the culture, as the phrase goes – my culture, as I now thought of it, if 'culture' was the right word for the endless trips to retail parks and the other humdrum staples of modern life to which we all pay our citizens' tribute. It's a die I had already cast for myself when I met Heloise, perhaps the last chance I had to choose a different path. But I had not chosen it, had not even chosen and failed like Mo but simply pulled up the drawbridge. I could tell myself that I had never had the kind of transcendent vision he had experienced on Primrose Hill – no sublime moments that I could remember, only one kind of trepidation or another. But even this wasn't true. I had made a conscious choice to steer a blameless path through life between the Scylla and Charybdis of quotidian disasters, as if the main task was just to get through unscathed to some distant safe haven, some far-off unknown port. But I had also known it didn't need to be like this. Heloise and the magical time we had spent together were proof enough of that, though the potent alchemy of those few months had unsettled me, and when she had tried to prise me open, to see into my soul, I had cut her off completely, renewing the pledge I had already made to myself never to venture there again. And perhaps I was grateful to Bridget, above all, for the insight she did not possess, which meant I had been able to keep some things from her, for my own sake as well as for hers. But I also was sure that even within the picturesque limits in which I'd been careful to frame my own idea of our future life, Bridget and I had once had larger horizons in mind, a range of sympathies which in the intervening years she has gone on trying to expand but which I have done my best to contain within the misshapen trapezoid by which I define my normal routine: from office to

home to the pub and the woods with Trudy; and, when the need arises, in dreary excursions to B&Q.

I walked back to the car with my toilet seat, clutching it with both hands, but also stifling an overpowering urge to hang it, like a lifebelt, around my neck. I waited to cross to the car as a Ford with twin St George pennants cruised along the parking aisle like a shark. It wasn't the only one I could see.

Sunday morning I was out walking with Trudy under the same gloomy skies which had hung around now, it seemed, for weeks. I wanted to take her up to the ruin again, but she was straining at the lead so hard that once we got to the woods I decided to let her off, and straight away she was heading into the trees, her nose pinned to the ground in search of something she had sensed was in there. I'd never seen her scoot off like that so I knew that something was up, and it had to be the boar. That was what occurred to me.

I started trotting in the same direction, and then suddenly from deep in the woods there was a noise of snarling that I knew at once meant trouble. I sprinted as hard as I could toward the sound, but the faster I ran the more it felt as if the real danger was closing in on me from behind, even as the sound of the battle ahead rose to something savage and ferocious before dying down again very quickly. When I got there, Trudy was lying on the ground, panting, her face and neck badly bitten with an ear gashed open and a flap of skin hanging off. Whatever had gone for her had disappeared, but it seemed as if she would die, there and then, and I simply didn't know what to do. I took her head in my hand and looked into her big brown eyes, seeing my own tiny face reflected back at me, as if I myself was somehow trapped in there. And for a moment it felt like I was, as if it were me whose wounds were in such urgent need of care. Then a couple of runners, a couple of women a few years younger than I am, came along the path, and that brought me back to the here and now. They saw me sitting there, panting heavily, holding the dog's head in my hands, and straight away they volunteered to help me carry her out to where their car was parked, a lot closer than where mine was at home. I said I would phone the emergency vet and they volunteered to take her in with me.

Trudy was sedated and her wounds stitched up; they weren't quite as serious as I had feared. All the same, I asked the vet what kind of animal might have done this, and he surprised me by saying it looked like the work of another dog. "But there was no one else in the wood," I said, disbelieving. The vet just smiled.

"Look, I'm not a detective," he said, "just a vet, and since we can't ask Trudy, we'll probably never know." I don't know why he took this line. He was young, a foreign guy, Slovenian or Slovakian or somewhere like that, but I had only made what seemed to me to be a perfectly reasonable remark. I had no beef with him.

Trudy was kept at the vet's under observation until the following day when Bridget and the kids went round there after school to pick her up. I had a horrible day at work, even worse than the week before. Standing in the lunch queue, I couldn't get that poster out of my mind: the queue as a symbol not of helplessness or patient forbearance or grateful cooperation, but of threat. Didn't I feel it, too, the poster had seemed to say. And perhaps I did, if not to me directly then to others I cared about.

Just as I was standing there I got a message from Barry. *Hrd bowt dg. Need do smthng bowt bor. Its bowt time. C u wyt hrt fri. Baz*

I'd never had a message from Barry before, and in fact I didn't know where he had got my number. I knew he must be serious to have gone to so much trouble to find me, but this didn't feel like an act of solidarity with me and Trudy, and I didn't want to be drawn into anything rash. I'd spent my whole life avoiding such foolishness.

The queue got up to the food, and I piled stuff on my plate at random, way more than I could eat, without even thinking about what I was doing.

That night I sat down and read the paper, which I never manage to get through on a Sunday. Bridget was watching a documentary on the History Channel about Britain during the Ice Age. I would rather have watched the match, but I didn't want to make a fuss. I tried to concentrate on what I was reading but the programme was more interesting, and for some reason Bridget kept on saying things to distract me, trying to coax me out of the grumpiness that comes over me of an evening these days. "Wow, look, Abe. Look at that!" she said. "They found lion and hippo bones in Trafalgar Square when they were building Nelson's Column. What did the Victorians make of that, I wonder? Did you know that?"

She leaned forward and flicked her hair outside her collar, arranging it with care so that it fell decorously across her shoulders. I folded the paper and glanced across at her as she was doing this, then peered over my reading glasses at the television. I could tell she was trying hard and I humphed a response, either a yes or a no, depending on which way she wanted to take it. This for us, going on the form of recent months, amounts to something of a conversation. And it turned out that I didn't know anything at all about the prehistory of Britain. I knew about Boadicea or whatever name it is they give her these days, but anything before that was the mists of time as far as I was concerned. Well, according to the documentary, it seems that during the last Ice Age, the land bridge between our own country and Europe was a place they now call Doggerland, an area more densely peopled than anywhere on what we now think of as mainland Britain, which if truth be told was a pretty cold and inhospitable place. Doggerland, on the contrary, was a wide and fertile plain full of exotic animals – the lions, hippos, rhinos and ten-metre elephants that are known to have thrived there, along with extinct species like sabre-toothed tigers and woolly mammoths. It sounded like hunter-gatherer heaven.

Then, quite suddenly it seems, about eight thousand years ago sea levels rose during a brief period when the climate got warmer very quickly – as they keep telling us is happening again – turning what had been the northwest tip of the European mainland into an island that had now become

just a bit more pleasant to live in; and at the same time it kissed goodbye to the Continent and a common culture whose transmission had been shuttling back and forth across the region for tens of thousands of years. The programme makers had put together some very convincing CGI of what this vast and marshy plain might have looked like and presented evidence of bones and ancient tools that archaeologists and Dutch fishermen had brought up from the seabed of Dogger Bank and the coastal waters of eastern Britain. But what did it for me was how quickly it had all disappeared beneath the waves. I could well imagine the disturbance the people living there must have suffered, as every year the sea claimed more and more land. I could almost hear their monosyllabic dismay at the gradual inundation, which being unable to explain no doubt they saw as some kind of celestial judgement for things they had or had not done. But it was also apparent that they had quickly adapted to the loss of homeland and the new conditions of life in a way that it was hard to imagine anyone doing today; in fact, the programme made it quite clear that modern Britons would find it much more difficult to come through a similar dramatic shift without a lot more strife or at least a divine being or hapless scapegoat on whom to pin the blame. Doggerland seems to have been a relative paradise compared with the surrounding areas to the west and to the north. But then in the space of a few decades it was gone, a Stone Age Atlantis forgotten about for another eight thousand years.

The following day when I got into work, Brenda told me I'd received a letter, marked 'private and confidential', and in what was the nicest handwriting she'd ever seen, she said – so nice, in fact, it occurred to her she shouldn't open it. So despite being so keen to know who it was from, she had exercised restraint – Wasn't that good of her! – and put it, unopened, on my desk. I don't where Brenda's sarcasm had come from all of a sudden and, frankly, I was a bit taken aback at receiving a handwritten letter, as who writes one of those anymore? It turned out to be from Nadia, the missive I'd half-expected to receive as an email, though it was more than just a resignation letter but took considerable and perhaps unnecessary pains to explain why she had walked out so suddenly the other week. She

said she'd been watching TV the night before it happened, and they were interviewing the owner of our company, who was all for getting out, saying there was way too much red tape, that Europe held us back and was finished, anyway, as a project, sunk by its own contradictions. But according to Nadia, it wasn't the opinions he'd expressed that disturbed her but the dead face and the cold eyes of the man who'd uttered them, the boss that she had never met and never even set eyes on until then. She said he had frightened her so much as he reminded her of the people her parents still talked about from the days of Ceausescu, those apparatchiks and flunkies of the state and security service, all with the same dead, cold eyes – the same flat, expressionless voice – as if something inside them had been switched off, and the absence of that quality was what enabled them to take full part in the madness, as her parents now referred to the politics of that period. I had never given any thought to Nadia's experiences back in Romania, but the letter was so lucid that I didn't doubt its sincerity for a moment, even if the tone became increasingly hysterical as the pages turned.

She wrote that the man on the television had so unnerved her that the following day she had told her colleagues, whom she thought she could trust, but their own reaction had been more alarming still. She said she told them about Romania in the old days, that it was ruled back then by people with dead souls, and that she had wanted to come to England not only because life was better but for the reason that here there had been no such horror, that there was no memory of tyranny to which the people might be tempted to return, that the British felt free and unafraid to show their joy or their anger or their real hope, to say whatever really came into their hearts, not what others had deemed should be planted there.

The dead souls had imprisoned those feelings inside themselves, as they got in the way of what everyone was told were the loftier goals of devotion for the leader and love of the country he had created in his own spiteful image. But it must have pained them, she told her silent colleagues, to have to shut up those troublesome feelings, to keep up the pretence, just to prosper or even simply not to vanish without trace – so that over time, out of furious envy, the ambition which overcame so many of them was to try to extinguish that anger, or that joy or hope, in everyone else they identified as

being unable or unwilling to give it up; for there is nothing that irks a tyrant more than the happiness of a free man. The letter said she was trying to warn them all, her colleagues, but they sat there looking at her blankly as she spoke, and if their eyes seemed not quite as dead as those of the boss, the lack of reaction to what she told them made her still more frightened, as if her words were not just a slander but a betrayal of some pledge of allegiance she was not aware of and had never been asked to take, which had put a barrier of mistrust between her and them that she realised at once would be insurmountable.

