



THE OFFING

BENJAMIN MYERS



B L O O M S B U R Y P U B L I S H I N G  
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I've left my own old home of homes,  
Green fields and every pleasant place;  
The summer like a stranger comes,  
I pause and hardly know her face.

'The Flitting', John Clare



Where did life go?

Every day I find myself asking this one same question of the mirror, yet the answer always eludes me. All I see is a stranger staring back.

So I shuffle to the kitchen, where I stir my tea and spoon my morning oats and mutter the mantra – you’ll never be as young as you are right now – but it feels hollow between my lips. I cannot trick time, nor myself. I’ll always be as old as I am right now, then older.

The paint on the floorboards has been worn away by the drag of my feet, which ache from walking a million miles, and the wooden lengths are warped now like the hull of a landed galleon, and the meadow is wild too as the days slip away and the seasons shorten. A few summers here, some long dark winters there; good fortune, infamy, illness, a little love, a little more luck and suddenly you’re looking down the wrong end of the telescope.



Everything aches these days, not just the feet. My legs, my hands, my eyes. My wrists and fingers throb from a lifetime of hammering the keyboards. A constant pain nags at my neck and I marvel at the minor miracle that my body has held out this long. Sometimes it feels as if it is held together by little other than strings of memories and sinews of hope. The mind is a museum coated in dust.

But I was a young man once, so young and green, and that can never change. Memory allows me to be so again.



I knew not what language could do then. I did not yet understand the power and potency of words. The complex magic of language was as alien as the altered country that I saw around me during that summer. Something insidious grows within me now; its roots are deeply anchored. Vines reach around corners to clutch and tighten. I am a passive host. Too tired to fight, I accept it and instead sit back and merely wonder where life went. And I wait.



My desk is old and the chair creaks. Twice I have had the joints fixed and the upholstery replaced. Every so often the old wood-burning stove coughs smoke back into the room, and the guttering is clogged with moss. One window is cracked and soon I will need to find someone to fix the roof. The whole place needs a lot of work but I am too ancient for all that now; the building and its contents will outlast me. The old word processor still functions, though. There's power in the both of

us, there is electricity, and while it is still there I have something to share.

Sitting here now by the open window, a glissando of birdsong on the very lightest of breezes that carries with it the scent of a final incoming summer, I cling to poetry as I cling to life.

# I

The bay opened out before me, a great glacial basin carved by creaking ice and trickling water hundreds of thousands of years ago.

I approached it from the north and saw a giant semi-amphitheatre that held within it farms and hamlets as the land funnelled downwards from the purpling moors, and below them the fields ran all the way to an opaline sea, over which there perilously perched a huddled cluster of houses jiggered together in a cleft in the land. Between them and the water, a narrow sweep of glittering sand. A bronze band.

The houses sat haphazardly above the ebbing tide on a crumbling cliff face of loose soil and wet clay that was slowly being eroded by the salt spray and circling fret. The homes resembled stranded sailors shipwrecked by the storms of centuries. Time itself was chipping away at this coastal reach, sculpting the island anew in an age of uncertainty.

I thought about how the sea served to remind of the finite existence of solid matter, and that the only true boundaries are not trenches and shelters and check-points but those between rock and sea and sky.

Here I stopped to refill my flask from a roadside spring that fed into a stone trough, feeling as if I had wandered into a painting. The sun was a brilliant bright disc of shimmering white over a scumbled scape and I understood, perhaps for the first time, what it was that made men wish to pick up a paintbrush or compose a verse: an impulse to capture the pulse-quickenning sensation, this *nowness* evoked by a vista as breathtaking as it was unexpected. Art was an attempt to preserve the amber of the moment.

The fresh water slipped down my throat like cords of silk, cooling my stomach for a moment, and pooling there. Water never tastes finer than that drawn fresh from the ground and drunk from metal; whether receptacle, ladle or spout, it seems somehow to bring the flavour alive.

I drank more and then cupped my hands and held them there, a dub in the pinkness of my palms, then patted the water onto my forehead, face and neck. I filled my flask again and walked on.

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There had been a war and though the conflict was over it still raged on in those men and women who had brought it home with them.

