

Martin Malone

From The Unreturning

8. Six V.C.s before breakfast

At the hashtag cenotaph performative piety stands easy, while our misbegotten beachhead floats face down off Cape Helles. It's written large in the Non-Dom's daily, worn cotton-rich at the checkout. For £19.99, plus postage, this quality garment now does for a Lancashire Fusilier; some foreclosed son of a long-lost milltown. The Gallipoli Centenary T-shirt Eleven takes to the field in sizes S-XXXL, feeling good about the gesture. And why not? Shot through the neck and weighed down with kit, I can still spot a good singlet when I see one. What you have to remember is that the mills were in our blood, leaching away last before our feet could touch the ground.

9. *Now we rise and we are everywhere*

Not that iconic shot of him wrapped in his blanket, outstretched hand feeding petals to the lens, but a black & white taken by the sea, arms hidden inside a trench coat. Younger, he is yet carrying shades of the Mem Hall with its *Sed miles*, still willing to play up and play the game. A face seen so many times on the broad High Street; flushed with plenty, old before its time, dying the thousand deaths of duty. It is noted in tones of some surprise that, towards the end, he thought to join the infantry. But by then the star-shell of his five minutes had caught him out in the open, frozen in the forward sap of the Festival Hall, Rodney and Molly already reaching for the blinds at *Far Leys*.

17. *Permaded*

For want of explanation, you order a pun to stand-to and serve that teatime with some reason. Was his *Call of Duty*[®] too strong; did it box him in? Night after night the same game teases the hunger of his brain, shits him out on the far side of meaning; lethal scenarios unspooling into Tetris sleep. Black Ops, Ghosts, tea or coffee? Kill or be killed? A thousand options fuse into crazy nitre; his mother's call across their No Man's Land of the staircase, where once per second a pixel misses its aim. This little soldier's virtual officer logs another 'Self-Inflicted Wound' though a glance around the bedroom door is enough to register that he's lying when he writes home: 'Tim died smiling.'

18. *Bergsonian Numbers*

Alright then, let us assume that the sheep in a flock are identical and, for the purposes of history, all men likewise; differing only by the position they occupy on our right or left flank. Let us, indeed, set aside the fifty sheep themselves and retain but the idea of them by way of commemoration. The impression of a multiplicity of units all absolutely alike is, as you say, the product of simple intuition; caught today by a coachload of smartphones held aloft beside *Langemarck*. Number you define as a collection of units or a synthesis of one and the many, though at the end of a bayonet, as the home of a bullet, in the path of an ill-wind, every number is one.

19. *Commuter*

He insists we go outside so that he can show us the moon, our two-year old pointing at his man made of cheese. By the slice of light from the half-open door I look at you; feel the gentle suck of warm air from the grate, a sudden welter of regret tugging at my lungs. God knows, our mood about the house has made such moments few and far between. *Moon, moon!* he says, as if the word holds the heft of all things. A child's finger marks the way skyward to this moment and now all roads lead to France. When I slip away at dawn, the thatch is humming with early frost, the downs roll their green path to the sea and all my Tipperaries stretch before me, unreachable, beyond

Sorley's Bullet

Books and bullets have their destinies.

Ernst Jünger, *Storm of Steel*

And so it finds you, like many another,
late for your own last rites, a lean lad
running the downs to Hackpen Horse,
hair lank with rain, mind made up
and homing in on College supper.
We can't say you'd not told us,
nor pretend you didn't leave behind
advice for times like these: say only
'They are dead' and so it is.

And so it finds you, like many a better,
biting the bullet and doing your bit,
with just enough paper to thank a teacher
and Arthur for his tale of meeting Wells.
Return that New Testament to store, take only
your Homer and the Kennet's pagan drift
through the veins of a final Summer,
as you walk your weathers from Avebury
to Adam's Grave. For so it is.

Lending yourself to the cross hairs
you lean out to fix a sandbag, ghostless
and young, given only to the task at hand
just south of the Hohenzollern Redoubt.
Gently, you slide forward as in easeful sleep,
and it is all as one: detached as Socrates,
sacrificed as Christ, guilty as Barabbas;
none come back, leastwise not for long.
Say only, 'They have gone'. And so it is.