And that is why, she wrote, I cannot work in a place where this is happening in a way that is just as my parents described it to me, and where people are so naïve or so brainwashed that they do not even realise the nature of the catastrophe they are calling down upon their own heads.

There the letter ended with the customary formalities, but my immediate thought was that she had the wrong insurance company as I was not aware that the boss had taken a view on the matter at all – at least not one he had shared with the national media or even, to my knowledge, with his own employees. In any case, it occurred to me that brainwashed was what we had all been for far too long and now, for once, we had been offered the chance to think and to change things in a fundamental way, even if the changes available to us seemed implausible, perhaps likely to make us more discontented than ever, and this again without ever knowing enough to be able to figure out why. But I realised, too, that I may have been wrong about Nadia, who perhaps was not quite as together as she came across or else had a little too much imagination to go the distance in this line of work. Certainly, her colleagues seemed baffled and even a trifle hurt when I put the contents of the letter to them later that morning, complaining that Nadia's tirade had come completely out of the blue and none of them had a clue what she was on about.

We left it at that and I went to the toilet on the way to joining my more dynamic peers at the management meeting that was scheduled for eleven o'clock, though for some reason my reflection in the mirror was getting on my nerves as I stood there washing my hands, and I could feel it lingering, as if following me, when I went out the door. And it was then, as I walked

along the corridor to the meeting, that I recalled the news report I had seen at the time, of the deposed Romanian despot and his wife, tied up and driven like a pair of useless old street dogs, despised but still protesting, into a dingy prison compound to meet their fate.

There was still no let-up in the suffocating blanket of cloud as the day of the vote approached. On Wednesday morning I got another text from Barry telling me that he had a plan for the boar, which he would brief us about on Friday night. He specifically used the word *brief*, which told me something on its own. He said he'd been doing some research, but I didn't want to know and didn't reply to the text. It was true that the children had been upset to see the dog all scarred up by the attack, but the vet, for all his sarcasm, had suggested quite reasonably that the culprit most likely was another dog, and Mo, too, had been doubtful about a boar attacking that old woman's little mutt. I didn't know what to think and in truth I wished it would all blow over. I could take the dog for a walk somewhere else in future. It would mean a bit more of a hike to get there, but rather this than the more drastic and dangerous course of action that Barry had in mind.

Libby was knocking off her exams that week, one by one, but was not so distracted by the stress of it all that what was going on in the country completely passed her by. She doesn't always see eye to eye with her mother – they're far too alike – but on this they were in firm agreement. There was simply no way we could cut ourselves off like some were saying we should. "We'd be mad," she said over breakfast the day before the poll, insisting that it wasn't fair, that they should have given the vote to people of her age, too, as her own generation would be the one most affected by any change. Her mother tried to reassure her, saying that it would all be all right on the night, that people would see sense, insisting as if it was a foregone conclusion that turkeys don't vote for Christmas.

Well, the memory of that farm came into my head when she said that, and I couldn't help myself. "Turkeys don't vote," I said, and straight away I wished I had kept my mouth shut. Libby looked at me like it had dawned on her for the first time that I was not the known quantity – someone called 'Dad' – that she took me for. She raised a glass of orange juice and gulped it down but she never took her eyes off me for a moment.

That look of hers bothered me for the whole day, and in the evening I tried to stay out of her way; it wasn't difficult as apart from coming down for dinner, she was camped in her room revising for her next exam. I went to bed that night feeling slightly dizzy; I had to steady myself with the bannister as I climbed the stairs, as if on board a ship that was listing, trying to ride out a force ten gale. The next day I woke up with a pain in the side of my head, as if it had indeed been knocking against the side of a wooden cot as I slept through a storm at sea. It seemed an odd place for a headache, but I popped two paracetamol and a glass of water anyway and dropped off Anne-Marie in front of her school. She met one of her friends as she walked up – a girl in a headscarf I didn't recognise; was that the girl Fatima she had talked about? – and I watched them waltzing along the street, yabbering away, until they went in through the school gates. My voting card was on the seat beside me and I reckoned I had just enough time to go to the polling station before I had to be at work. The pain in my head was still there, though it was on the move now and had lodged at the front in between my eyes. I rubbed my cheeks in the hope I could relieve it in some way, but it didn't seem to work. Then it struck me that nothing was going to work, that nothing would ever work because it never had. I didn't even know what I meant by that but I started to bash the side of my head in the hope of something – I don't know what – perhaps that penny which had always refused to drop, no matter how much at one time I had willed it to do so.

Instead of going to the polling station, I drove off as if en route to the office. But I didn't get there. I took a detour and turned onto the Rye road and for the first time in months I put on the CD player, to divert my attention from the pain. But Thom Yorke moaning 'No alarms and no surprises' was the very last thing I needed to hear at that moment, so I'd switched off the music even before I turned onto the road to Romney Marsh. I felt pushed into a corner and had to go off somewhere to think, or at least to try and shake off my headache. I had long thought that if anything should ever happen to me – if I keeled over with a heart attack or some other fatal illness – my family would be fine, even if that meant Bridget having to get a job again that earned some proper money. But did I seriously want to walk away from what I had, for which I had kept my pecker up and my head

down for so long – to strike out in a crazy bid for a freedom I thought I wanted for reasons I didn't begin to understand? And what would I do with that freedom if it ever came my way? I was now surrounded by a plain of pebbles ringed by a wide horizon, and the only thing that came to me was the image of that hermit on the lake isle close to my childhood home, praying to god-knows-what to purify his immortal soul. But what kind of freedom was it that made me shudder at the thought?

I turned onto the Dungeness road and drove down between the shingle on both sides and the old fishermen's houses – tar-painted, weather-boarded shacks that were fashionable as getaways for the London types that Barry viewed with such contempt, even though it was those same liberal lifestyle junkies, as he called them, who would happily pay whatever price he quoted them for a job. I reached the old lighthouse and parked up in the shadow of the nuclear power station. Once upon a time it was somewhere you could visit, somewhere I'd wanted to see inside, peering down, so I fancied, into those pools with the spent fuel rods stuck in them to cool them down. I had always thought it would be thrilling to be so close to so much power, which in the wrong hands could turn an entire region into a ten-thousand-year wasteland, a poisonous paradise where only wild animals would be allowed to live – mutant creatures thriving, in spite of their deformities, for the lack of human interference in their lives. But I never went, and after 9/11 people started to worry about the wrong hands getting anywhere near a place like this; and then you couldn't come here any longer without official clearance. But we brought the kids to Dungeness anyway, a number of years ago. We climbed the old lighthouse and then rode on the miniature railway to Romney and back. We went to the bird reserve on the way home, and Anne-Marie started howling with laughter when she caught sight of the long-legged waders – the herons and redshanks and egrets – stepping gingerly with their funny walks among the tidal ponds. And despite the frowns and scowls from the twitchers with their telescopes, we couldn't help but laugh along with her, because they did indeed look awkward and silly and endearing and right, just as we felt ourselves to be at that moment, as I could tell from the fleeting look that Bridget and I exchanged as we stood there in the hide.

I got out of the car and started to trudge across the shingle between the clumps of sea kale, apparently heading for the waterline like some latter-day Reginald Perrin. I didn't know what I was doing there, other than the headache I had that I was trying to get rid of. And when I looked out at the Channel, all I could see were the distant slit shapes of ferries and container ships, gliding along the horizon line in different parts of the stretch of sea that was visible from this point.

I sat down on the shingle and began to think about those eight thousand years of separation. For eight thousand years people have sat like I was doing, all along the coast, and looked with every kind of emotion across this stretch of water – everything from longing to loathing depending on where they had come from but also where they thought they were going. It wasn't so many years since, quite absurdly when you think about it, this little island nation had had the largest empire the world has ever known, something most of its subjected peoples were only too happy to be rid of and are now a lot less grateful for than we'd like them to be. Yet despite so much evidence to the contrary, we still managed to cast ourselves, invariably, as the plucky underdog, the victim of foreign connivance – a badge of grievance and entitlement endlessly buffed up by the righteous victory of the last world war – so that, given the choice between a smaller, parochial ideal and a larger, collective one, we always seemed drawn back to the lesser, the singularity, believing this on flimsy evidence to be the most innate, the least expedient, the least corrupt. So it was always the Saxon resisting the Norman yoke; the Briton oppressed by the Roman; always the islander over the continental, the provincial before the cosmopolitan, the Englishman over the Briton; and when it suits us, blithely assuming all the home nations take the same view, always the Brit and not the European. But after so many centuries of suspicion, for the briefest period all the old objections to a sense of community – not of vassals but partners – extending beyond the insular border, the forbidding coastline of the national mind, had seemed to tumble away, along with some of the more recent obstacles. The Berlin Wall came down and again it was that word, *freedom* – which politicians dangle in front of their electorates like an opiate in front of an addict – which for once, and for maybe a matter of no more than months, had real meaning

until, inevitably, it started slipping through the fingers of those who had claimed it, as it always tends to do. But there were other things that did seem unstoppable, and the following summer the two ends of a tunnel under the sea, which even Napoleon had thought about in the pursuit of his own European pipedream, were joined up out there in mid-Channel, and eight thousand years of stony isolation seemed to be coming to an end. And I remember being surprised how happy I was that this had happened, just as everybody seemed to be at the time. In fact, people around Ashford were cock-a-hoop at the prospect, and as soon as the tunnel was finished we all started taking daytrips to Paris and rubbing our hands at the benefits that would flow into town from being a stop on the Eurostar line. But even then, I remember, there were fears of things coming down the tunnel that we knew we definitely didn't want, like the rabid dogs which, as a child, used to worry me every time we took a ferry to France, not only because they might have bitten me, but because we couldn't take our own dogs with us on account of the quarantine on the way home, in case they'd been infected by some mad French mutt. So there was always a downside, even when the benefits were clear. And now those benefits are far from clear to just about everyone I know, even if some are worried the alternative would be worse.