It was kept alive in their eyes or hung heavy about their shoulders like a blood-soaked cloak. It blossomed too in their hearts, a black flower that had taken root there, never to be eradicated. The seeds were too toxic, too deeply sown, for the memories to be anything but perennially poisonous.

Wars continue long after the fighting has stopped, and the world felt then as if it were full of holes. It appeared to me scarred and shattered, a place made senseless by those in positions of power. Everything was fragments, everything burnt.

I was neither old enough to have made myself a hero nor young enough to have escaped the newsreel images or the long dark shadows that the returning soldiers dragged behind them like empty coffins. For no one ever really wins a war: some just lose a little less than others.

I was a child when it began and a young man when it ended and in the wake of this conflict visible loss was everywhere, hanging like a great heavy cloud over the island, and no amount of red, white and blue bunting or medals pinned to the sobbing chests of its survivors could change that.

The history books should not entirely be believed: Allied victory did not taste sweet and the winters that followed would be as frosted and unforgiving as any. Because although the elements care little for the madness of men, even the white virginal snow would now appear impure to those who had seen the first footage of barbed wire and body pits.

Yet viewed through the eyes of the young the conflict was an abstraction, a memory once removed and already fading. It wasn't *our* war. It wouldn't ruin *our* lives before they had even started.

On the contrary, it had awakened within me a sense of adventure, a wanderlust to step beyond the end of the street where the flagstones finally gave themselves to the fields, and industrial Northern England stretched away beneath the first warm haze of a coming season of growth, to explore whatever it was that lay beyond this shimmering mirage that turned the horizon into an undulating ocean of blossoming greens.

I was sixteen and free, and hungry. Hungry for food, as we all were – the shortage continued for many years – yet my appetite was for more than the merely edible. To those blessed with the gift of living, it seemed as if the present moment was a precious empty vessel waiting to be filled with experience. Time was more valuable now; it was the only thing we had in abundance, though war had taught us that this too was a limited resource, and to spend it unwisely or wastefully was as great a sin as any.

Young men and women we were, and it was for those fellows who had fallen in foreign fields, or been shot down from skies like grouse on the Glorious Twelfth, or those poor withered souls interred in the mass graves, that we were living now.

Life was out there, ready and waiting to be eaten in greedy gulps. To be scooped and swallowed. My sensations were awakened, and insatiable, and I owed it to



myself, and to all those like me who had died screaming for their mothers or drowning in thickening pools of themselves, to gorge myself.

More than anything, though, was the allure of a natural world in which I intended to immerse myself. I knew from books that the North offered a diverse terrain of wolds and woods, moors and fells, dales and valleys, all inhabited by plant and animal species waiting to be seen by my wide and wandering eye.



At home I had exhausted the possibilities. I had diligently recorded all sightings of passing birds, migratory or otherwise. I had built a small collection of bones and skulls, carefully debrided and scrubbed clean of flesh, and kept in a tea chest by the concrete coal bunker beyond the back door as my mother would not allow them in the house. I had fished and ferreted, ratted and ensnared, and on one guilty occasion even removed the egg of a sitting raven from its crag-top eyrie, though had soon grown ill at the thought of animals killed for sport, hunted for the thrill. Even to disturb their patterns felt sinful. So much adolescent time had been spent up trees, yet I was tired of the same views now, the same predictable seasonal changes. I wanted to experience so much more of what was happening out there, beyond the confines of the rural colliery village that sat in the softly undulating fields, somewhere between the city and the sea. I wanted to be surprised. Only when alone in the wild had I ever come remotely close to beginning to know my true self; the rest of the time



was mere playground noise and classroom instruction, domestic duty and banal distraction.

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I had set out in spring, impatient, a pack on my back containing the bare essentials for a journey whose only aim was transience: a sleeping bag, a blanket and groundsheet, a change of clothes. Two camping pans, a cup, my flask, penknife, fork, spoon and plate. A trowel for outdoor business. No map.

I had no need for a razor either.