What happened? Did those benefits ever really exist? Not according to those agents of chaos who would have us blame the EU for everything that went wrong and keeps degrading further, even though they themselves will always secure their own advantage under any given system. Perhaps there have been benefits for us all, but how could we know what they were when our assessment depends on messengers whose motives are never less than questionable, whichever side they are on – which for so long has been the same side and seldom seems to be that of those who elect them or give assent to their column inches? But people feel the same way from Ashford to Athens; our own disenchantment with the way things are going is not unique. The joint enterprise was supposed to make us all prosperous, to raise all boats, not just the superyachts whose owners this neat little metaphor serves so well. And perhaps for a while it did. And if it didn't work out, whose fault was that? The poorer, the more culpable is the line we've all been sold for years. You need to take a good look in the mirror,

sonny, exhort yourself to try harder, to make your own luck, as all those who prosper invariably do, or so the wisdom goes. Or else you must pay for the poverty that was foisted upon you against your will.

So perhaps it was our fault, after all. Perhaps we just got lazy, began to take prosperity for granted. And if that isn't fair, then there must be someone, somewhere, who is taking us for fools. It seems like an idea from another age – prosperity – one that no one dares mention anymore for fear of being laughed at. And even here, in a place that, even now, many would think of as prosperous, whether true or not, there are only so many trips to meet Mickey Mouse you can make before other priorities start to kick in, before a perception so well sown by those who stand to gain by it finally convinces us that the Brussels gravy train, as Barry calls it, is all one-way traffic, with people all coming in from one direction, and the benefits, our once and future prosperity, going out the exact other way.

I must have sat there in reverie for half an hour before a familiar noise broke the spell. It was the sound of someone crying, weeping, almost uncontrollably. It seemed to come from far away, as if borne on the wind across the sea, but at the same time it was in my head, like distant waves lapping on the inside of a seashell. I thought to look around me to see where she was, but I knew she wouldn't be there. Even back then I could never tell exactly who it was she was crying for: herself or someone in her past, or even for me or the better man she saw in me – the better man that only she has ever seen. But now it seemed to me that anyone could have sat here in my place and heard her sobbing and felt as affected by it as I was at that moment. It occurred to me then that many had surely taken my place in the years that have passed, and I couldn't help but wonder, as I sat there listening, if she still cried like that whenever she made love, with whoever it was she now made it, and straight away I wanted the crying to stop. But when I went to get up it felt like I'd been kicked in the gut. I fell back on the stones and sat there with my head between my knees for I don't know how many minutes until the crying subsided, as it always had before, and all I could hear was the sound of the wind and the keening of a herring gull a little way away along the beach.

It occurred to me then that there was probably no signal from here, and this was a reason to jump up and run to the car, dialling the office as I did – of course there was a signal – to say that I was waiting for the RAC, that the car had conked out but they'd soon have it back on the road, I was sure of that. And as it happened, that little 'breakdown', as I described it to Brenda, seemed to do me the world of good, and I sailed through what remained of the working day, unconcerned with or even oblivious to the general foreboding which in recent weeks had oppressed me whenever I'd set foot inside the building where I work. It was as if I had come to some kind of conclusion, a decisive insight that would clear away the fog in which I'd been wandering for such a long time, though if anyone had asked me what that insight was, I wouldn't have had the slightest clue.

With a heart apparently light, on the way home I pulled up outside the polling station at the church hall. I handed over the card to the official and she directed me to the booth. I went over and stood there with the pencil in my hand, but the headache from this morning returned, worse than before, and a great gulp of bitterness rose up in my throat until I felt I was about to choke. I was suddenly dizzy and hot and my eyes began to swim, so that I couldn't be sure which box was which. All I could see were the words 'Leave' and 'Remain', which seemed to slide around the voting card like a Spitfire and a Messerschmitt locked in a dogfight over the Channel. What should I do? Who could help me now with a decision I had come to years ago?

With an effort of will that seemed a complete waste of energy, for all the difference it would make, I recovered enough to see what I was doing. I marked the card and left the hall, blinking back tears as if blinded by smoke.

I was woken up the next day by the sound of wailing coming from the kitchen. I was suffering from some sort of hangover, though I never touch a drop during the week and hadn't made an exception the previous night. I decided to wait until the sounds of lamentation had died down, though for a long time they seemed to egg each other on, as if the intention was to alert everyone else in the house to the depth of their distress. In the end, when it seemed safe to do so, I hauled myself out of bed and went downstairs.

By then my wife and eldest daughter were sitting at the table in glum silence. I was in the doghouse – that much was clear – so I decided to say nothing at all, to pretend I wasn't interested. But I could tell at once that to do so in their eyes seemed to nail my colours more firmly to the mast.

"So?" was all I said in the end. I wasn't sure I could manage a full sentence under that kind of scrutiny.

But in fact they didn't want to talk about it. Bridget came to her senses and got up from the table. "You need to get ready, Libby. Come on, I'll take you. What have you got today?"

"Economics," Libby said with a degree of venom I hadn't expected.

I wanted to say something then but I couldn't bear the comeback, and anyway she didn't need that kind of sideshow when she had something far more important to get through.

A few minutes later I could hear them getting ready in the hall. "What's the point?" my wife was saying in reply to Libby asking the same question of her. "Well, I'll tell you. You'll need to be even more brilliant now, my girl. Fewer good jobs will mean more competition. But you'll be fine. Have confidence." These were sound, encouraging words, though Bridget's voice did seem to trail away as she spoke, so I wasn't sure if she truly believed what she was saying.

The door slammed and I heard Anne-Marie tramping down the stairs. I turned on the radio and listened as the country tried to come to terms with the decision it had made. The head boy came on and explained to anyone who might be listening how sorry he was with the way things had turned out, though it was obvious that the person he really felt sorry for was

himself, thwarted, properly insulted for perhaps the first time in his ludicrously gilded life. All across the country people had wanted to puncture the bombproof layers of people like him, and for once they had done it, even if that same group, bound together by privilege and patronage, would soon have brushed itself down and moved on, quite unpunished for its failure, propelled by the effortless assumptions it had always enjoyed into sinecures of one kind or another. But just for a moment the unlettered masses, so long ignored, had made them check their stride. They may have had little else to shout about but at least they now had this one undeniable victory – for many the only one they would ever taste – and the knowledge that the men whose noses they had bloodied would never forget it.

I couldn't listen to any more, so I turned off the radio and stood there staring at it for a few moments longer. The feeling of a hangover hadn't entirely gone, but I couldn't tell now if this was something particular to me or a wider change in heat or humidity – a more fundamental fluctuation which had permanently altered our barometric norms. I went up to the bathroom and ran the tap as cold as it would go, splashing water on my face, though to little effect. Still the worse for wear, I came back downstairs and began unlacing my shoes to put them on. I was just slipping on my jacket when the landline began to ring, and it went on ringing as I lingered in the hallway, waiting for Anne-Marie to fetch her schoolbag. It rang on even after I had closed the door and locked it behind us, and when I rolled down the car window as we drove off, I could hear it still, like an air-raid warning in an empty city or for the man on the other end, it occurred to me, like the Liberty Bell itself.

That night the atmosphere down the pub was as strange as I can remember, and this may have been because the place was as full as it's been in years. A lot of the unfamiliar faces were friends of Geoff's from all over the county, come to toast the unexpected victory; drinks were on the house. But it was a strange celebration, a sort of hushed excitement mixed with disbelief in the potency of the wish which had been so surprisingly granted. And also a fear of what that wish really meant.

Geoff had turned on the music, I noticed. It was the first time in decades that I'd heard Lynyrd Skynyrd's 'Free Bird', and it reminded me of the time I first started going to my local pub as a teenager, a good couple of years before I was old enough to drink, and the group of friends I'd hung around with then – grebos every one of us – would stop the game we were playing when it got to the galloping guitar solo, turning our pool cues into rock axes, tossing our long hair from side to side as our immediate surroundings – the pub, the pool table, our lives whose smallness we had yet to comprehend – simply melted away. For a few minutes we all felt like mini rock gods, riding on air guitars among the heavens, and then the song was over and the stark fluorescence of the poolroom made it hard to focus again on the game, and someone suggested that we go outside and smoke a bit of grass, and all of us understood what he meant by it. But even when it worked and the sense of liberation returned, it was only ever a temporary measure, as all of us instinctively knew that we would never be freer than we were at that moment; that the liberty of limited experience was already slipping from our grasp, as it must, and all the remedies we would turn to later to rekindle it would themselves wear out, like old jokes retold so many times they simply stop being funny. And the only way around this sense of loss was to redefine what you meant by it, freedom, because anything so valuable, so vital, had to be something more durable than the frail temptation of a transient state of feeling.

But I knew what I thought was freedom; I'd caught a glimpse of it at the next stage in my life and been terrified at how naked it left me feeling. More fundamental even than the wish to be happy is the need to be free, as true happiness isn't possible without it. It's a need so integral to the sense of being alive, it is constantly at risk of being corrupted, hijacked by those who seek to exploit our desperation, promising more than they can ever deliver but less than might actually make us happy, let alone help to set us free. And in pursuing someone else's idea of freedom, we risk becoming slaves to the idea itself, let alone to the people whose interests it serves. But if any choice made in the hope of freedom can also become a prison, what had I chosen in running away? Had I freed myself from the burden of freedom, to seek a lesser form, involving compromise and contingency, that was not simply

tolerable but seemed to offer the only sustainable life? Does true freedom burn too brightly for unexceptional men like me to endure? Is it really the radiant awareness met with on the road to understanding by the sages and hermits whose examples I could never quite forget; or the dark material which if harnessed is the engine of a meaningful life and perhaps a free one? Or is one awakening state the result of the other – stars begetting canyons; canyons, stars – as at one time I had had the chance to understand? A luminous moment in which the world dissolved in the darkness of her eyes; not even a moment of recognition but a kind of unknowing. Is it possible to be free except by this unknowing of everything else that is or appears to be, including oneself? And then not to be able to bear the unknowing, the uncertainty of that path, instead turning back to the knowing, its safety, its sense of precedent, its familiar regrets to distract us from the larger one of not being able to bear the unknowing, not able to take the gift of it from the one person who truly saw us and loved us for who we were, someone we also beheld in a radiance and with a clarity that was love, which made the future seem astonishing but frightening too. Pulling away, we may have counted our lucky stars to have got back to the knowing; but then the loss of those stars and a lifetime of bitter regret.

Our game continued in spite of the hubbub, though it was hard to concentrate and not only on account of the crowd. He didn't refer to the result himself, but Barry was as full of beans as I've ever seen him. His eyes were shining. "Listen," he said. "It should be simple enough if there's a few of us. We need torches, a bit of camouflage and some weapons."

"What kind of weapons?" said Oliver, pretending to be amazed.
"Crossbows?"

"No, this isn't Game of bloody Thrones," said Barry. "Shotguns. I've got a mate who's a gamekeeper. He can let us have a few, as many as we need, for a couple of weeks until we get this done. Though he said he can't be there himself or he'll lose his job. No problem, I said, we'll take the guns. You just show me how to use 'em and we'll do the rest. What's not to like?"

I screwed the cue ball accidentally into the spot ball by the middle left pocket. Mo and I were stripes. "I'm not sure about this, Barry," I said then.

“It doesn’t feel right, like something that ought to be left to people who know what they’re doing.” I could see that Mo was nodding.

“Don’t be a wuss,” Barry said. “It’ll be fine. And anyway, if we don’t do something about it, someone else’s dog will be ripped to shreds. Do you want that? No, enough is enough. We’ve left this to others for too long. We’re in charge now.”

Mo had already absented himself from this adventure, and Barry had been irritated when he’d said that it was not something he wanted to get mixed up in. He might have found a better way to put it, I guess. Now he was looking at Barry lining up his shot and, perhaps unwisely given his own reluctance, he couldn’t help but offer advice. “You should all think about wearing something bright, something hi-vis,” he said. “There’s a risk you might end up shooting each other in the dark. It does happen.”

It seemed a useful point to make. Barry smashed his ball to the back cushion so hard that it bounced up and off the table. Oliver leaned over and picked it up, put it back at the top of the table, just inside the D. Barry looked at Mo. “Your go,” he said with a curtness that surprised me.

Mo seemed not to notice. He moved around the table to pick a shot. “I don’t think you understand how dangerous they can be when cornered,” he said.

“Of course, we bloody do. That’s why we’re doing it. It’s time we stood up for ourselves.”

“All right, but I don’t think a shotgun is the best weapon to kill a beast like...”

“Who asked you? Who the hell d’you think you are?” Barry said with a sudden ferocity that seemed to surprise even him. The people standing at the bar stopped talking and turned towards us. Barry was looking directly at Mo. His eyes flashed as if he’d been pushed too far, as if daring Mo to respond, before he stepped back and picked up his drink.

Mo stood for a few seconds, looking at Barry downing his pint. Then he laid his cue gently down on the table and left the pub without saying goodbye.

I was disgusted at what had taken place and I knew I should have followed him straight out of the pub, as Barry had clearly stepped over a

line. But something stopped me. I tried to persuade myself later on that it was just my usual pragmatism, the balance of risk I apply to every decision I make; that, having committed myself to this course of action, I couldn't very well back out now. But that only made it worse, as I knew it was a lie. And I also knew there was a word to describe my failure to react that night, though I kept on telling myself that I couldn't think what it was.

The game had broken up after Mo walked out. Barry was so high that evening that he wasn't in the least bit bothered, and he wandered off to the bar to celebrate with the unfamiliar punters who'd descended on the pub that night. Oliver looked over at the throng. "What's the collective noun for that lot then?" he said, and I realised at that moment, but too late, that I needed to get away.

I was halfway home, almost up to the green, when it dawned on me that I had company. A fox was trotting along on the other side of the road, matching my one stride with a dozen of its own, keeping up with me despite the limp in what was clearly a front paw that was lame. I stopped to look across at the animal, which just stood there, aware of me but not giving me anything more than a passing glance, as if trying to pretend that we were just a couple of swells, sidling along, enjoying the night-time air. I set off again, back to the house, and the fox stayed with me across the tarmac, stopping again when I stopped, then starting, limping and stopping, mirroring whatever move I made. I wasn't sure what it had in mind, whether perhaps it wanted help with its injured paw. But it wasn't that, as when I started across the road towards it, the animal slunk back into the darkness, coming forward again when it was sure that I'd resumed my previous course. It was only when I turned the corner toward the house that it stopped to watch me go, as if in following me to this point its duty was done.

By the time I got home, I'd forgotten about the creature altogether and when I got into bed beside Bridget, the only thing I could think of was the scene at the pub between Barry and Mo. I don't dream much, but even when I used to, decades ago, what was of most interest to me was the raw mechanics of the process: when in the night I had dreamt the things I could later recall; whether a given sequence happened in real time; or whether, indeed, a single, intense moment had been extended through narrative into the only means by which I could comprehend it, like the history of the universe as the afterlife of Big Bang, the event in which in all that history had once been constrained, or a story about the present as the aftermath of another Big Bang, the one the year before the Great Storm – as if all stories

or series of unfolding events were simply a way of making intelligible states of feeling too dense to comprehend as a singularity, from which so much is lost by being subject to time, the necessary chains of concatenated moments too fugitive to enable us to fully grasp the original whole. A case in point is the dream I had that night, the first I can remember having for years. I was in the woods after dark with Trudy, and up ahead there were lights and the sounds of male laughter, but also a woman's voice straining with an effort that was clearly unchosen. We rounded the corner that led into the car park and I knew at once who the woman was – I knew her body, which was naked except for a white football shirt pulled up above her breasts. She was bending over, her arms braced against the floor of the open boot of a Volvo estate, and a man with tousled hair was entering her from behind, grunting like a pig. Trudy clearly knew that it was Bridget, and was torn between wanting to go to her rescue and, sensing my own confusion, holding herself back. Though the men didn't know me and never would, I knew them all by sight: the one with the blond mop taking his turn to exercise ancient seigneurial rights; the one in a tweed jacket, a pair of Y-fronts and with a beer glass in his hand who stood watching, waiting his turn, laughing heartily at his own words of ribald encouragement; and another man, altogether more debonair, despite sitting naked in the driver's seat, except for a pair of socks, as if staying out of sight for fear of being seen. It looked as if he wasn't sure how he had ever agreed to take part in such a sordid business and was already preparing his alibi.

It was my wife they were doing this to, but I knew I lacked the authority to intervene, that I had given it away, not all at once but slowly and over many years, almost without knowing what was happening. I pulled Trudy away from the scene and, ignoring her whimpers, I marched her off into the woods, with the sounds of grunting and laughter dogging my steps long after the lights from the Volvo had faded behind us. We had just passed by Mo's cottage, which was dark and silent, when the wood opened out into a glade that Mo himself must have cut. In the centre of the glade, standing stark against the moonlight, was a wooden cross, eight or nine feet high. There was someone tied and pinned to it, the delicate body of a young woman, this time completely naked, though her modesty had been slightly

preserved by what was in fact a further violation: the blood of an animal had been used to smear the length and breadth of her body, from tip to toe and finger to finger. Her head hung down and her dark-brown hair spilled across her face, but again I did not need to see it to know who she was, as at one time, for a brief period that I could never forget, I had known that body more intimately than I did my own. Trudy walked up to her and began to lick her feet, which were a good eighteen inches off the ground, fixed together to the upright with a large nail to match the ones that also pierced her hands. She raised her head a little bit and gazed at me, and perhaps she did know who I was, so many years later, because a look came into her dark eyes at that moment – a look of compassion which in truth was not just for me alone – and she started to say something in French, a plea to the saint in whose name she'd been daubed, of which I could only catch the last part: *'...ils ne savent ce qu'ils font'*.

But I knew at once that to those who had done this, her compassion would seem like a form of contempt; that compassion would have no place in the world that is coming.

It may have been the lingering memory of this dream that stopped me from going to the woods that weekend, though I'm sure I told myself that the reason was Trudy, who still hadn't recovered enough for a proper walk. Bit by bit she was coming back to health, but for a couple of weeks after the attack we either let her out in the back garden or I took her down for a quick widdle on the green. But even that tired her out and she collapsed on her bed in the kitchen as soon as we got back to the house. Her and me both. I made myself a cup of coffee to try and get some energy into my muscles, but I was almost too fatigued to stand up straight. The next thing I knew, Anne-Marie was shaking me by the shoulder and very gently exhorting me to wake up.

"Daddy, you're snoring," she was saying. I looked around and was startled to find myself sitting at the kitchen table, where I must have dozed off for a while. I reached out for the coffee, half-drunk, which sat stone cold in front of me on the table, and it was then that I thought of Ibrahim, Barry's son-in-law, or whatever it was he was to Barry. I realised that even though I

had never met the guy, I had seen him kneeling at the mosque somewhere, praying to Allah with heartfelt devotion; but in the stupor of suddenly waking up, I couldn't work out where. It might have been a documentary I watched a while back about Muslims in Britain, or maybe I had just been dreaming of a scene in a mosque, with Ibrahim among the prostrating faithful. Perhaps that was all it was. Either way, I had awoken with a clear sense of how it felt to pray like that – with that much intensity and need – and I curled my hand around the cup's coldness as I thought about it. Then for some reason – and it must have been disbelief, as I can't think what else it could have been – I found myself shaking my head and muttering, over and over, "My God ... my God my God my God," until the realisation that my daughter was still in the room brought me up short. I wasn't sure if she had heard me, as she was standing with her back to me at the counter, making herself a sandwich, piling up the bread with pieces of ham and a ripe tomato that she had sliced herself. I had no idea that she knew how to make a sandwich, and in my utter confusion at this competent display, I picked up the coffee and gulped it down.