I also carried with me a notepad and pen, a bar of soap, a toothbrush and matches, and a Jew's harp gifted to me by my grandfather, who offered the sage advice that if one could master a musical instrument one could always make money, for the English were a nation who valued effort over talent and thought that *having a go* was enough, and though I had not yet taught myself to play this strange and haunted-sounding instrument, I certainly intended to. Ahead of me down the tracks and lanes I envisaged plenty of free time, and a fair few nights whose lonely silence would surely benefit from some music, however discordant and ineptly delivered it might be.

On the morning of my departure my mam also insisted on squeezing into my bag a pack-up containing some thick slices of ham, cheese, apples and a large stottie, all wrapped in a facecloth that she made me promise upon God's good name that I would use at least once a day.



There was still a nip in the air when I left the ancient city, joining the river below the high turrets of the great cathedral, looming loftily from its natural promontory. I let the slow-moving waterway guide me as I followed it upstream through a wooded gorge, then beyond that out into the great unknown.

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The larger part of my young years so far had been spent staring out of classroom windows longing for a life lived outside, willing the bell to chime down the corridors so that I might run free through the fields.



And now here, finally, it was all around me, an unfolding wonderland, a swirling season in bloom alive with the warm sound of wood pigeons and drilling woodpeckers, and the scents of ragwort, balsam and, beyond the trees in the sloping fields, the heady, sedative musk of rapeseed.



Soon too there would be the sight of swallows and swifts returning from North Africa to summer here, the centre of the world, Northern England, the greenest land there ever was, so pungent and lush it could make a young man dizzy.

Along the riverbanks wild garlic grew, peppering the air. As I walked I plucked the leathery leaves and chewed them, the rich, raw taste viscous on my tongue. Oily almost.

I left the Wear as I knew that if I continued it would take me west, to the upland dales of Wolsingham,





Westgate and Wearhead, where they said the river bubbled up from the soil, little more than a gurgling belch of a thing, and beyond it nothing but tiny villages with names like Cowshill and Cornriggs. Employment would be scant there.

Here and there I walked on tracks and alongside warm bitumen roads. I came across abandoned quarries, wide chasms in the earth, open and ragged like gaping tooth extractions. I picked my way through the rusting remains of wagon rails and tin- and slate-mine trails. I passed closed-down gypsum works and clearings containing cable spools and tipped dolly carts, but no other signs of man. Whenever possible I kept to the woods and glades, fields and dales.



I found work where I went, at farms and on smallholdings. Piecework mainly, and odd jobs at solitary houses, as many families had lost men, or had seen them return depleted, decrepit or broken, parts of them missing like second-hand jigsaw puzzles. Few had returned fully fit and functional enough to resume their lives as if nothing had changed, and though many were still strong of body, they were now no longer muscular of mind.



These homes always needed young brawn to do the tasks that these broken-toy men could no longer complete and few doors I knocked on turned me away. Behind them I found quiet survivors who had seen things previously unimaginable. War was an illness in a way, treatable only by the passing of time, and many were stricken until the end of their days.



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I steadily laboured across to where Durham met Cumbria and Cumbria shook hands with North Yorkshire, where the mining of tin and lead were still the local industries, or else the farming of sheep took place on the windswept slopes of the upper moors all year round, the woolly-backed creatures corralled and clipped in the summer and dug out of drifts in the long, lingering winters. It was a different landscape to the one I was accustomed to – it was also sculpted and scarred but in a somehow more agreeable way. The newness of the unfamiliar was intoxicating. It even sounded different here, the empty vastness of the moors a whispering place free of the clang and clatter of colliery life. A place weighted with myth. It was thrilling.



At one such farm I kissed a taciturn girl called Theresa who tasted of aniseed, and whose curious sugary tongue probed my mouth for a full ten seconds before she turned and ran away without a word, and though she explored me with a vigour that bordered on the violent, her disinterest so equally sudden that I might as well have been a passing donkey, I was still aware I had passed a small milestone in my life. No one back at home would ever believe me, of course, the gymnasium changing room already busy with tall stories of unseen girls kissed in faraway places. These things only ever happened elsewhere, without witness. And now I actually was in the kingdom of elsewhere, free from the shackles of familiarity of place and people.