I got up and went into the garden to get some fresh air. I had lifted my face to the sky, trying to drink in whatever peace was to be had, when I noticed a buzzing in the distance. At first I took this to be the strimmer that one of my neighbours had bought himself recently, which he seemed to be using almost every weekend, though I couldn't think what was left in his garden that still needed such radical attention. But then the sound seemed to drift away, and I wandered past the trampoline and across to the long border against the fence. Out of the two of us, Bridget was the green-fingered one, and these days her passion took the form of what she called wild gardening, which, if I'd had the right to pronounce on such matters, I would have called out for what it was: laziness, allowing all those weeds to strangle the life out of the features that people really loved about gardens: the flowers and the shrubs – the colour. In fact, I did mention it once when, over the course of a single summer a few years back, I noticed the balance of power shift in favour of the scrawny poster kids of this subversive horticultural creed. I was nothing if not diplomatic on that occasion, quizzing her very gently about the names of certain flowers I had seen in previous years which now

seemed to be far less abundant. “And these are new,” I’d ventured, pointing at some scraggy-looking specimens with little pink flowers. “They’re a bit more subtle than the ones that used to be here – the native ones.”

“It *is* native,” she’d said with a tinge of exasperation. “It’s rosebay. Most of the other ones aren’t the least bit ‘native’, as you put it.” She swept her arm across the swath of bright red, orange, yellow and purple flowers that she had planted in previous years, which were now being challenged, even choked, by these newcomers, or so it seemed to me. “I’m just letting Mother Nature do a bit more of what comes naturally,” she added, as if this somehow justified the disorder she had allowed to let rip.

Now, as evening drew on, I could feel the cold coffee swilling around my stomach as I stooped above the general bewilderment of the flowerbed. I peered down through a forest of tangled stems, and my eyes lit on a bright green bug flashing with tinges of red, crawling ever so slowly along the shaft of one especially sorry-looking weed. And then I noticed another bug, and another, each a vividly bright green but with different kinds of patterning; and then an earwig came crawling into view and a big black beetle atop the soil, both creatures enriching it as they fed; and poking up in different places half a dozen worms whose job it was to maintain the soil in its optimal state; and a gently hovering bumblebee with a function no less vital; and then, yes, in a sign that all was well with this diverse little world, a brilliant butterfly, the first one I had seen all year, resting on a bright yellow flower whose name I didn’t know, flexing its black and orange wings as if fanning itself very slowly, until suddenly the border seemed to be teeming with six-legged industry. And I became so absorbed in the accidental drama of this miniature wilderness that I didn’t even notice the buzzing sound from before come back, until it was so loud that I could no longer pretend it was the natural soundtrack of the complex society of minibeasts I had been observing.

I looked up and there, hovering straight above my head, was what I thought for a moment was the biggest and most frightening insect I had ever seen. I was so startled I fell backwards onto the grass, still staring up at the thing in the sky, which seemed to be watching me. I was in no position to run away now, but instead of striking as I feared, the thing simply shifted its

position jerkily to one side. And it was then I realised that this was not an insect at all, but a drone – the first one I'd ever seen – which someone living in the vicinity was causing to hover like this on purpose in the sky above my head. Who they were, and what their intentions, I couldn't say, though I did wonder whether getting me to fall over like that had been part of the plan or whether it was simply an unexpected comedy bonus. And I wondered, too, if the drone's remote controller was anyone I knew and whether, if that were the case, this knowledge should be either more or less comforting.

Suddenly angry at the invasion, I rolled over toward the border and picked up a stone. I sat up and pulled back my arm to hurl the thing skywards, but the drone operator had guessed my intention, and the creature lifted suddenly into the sky and zoomed off toward the village, though whether homeward bound or not, I had no idea. And it was only when I saw Anne-Marie standing at the kitchen door, looking out at me, that I realised I was shouting at the buzzing contraption as it fled.

On Sunday evening I had a text from Mo. *Be careful*, was all it said. I was grateful for the message, though it occurred to me that these were the same words the blind man had used, and the thought of it made me bristle. I decided not to text him back my thanks, after all, as Mo didn't seem to get it any more than Barry did. And then a sinking feeling came over me that I didn't want to think about but couldn't shake off – a sense that the same inevitable outcome would eventuate no matter what I said or didn't say, or did or didn't do.

I was watching the TV when the text came through. Libby was up in her room, revising for her final exam the following day. We hadn't spoken about the result as a family, and in fact I think this was something she and her mother had decided to ignore until the exams were finally over, in case she got deflected from the main task. I didn't see her in the morning and she was done by lunchtime, so by the time I got home she had already gone into Ashford on the shopping bus to celebrate with her friends, though when I put this to Bridget, she guffawed. "What shopping bus?" she said. "They cut that service years ago."

Anne-Marie was out in the garden, bouncing on the trampoline, doing the somersaults and backflips and handsprings she had taught herself. I watched her twisting and tumbling, apparently unaffected, even exhilarated, by the physical upheavals she was putting herself through. It was a long time since I had done any strenuous exercise and I was entranced by my daughter's routine, her appetite for life. My children seem able to do so much that I am often surprised they need me at all, as increasingly they don't. And standing there, watching her defy the laws of gravity with such hypnotic ease, I remembered the story about Samuel the migrant. It had a quality which I had been trying half-heartedly to identify for weeks and which I now realised was hope. Anne-Marie was almost certainly unaware of it, but very soon that would change, as in her sister's case it already had. And it dawned on me that, despite the world we had created for the children, or had failed to create, they would be all right; that my own mistakes and ministrations were like so much chaff by the roadside. At least I hoped that

this was so, and that I wasn't trying to pretend that the mess we had left them to clear up was not the catastrophe it increasingly seemed. And then the oddest feeling came over me as I watched my daughter bounce and tumble and twist on the trampoline: a kind of nausea that arose when I thought about the past or the future, in which the present wasn't any kind of refuge at all.

Libby came in at nine, right on the dot, though I'd no idea who had brought her home. She seemed a bit merry, as if she'd been drinking. But she is such a level-headed girl that it didn't bother me if that was all it was. Bridget, on the other hand, gets a bit anxious and wants to know as much as she can wheedle out of her. But she was wasting her time that night, and besides I knew that Libby was fine when she made a joke on her way up to bed about the footballers being as clueless as the politicians. I don't know what prompted it as I couldn't bring myself to watch the match, but within the hour, as I learned the following morning with a sinking feeling that in spite of myself I could never quite suppress, the sporting calamity my daughter had predicted did indeed come to pass. With impeccable symmetry, the national side caved in to the unfancied sons of the North Atlantic sailors who'd seen off the Royal Navy all those years ago, at the start of our continental dalliance. But this deflation brought no relief from the savagery and the raw emotion that roamed the land, as the anger which had been building up in the country for weeks had already begun to erupt all over the place. People were shouted at in the street and a butcher's shop in the Midlands had been firebombed on the day of the match. All of a sudden, the sense of something creeping up behind me was pushed aside by what was clearly marching in lockstep from the front. Libby now had time to take in the world, and over the next few days I could see her getting increasingly worked up by events, turning her attention to what the politicians were saying or were not saying, the promises they had made on which they were now beginning to renege. It was a lesson in the cynical games of the adult world which, despite her mother's valiant attempts to prepare her for such things, was still a bitter blow. I felt for her, but I could tell that either she didn't want to know any more or she already knew quite enough.

We were having dinner the evening after the match and I asked about her friends for the first time in ages in a way that surprised her at first but also seemed to make her suspicious. “What are you getting at, Dad?” she said. “Perhaps a guilty conscience? A bit too late for that, I think.”

I could see what she was driving at and I should have put her straight, there and then, but I felt she wouldn’t believe me; I wasn’t even sure I believed myself. And I knew that any reassurance I tried to give her she would throw straight back in my face. “I care about your generation, if that’s what you mean,” was all I said.

It was far too mealy-mouthed, but I didn’t know what else I should say. “No, you don’t,” she said then. “You don’t even care about yourself and you certainly don’t care about any of us, except Trudy.” She cast a withering look in the direction of the dog, asleep in her basket, before she turned on me again. “You’ve never taken a risk in your life, have you, and now you gamble away everything – everything! – and for what? A game of king-of-the-castle with our neighbours. A cake fight over a little island that doesn’t even matter anymore, in case you hadn’t noticed!” She was shaking her head now. “Dad, this is not a game. People’s futures are at stake. Their lives are at stake. My life, Dad. We need grownups, not schoolboys. No, wait a minute, that’s not fair,” she said with sudden poise in her voice. She got up from the table and walked into the other room, then came back half a minute later, having got what she wanted from the pile of books which had sat on the sofa for the past few days.

“They did get one thing right,” she said, and she tossed a paperback across the table to where I was sitting, knocking over the peppermill, which rolled slowly along the table towards me. And I noticed now that the cover art of the edition she’d been studying had a group of savage little men and, in the middle of them all, looming above them, the giant head of a wild pig, like the effigy of a god.

A few minutes later, she went out the door without telling us where she would be. I was so startled, I hadn’t thought to ask, and in fact I realised that in the present circumstance it would have been an impertinent request. She came home about half-past ten. Bridget was still up, fretting, while I had

gone to bed by then, but when I heard the door I still breathed a sigh of relief. If Bridget's glum silences these past few days were anything to go by, this mess was almost certainly down to me, so if Libby wasn't going off the rails as a result of it all, that at least was one less cause for opprobrium.

By the middle of the week the national comedy had reached its most knockabout level, with the pratfalls coming to a head when one of the men from my dream, that shameless Billy Bunter with a longstanding contempt for facts that had now become a national creed, shambled through a speech in which he seemed at once guilty, evasive and cringingly absurd. His ambitions in tatters just as he had seemed on the point of achieving them, he blinked into the camera and looked even more dishevelled than usual, giving the impression of not quite being able to see properly. Libby came into the living room and laughed. She stood for a moment, drinking in the bathos from behind the sofa and sensing the same thing as I did. "Poor little Piggy," she said quietly. "Someone must have broken his glasses." But she was kidding herself if she thought for a moment he would meet with a similar fate.

Barry texted me again that night. He'd got the guns together and instead of going to the pub tomorrow night, Barry and Oliver and Barry's mate Desmond were all meeting at the walkers' car park on the far side of the woods. *Therz gn fr u 2*, the text said. *We o evry1 who uze wds to mk safe. C u hlf-9. Jst b gtng drk. Gd tyme to go.*

I wanted to ignore it but I couldn't. I thought about Libby and how I had to show her that I was doing something to make the world a better place. And this was something, wasn't it? I couldn't sit back and let yet another thing happen on my behalf in which I had played no active part. My reply was non-committal. *Will try. Go on without me if not there by 21.45.* But I knew that I would make it, as already I could feel the old foreboding, skulking in the shadows, eager to reassume its rightful place.

When I got to the car park the following evening, a little after nine-thirty, Barry was already there. He'd come with Desmond, a guy who'd been working for him for a few years. I hadn't met Desmond, but he grinned when he saw me, in a way that put me even more on edge than I already was. Barry handed me a tin of shoe polish. "Time to black up," he said. "Even your face is shiny to a boar."

Just then Oliver pulled into the car park. Barry reached into the back of his van and came out holding a pair of guns. "Here," he said, handing one to Desmond, who had blacked up with a bit too much enthusiasm. "Bloody hell!" said Oliver when he caught sight of him. "It's the Black and White Minstrels. Never thought I'd see them again." Desmond was a bit too young to remember that show, I guessed, but that didn't stop him grinning in the way that so unnerved me.

It was all a bit *Apocalypse Now* for my liking, but all the same I drew a few streaks of polish across my own cheeks and forehead, just enough to show whose side I was on, though even that much felt absurd. Then Barry handed me a gun. It was heavy and felt as dangerous in my hands as it looked in those of the other men standing around. Barry took us through how to load them and how to place the stock against your shoulder so that you were "in control", as he put it. Then he handed each of us half a dozen cartridges. I didn't know what to do with so many. I stuffed a couple into each back pocket of my jeans and then loaded two more into the gun. "There's more if you need 'em," said Barry. I think he meant to reassure me, but the thought that we might have to fire so many rounds had the opposite effect.

The car park was in half-light now and Barry handed me a head torch, which the others all seemed to have brought with them. In the light of my dream, there seemed more than one reason to be worried about what lay ahead, but there was nothing for it but to go on with the others, all of us stepping out of what was left of the light and into the woods, turning on the torches, which swept the night in front of us as we looked around for signs of our quarry. According to Barry, who'd been doing a bit of research, these

were “scrapes” or “wallows” underfoot, or what he called “barges”, where the bark of a tree had peeled off when a boar had rubbed against it. He looked quite proud of himself for having found this out, but I wasn’t sure how in the darkness we were meant to notice such subtle signs. For a similar reason, I wanted to ask why we had all blacked up when the torches would surely give us away, but now was not the time, though it confirmed my feeling that the greatest danger we faced that night was ourselves. And I realised then that this was not the action I’d had in mind; that once again I’d let myself be swept along by events, as has happened at so many moments in my life when things might have gone differently, perhaps at every moment except the one which in the end has mattered most of all.

We headed deeper into the woods, into almost total darkness, as the last of the daylight vanished behind us. Barry turned and spread his arms out wide. “We need to cover a big area,” he said in a loud whisper. “Let’s spread out but head in the same direction. Don’t worry about staying on the path.”

I wanted to say that we were likely to make a lot more noise going through the undergrowth, but I hedged my bets. “Is this how you’re supposed to hunt them?” was all I said.

Barry turned to me. In the torchlight, his eyes glinted like steel. I could tell he didn’t like me questioning the plan. “You didn’t put any on your big conk, mate,” he said.

I rubbed my nose without thinking. He chuckled and then as a bit of banter, he said, “Where’d you get a great big nose like that, then?”

I felt the other torches turn towards me. I scratched at my cheek and rubbed what I hoped was a bit of black onto my nose. The searchlights looked back at Barry, who made the same expansive gesture with his arms. He was in charge tonight. “Let’s go,” he said.

We headed further into the woods. Barry stayed on the path and the rest of us spread out, Oliver on one side and me on the other, with Desmond to the right of me, a few yards further off. A stick was broken over to the left where Oliver was walking and then Desmond seemed to stumble over something as his torch went down with the sound of bracken being disturbed. “Are you OK, Desmond?” I whispered. He stood up and his torch

looked across in my direction. I thought he might be sticking his thumbs up but I couldn't tell. He might have been just looking at me for a few seconds.

I started forward again and then Barry whispered sharply. "Hey, stop a second. I can hear something." I listened but I couldn't make anything out myself. I was aware of the torch to my right shining on me again and for a moment I didn't want to look round. I didn't know what he wanted and felt he was looking for something I shouldn't indulge. But the torch kept shining on me, so I had to look, and for a moment the two beams stared each other out. Then Desmond's torch dipped down to the ground in front of him.

We set off again. There was more breaking of sticks where Oliver was walking. And then out of nowhere, something came bounding along the path from behind us. But before I had time to shoot, it was on him. Barry started screaming and I could tell that whatever it was had forced him to drop his gun to the ground. "Ah, fuck me! Fuck me!" he shrieked, "Get it off or I'm fucked! Shoot it, someone, quick! Aaaah!"

Desmond came crashing through the trees toward the path but I could see in my torch beam that the beast had got hold of Barry by the arm. Oliver was shouting. "Don't, Desmond! Don't do it! You'll hit Barry." It was true. Shotguns were the worst weapon we could have had. Desmond went toward the huge animal. It was smooth and white, its skin in the light of our torches giving it the appearance of a spectre. He started jabbing at it with the butt of his gun, but the beast kept swivelling out of reach, pulling Barry as it did, despite his frenzied efforts to break free.

I was still standing a few yards off, hoping to get a shot in when I had the chance, but then something rushed past me, squealing through the undergrowth, at incredible speed and sank its snout into the side of the beast. The dog, as it was obvious now what it was, let go of Barry's arm and turned, snarling, towards its assailant, but the boar advanced again, driving its tusks and teeth into the dog's side. The pair broke off and at that moment a shot rang out from somewhere in the woods, out of the range of our lights. The dog fell dead even as the three of us loosed off our guns at the beast. I felt a tiny bit of shot graze my hand and I cried out, though more in shock that any of my companions could have missed by so much; I could tell it was no more serious than a scratch. Someone – it must have been Desmond

– was trying to reload, but he also must have known that the dog was already dead. Oliver and Barry both screamed that we should stop shooting at once, and Desmond had to give up what he was doing.

I walked over to where the body of the dog was lying on the path. It was some kind of mastiff breed, perhaps an English type crossed with a pit bull or something of that sort, but ghostly, almost albino white. And then I realised that in the frenzy of shooting, the boar had melted back into the woods. Barry was bleeding from his arm and shoulder. He ripped off his shirt and tore it up to staunch the wounds.

I looked down at the dog. It had been hit on the haunch by one of the shotguns, though the others seemed to have missed. But it was obvious that what had killed it was the clean shot to the head that was the first sound I had heard. And there were also two deep gashes in the dog's side where the boar had struck, though I couldn't have said which animal would have won the fight if the shooting hadn't intervened. The ghost dog was a huge beast, deliberately bred for a life of misery and aggression. The boar would have had its work cut out.

It had just occurred to me that the shot to the dog's head had clearly come from a different weapon when a figure stepped quietly into the light of our torches. It was Mo, holding the rifle I had seen that time at the cottage. He looked around at the bedraggled posse. "Everyone all right?" he asked with a certain impatience, and a wavering torch beam showed that one of us at least was nodding.

"Apart from Cap'n Ahab here," said Oliver. Mo looked at our wounded leader in the light of the torches. He was clutching his injured arm and scowling, though whether from physical pain or some other, imperceptible injury, it was hard to say.

"He'll live," Mo said, then turned and stepped back into the woods, out of vision and, very soon, out of earshot, too.

We decided to leave the corpse where it was. Oliver would have a discreet word with someone at the council over the weekend and get them to come and clear up the "dog mess", as he put it. And 'mess' was certainly the word that came to mind. The poor creature must have belonged to someone at

some point, but had since become so feral that the life it had previously endured had to have been terrible – far worse than mere neglect – to have made it choose this desperate existence over what it had known. But a public service had now been done and a definite menace removed. That was what I told myself.

It was still dark when we set off home. Desmond was driving Barry to A&E, where no doubt he would have a lot of explaining to do. To deflect any further suspicion, I'd agreed to keep the weapons in the boot of my car until he could meet me to take them back over the weekend, though I didn't know how I was going to explain them to Bridget if she clapped eyes on them in the meantime. It was five to three when I pulled into the drive with just my sidelights on.

I went in the back door and put on the kettle. I slumped down at the table but I didn't get up again once it had boiled. I sat there with my head in my hands, waiting for the sun to come up, though it had been so thoroughly overcast for weeks that I wasn't sure if that would ever happen again. I was still here, in this house, with these people, my family, from whom I had drifted so far, and with the same sense of foreboding that even now, after a night like we had just passed through, seemed poised to torment me all over again. And when at last the light of day did begin to push back the fluorescence in which I had been sitting for over an hour, there was no relief at the transformation that took place. One glare was replaced by another, but in both I found myself wanting.

I thought about getting up to re-boil the kettle but weariness was taking hold, and I was just on the point of falling asleep when I heard someone come down the stairs. It was Libby. "Oh, it's you," she said softly, as she closed the door behind her. "What's that stuff all over your face?"

I remembered the shoe polish and started rubbing it off, though it had dried hard by now. I hoped that Barry and Desmond had also thought to do likewise before they reached the hospital. "Why are you dressed?" I asked her, as she waited for the kettle to boil.

"I'm going out," she said. "Is this yours?" She pointed to the mug with a teabag that I'd put out when I came home.

"Where are you going at this time?" I asked her.

"To London, on a march," she said. She poured hot water into the cups and then went to the fridge for milk.

"What for?"

“For my future, Dad.”

I watched her as she stirred the tea and waited until she handed the mug across the table. Then she turned and waited for the toast to pop up.

I couldn't think of anything useful to say. In my exhausted state, I couldn't think of anything except that dog with the bullet through its brains. There was something so clean and comprehensible about a bullet through the head like that.

Libby ate her toast and then stood sipping her tea. I looked up at her and then at Trudy asleep in her basket. I wasn't sure I understood my daughter any more than I did the dog. At that moment I wasn't sure I loved her any more than that either, just as she had said. It occurred to me, in fact, that given where we had got to, the dog was the only one of them I did love in a way that didn't cause me an almost constant pain.

Then Libby put down her cup and picked up her bag. “Are you going already?” I said. “It's only a quarter to five.”

“I'm getting the early train,” she said. “It's a three-mile walk to the station.”

All of a sudden, overjoyed, I saw a way that I could still help her. “Can I give you a lift?” I said, though as soon as it was out I thought about the guns in the boot and was worried I might be stopped by a patrol car with nothing else to do so early in the morning.

“It's all right, Dad,” Libby said. “I'll make my own way.”

I didn't know what to feel then. My daughter had got me off the hook because she simply didn't need me anymore. Perhaps I should be grateful for that. She was giving me back the freedom I had surrendered so many years ago, of which I had been so afraid. But what use did I have now for that kind of gift?

She closed the back door and I listened to the light crunch of gravel getting fainter and then ceasing suddenly as she stepped out onto the road and set off for the station. The light of dawn, even pallid and grey as it was, made the kitchen glow with a tenderness I remember from when I was her age or a little older, when I drove myself home in the early morning after a night at a party or a gathering of friends, with the window rolled right down

to keep me from falling asleep. Compared to Libby, my life at even a few years older than she was now had been so simple. Everything in principle was available to me, even if in practice I had availed myself of so little. I had shrunk from the many possibilities, and one in particular; had sacrificed my own potential on the altar of a life of quiet consumption, the most reckless life of all. But now Libby and Anne-Marie were being forced into a sacrifice in which they had been given no say whatsoever, to add to all the others which had been dumped on the shoulders of their generation. No wonder she was angry. No wonder she was heading out at dawn, treading the age-old path of protest to London.

When I got home from those parties at the same time in the morning all those years ago, I would slink up to bed and then emerge hours later, stick a Findus Crispy Pancake in the oven and turn on MTV, whose numbing attractions I fell for time and again, despite the need I felt even then for something more than was ever being offered, the will to freedom I had not yet disowned. Now, as if mocking that discarded hope, the earworms of irritating pop tunes from that period began to mingle with the primeval soup in my head as I started dozing off again, sitting there at the table. And when I woke up, a few minutes later, as my head hit the tabletop, it was with a sense of shock. In a rush and with a clarity I could not ignore, images came to me again of Barry's daughter's lad, Ibrahim, whom I had never met, hunched over a steering wheel on the M25; of Ibrahim prostrating at the mosque; of Ibrahim cradling his infant son and holding him up to the sight of God.

The images faded as I came to and got up to make some toast. As I cut the bread I looked down at Trudy lying in her basket. She was aware of me, looking at her, and she licked her lips in submitting to my gaze. I knew she would do anything to help me. If she had been with me tonight when the same dog which had savaged her had attacked our shooting party, she would not have held back for a moment, even risking her own life in our defence.

I cut another piece of bread and turned towards her with the knife in my hand. I thought about the shotguns in the car. It would be so easy. Just one clean shot. But I was too tired to get them, and there was also the noise and the mess it would make.

I knelt down beside the dog. She licked her lips again and looked at me, doe-eyed. I raised the knife and touched the tip of it to her nose. Still she didn't flinch, such was her trust in me. I drew the blade up to the space between her eyes and grabbed the handle with both hands. I held it there and was just lifting myself up to see better when the door opened and my wife walked in.

She shrieked when she saw me. "What are you doing? What the hell do you think you are doing!"

I froze. I knew she would call the police, whatever I told her. And I thought of the guns in the car, the children and all that would follow. And I knew that no matter what I did now, the tap on the shoulder I have always feared had caught up with me at last. And it was then I felt a lightness and a freedom of a kind I had never known, exhilarated but also at peace, perhaps for the first time in my life. I was on my knees, like a man in prayer, marvelling at how beautiful my wife was, standing in the doorway in her nightdress, her face framed by a wimple of golden hair. She looked like an angel and seemed to be speaking, though so quietly that I could only just make out the words. "Put the knife down, darling," she was saying to me. "Just put the knife down and everything will be all right."

Conclusion: A World on a Knife Edge

This creative and critical thesis, *Isle of Dogs*, is an attempt, by someone who didn't want the result, to understand why in June 2016 17.4 million British people voted to leave the European Union. In *The Everlasting Animal*, the critical component that comprises the first part of my thesis, through the lens of a number of works of English fiction (and one play) from the past two decades – including novels as different from each other as Paul Kingsnorth's historical novel *The Wake*, Julian Barnes's postmodern satire *England, England* and Nicola Barker's Southeast Gothic novel *Darkmans* – as well as several much older than that, I have divined the fears, resentments, grievances, grudges and self-delusions but also the hopes and aspirations for change or prosperity or meaningful community that drove the vote, finding common patterns of resistance to so-called progressive modernity which, in hock to the interests of global capital, rides roughshod over the grain of the lives that people actually lead. In Barnes's *England, England*, I found a parable of what unfettered free market logic can do to a country, with the eponymous tourist island supplanting a left-behind mainland England, or Anglia, that reverts to the bucolic, pre-industrial idyll of so many Brexit dreams. Jim Crace's *Harvest*, an exemplary historical tale of how the capitalist system has destroyed older patterns and ways of life in the interests of profit, puts the displacements of recent decades, and the resentments they have engendered which found expression in the vote to leave the EU, into stark historical perspective. In Kingsnorth's *The Wake*, set further back still in the years of the Anglo-Saxon rebellions against Norman rule that followed the invasion of 1066, I trace the anti-foreigner sentiment and tenacious love of freedom with which the libertarian Leave campaigners appealed so successfully to the 17.4 million. In the same writer's subsequent novella *Beast*, the process of social atomisation characteristic of the neoliberal economic order becomes a spiritual crisis which seems an almost inevitable outlet for those capable of such interiority – a longing for isolation, for freedom from entanglements, which was another aspect of the Leave vote. The extrovert antithesis of *Beast*'s moorland solitary is the postmodern Green Man figure of Johnny 'Rooster' Byron, the antihero of Jez Butterworth's play *Jerusalem*, whose love of England and its ancient freedoms, unlike most of his countrymen he refuses to surrender to the callous forces of the modern British state – an attitude of defiance which over more than twenty years of Eurosceptic argument has been drip-fed into the

minds of increasing numbers in relation to the EU. Finally, in Nicola Barker's *Darkmans* I found that even among those who have made the usual grubby accommodations with the kind of grim economic reality that many had imagined they might escape through a vote to leave, other, forgotten aspects of English life – dating from before the rational, commercial age which has sought to suppress them – are able to reassert their influence on the consciousness of modern individuals, holding out the hope that not just mayhem but also magic might return to the old country, England, whose unacknowledged grievances are the core of the Brexit complaint.

Nonetheless, the country did vote to leave, and my creative response to the trauma of that decision was the novella, *The Season of the Boar*, that I began writing in the days following the vote, which forms the second, creative part of this thesis. Set during the referendum campaign and its immediate aftermath, it seeks to understand the minds and motivations of a range of characters living in a small Kent village, whose differing philosophical positions on the shape and direction of British society during the neoliberal period in which they have grown up create a shifting dialectic that goes beyond the well-trodden arguments familiar to everyone from the thousands of press articles written and widely read on the subject of Brexit over the past three years. So themes of risk and sacrifice and freedom and regret – and the subject of male shame which drives the story just as it has driven the global populist revolt – are examined and developed as the story proceeds, extending the reader's understanding of the meaning of Brexit into the fears, desires and unrequited longings of the various characters, exposing the fragility of their personal narratives and belief systems as ideas of individual emancipation that emerged with the Enlightenment have been corrupted by an economic and political belief system whose primary purpose has been to destroy collective political consciousness and the common action that would arrest its otherwise remorseless advance. This erosion of human solidarity is evident in the attitudes of the main male characters in my novella, who, with one exception, in the context of the anti-immigrant sentiment of the referendum campaign are only galvanized into joint (and incompetent) enterprise for the most defensive of reasons – the apparent need to kill the wild boar which they mistakenly view as being responsible for a series of attacks on local dogs; the true culprit is a feral pit bull–mastiff cross, an Anglo-American mongrel emblematic of the neoliberal economics which has made their lives and those of the majority so bitter and, in so many cases, so hard to sustain.

The novel ends, quite literally, on a knife edge, because at the time I first wrote that scene, it was where the country had been – politically, culturally – for a dangerous period of many months following the referendum result, a place from which it has barely moved ever since. If events surrounding Brexit have seemed not quite so tense in recent times – though to many they still do – this is perhaps because we have lived on a knife edge for so long now that a gallows humour has developed to respond to the alternating pattern of pratfalls and premonitions of doom into which Brexit has descended, and which, to an extent, is also the pattern of events in *The Season of the Boar*. But the precarious knife edge on which we really stand – one of which Brexit is only an example – has more far-reaching implications than whether or not the United Kingdom should sever its ties to the structures of the European Union. In the novella's final scene, the knife-edge dilemma the narrator faces is not the literal one of whether or not to stab his dog, or even whether or not to come clean to his wife about what he has been going through, though the story's final image holds out the hope that he will. More important than these is the understanding of the knife edge – his dilemma and also our own – as the sharp divide between the same conflicting systems of belief whose clash of values is posing a challenge to every democratic society on Earth; a divide to which, it now occurs to me having finished it, the two halves of my thesis themselves give expression.

As my narrator discovers in the fraternity he feels towards his Muslim namesake, Ibrahim, this is certainly not the clash of civilisations that is such ideological catnip to both the hard right and religious fundamentalists of every creed, but instead the animating quarrel of our time, between the postmodernity of the period that followed the Cold War and its discontents: on the one hand, the liberal advocates of a global society of the kind that seems self-evidently necessary given the many common challenges we face as a species; and on the other, the many rooted communities and peoples who cannot reconcile themselves to the human demands of such a world – the weakening of ties to real places and people which for two centuries, more or less, have been held in tension through membership of and belonging to a nation state.

It remains to be seen what becomes of the rights and freedoms of the individual under the new models of national belonging that are gaining such purchase across the democracies of the West. Given the moral leap forward represented by the UN Declarations of the post-war period and those international institutions such as the UN, the EEC and then the EU created to embody them, it has to be of great concern that the

new authority claimed by states in the service of national sovereignty will lead only to authoritarian control of the very people – the attempt to curtail those rights – which those newly emboldened states have professed to defend, as we are already seeing in several of the new democracies of the former Soviet bloc. Reading between the lines of populist tracts by avowed individualists such as Nigel Farage, there is certainly little that gives much genuine cause to believe his ilk would vigorously protect the rights of individuals and especially minorities against the power of his own ideal state (i.e. not the one within whose checks and balances the populists are currently obliged to operate); these protections, achieved through bodies such as the European Court of Human Rights, have been the greatest boon of our co-authorship of European institutions over more than half a century. In the event that the extreme right should ever gain power, the fight to defend these individuals and vulnerable groups would be fierce and attritional at best.

There are certainly clear and ominous examples to be found among populist parties of the early twentieth century where democracy was used to undermine democracy, following patterns which are now being repeated with the same skilful abuse of the freedoms that liberal democracy affords. Invoking the shibboleth of the people, these infamous examples enshrined the popular will as sacred writ, reinforced by a playbook of rhetoric and propaganda today being deployed by populist outfits like Farage's Brexit party, who toy with fascist tropes in a postmodern tease that has become typical of a worldwide movement which is not quite strong enough yet to reveal its true face. For now, they are content to work within the law, their ever-more extreme positions stretching the credible legitimacy of the vote to leave the EU, manoeuvres they seek to justify by repeatedly pointing to what was the biggest electoral mandate in British history ever delivered to any cause or party, despite the vagueness of what it really endorsed.

From such a background of disruption and disturbance, my thesis has sought to retrieve the genuine complaints and sorrows which gave rise to it. Through the lived experience and intimate awareness of the characters in my novella, in parallel with evidence of similar lives in the various novels and the one play I have examined in the course of my study, I have demonstrated that the conditions for that huge and historic result were fully ripe in the years leading up to the referendum campaign – the decade in which most of these texts were written – though its roots go much further back. Notwithstanding Peter Ackroyd's advocacy of an English imagination that is mongrel

and magpie, a retrospective look from Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, through Orwell's essay 'England Your England' and his anti-progressive novel of English parochialism *Coming Up for Air*, to Huxley's *Brave New World* and Forster's *Howards End*, reveals a strain of exceptionalism and insularity that has been a mainstay of British and especially English consciousness for a very long time, and a more extensive study than this one could probably track a similar structure of feeling in the English novel much further back than I have here. Even in 1992, a highwater mark of recent continental entente cordiale, represented by the signing of the Maastricht Treaty, an oracular London cabbie in Ian McEwan's *Black Dogs* (1992) reminds us that Britain is "not a European player is it, not really. Still got its tongue up the American fundament, if you'll pardon my French" (McEwan 1998: 73).

Indeed, Britain's role as an Atlantic bridge between Europe and America, which in recent decades has certainly given it more influence than its status as a fading great power might once have warranted, has been a goad to those now pushing for a no-deal Brexit, who are adamant that we must choose one over the other – the linguistic, historical connection over the cultural, geographical one that was commonly accepted by great Victorians such as the progenitor of modern libertarianism, John Stuart Mill (cf. Mill 2016). Given an apparent Hobson's choice which Paul Gilroy once described as 'the incompatible options represented by bureaucratic Europeanisation on one side and the levelling effects of US cultural domination on the other' (Gilroy 2002: xxvii), even in 2006, at the height of a euphoric boom preceding a catastrophic bust (and notwithstanding the EU's growing adherence to neoliberal economics following the British example), it was Billy Bragg who observed which side of the argument was winning: that 'you are more likely to get elected in Britain today by proposing that we leave the EU than by calling for the abolition of capitalism' (Bragg 2006: 7).

This, after all, is what a quarter century of dog-eat-dog neoliberalism had done to us even then. Now, more than a decade after the start of the worst financial crisis in almost a century, a period during which more of the homeless have taken to the streets, more of the poor have become homeless, and more of the less well-off are now poor enough to resort to foodbanks – where, in short, the lives of growing numbers are as cheap as beasts' – are the men and the animals on this isle full of noises not more desperate than they have been for a very long time? Even in supposedly affluent places like Remainer London, even a genuine success story such as Natalie/Keisha Blake, a character in Zadie Smith's *N-W* (2012), is forced to squeeze herself into a series of disguises to keep

up the act, subject to the same crippling pressures of an inhuman system on the integrity of the self (Smith 2013: 278). As one of the less materially fortunate, her friend Leah Hanwell, puts it, ‘that’s how we live now, defending our own little patch, it didn’t use to be like that, but everything’s changed, hasn’t it, that’s what they say, everything’s changed’ (51).

If that truly is how we do live now, what becomes of our humanity, or our working notions of what we mean by the word ‘humanity’? In such a predicament, and in a wider context in which the same rapacious form of capitalism is disrupting and dismantling the climate and ecological systems that offered the very stable conditions which enabled it to flourish in the first place, it becomes essential to recognize not just the humanity we have in common with people of every race, culture and creed, but, in our own self-interest, the evolutionary bonds we share with other animals – the same imperishable nature whose acknowledgement as John Gray urges, and as both my novella and critical study suggest, is the only sane foundation for a sustainable human future.

At the moment, we face instead the widespread refusal of such recognition right across those parts of the world where people are lucky enough to be able to choose. And denial of what we know is there simply displaces onto others – other humans, other animals – the presence we need to own in ourselves. In William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*, though he is too young to know what to call it, it is Simon who identifies, with an afflicted clarity, a negative capability the other boys do not possess, what the narrator describes as ‘mankind’s essential illness’ (Golding 1954: 96) – the true nature of the beast that dogs their nightmares, asleep and awake. Another shadowy creature stalks the narrator of Paul Kingsnorth’s novella *Beast* and, until at last he can see it for what it is, the protagonist of my own novella, *The Season of the Boar*. Terror of the same everlasting animal is the primal fear invoked by the world’s current plague of demagogues to corral their own pliant battalions in defence of some other firelight shadow projected onto the wall of a cave: an idea of nation or creed, or simply a communal anxiety that may be the only thing left to bind them to each other in a material age; the one thing in opposition to which men can once more feel like men – a moral equivalent of war or perhaps the condition needed to provoke one.

A century ago, at the height of the first age of global capital but less than a decade before the advent of a terrible war that many predicted, and even hoped, would happen, William James identified what, in the absence of a meaningful life, he saw as a moral

need among men to define themselves against an enemy – to go to war – much as he hoped that this was a trait we could one day outgrow. Though no written records exist, we might imagine that during the childhood of Man, as James understood the term, before the reckless adolescence we have no more put behind us than have the boys on the cusp of a real adolescence in *Lord of the Flies*, our prehistoric ancestors had defined themselves not against each other but against nature itself, with the achievements of civilisation in the intervening millennia as proof that we had won. Of course, nothing better demonstrates the folly of this view of nature as a foe to be overcome than the clear obstacle to a viable human future that a human-disrupted nature is beginning to seem.

In any case, a different story is told by the images on the walls of the caves of Chauvet, Altamira and countless other global sites of refuge for early human groups – images once created and then viewed by the light of small fires, casting shadows that must have further enhanced their mystery and meaning. These wondrous animals, surely, are not the degraded spoils of a war of all against all, but fellow creatures of Earth, sentient beings like many of the animals, both wild and domesticated, which appear in *The Season of the Boar*; observers as well as observed, whose difference from us offers an ‘unspeaking companionship’ to ‘the loneliness of man as a species’ (Berger 2009: 15). Besides, I would contend – and countless ancient indigenous storytelling traditions such as those of the North American continent (cf. Ortiz & Erdoes 1990) support this view, as do Western writers like John Berger and John Gray – that the cave artists who made them did not, and maybe could not see themselves as a different class of being. Indeed, they must surely have recognized that their own future was as vulnerable and contingent as that of any other creature to the forces of nature which bound them all. And while it may seem a stretch to link this with the many justified causes and conditions which led the UK electorate to vote to leave the EU, I have reached the conclusion that a fundamental urge behind Brexit’s demand for a totemic national independence is the blank refusal of an opposite principle upon which the EEC was founded – its bureaucratic overreach and its practical and moral failures notwithstanding. That same principle of interdependence which our distant ancestors understood it is now clear we have to take seriously at every level of life and social endeavour if as a species we wish to survive beyond a few more generations, as even the ambivalent narrator of my novella has realised by the end of the story.

Moreover, as I have shown, most of the blame for the growth of those conditions of grievance lies at the feet of a neglectful British state. Even Nigel Farage could see this in his autobiography, where he writes, wholly without irony, that ‘the future of the British Union lies in federalism’ (Farage 2011: 291); that ‘the component nations of the Union should govern themselves and England should stand proud amongst them’ (291). He also goes on to make the following prediction, which in the light of Brexit, and as recent surveys of those who voted for it bear out, goes to the heart of our current division: ‘The regeneration of Englishness,’ he writes, ‘will happen willy-nilly, so will we manage it responsibly or wait for the disenfranchised to claim an identity for themselves?’ (291). Coming from the pen of such a divisive figure, a would-be demagogue indeed, this ought to be an ominous warning. In the first part of my thesis, I have offered a rational analysis of the pointedly English disenchantment that led to Brexit, which I hope will help any process of regeneration to begin; in the second part, I have offered a depiction of what could happen – indeed has already happened – if it doesn’t.

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